

Audience-centric Practice in Arts Organisations: A menagerie of approaches

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Abstract

Despite years of concern, arts audiences continue to represent a narrow and privileged social demographic. Shifting the social profile of audiences requires organisational change and the adoption of audience-centric practice. This paper investigates the drivers and inhibitors of audience-centric practice in Australian arts organisations. It identifies three organisational capabilities needed to diversify audiences: (1) dynamic capabilities; (2) social networking; and (3) business improvement processes. It offers an analysis of a narrative interview question that asked arts workers to describe their organisation using an animal metaphor. Despite evidence of limited audience-centric practice, research participants emphasised the positive capabilities of their organisations rather than negative organisational characteristics. Interviewees also focused on the dynamic capabilities of organisations and tended to overlook social networking and business improvement processes. These findings have implications for cultural policy and organisation change initiatives seeking to build audience-centric practice and change the social profile of audiences.

Keywords

- Organisational change
- Audience-centric practice
- Audience diversification
- Metaphor
- Hermeneutics

INTRODUCTION

Audience diversification is a 'sticky issue' in the arts. While the demand for many publicly funded art forms is falling (Kemp and Poole, 2016, p. 125) the audiences who do engage with the arts tend not to reflect the social profile of the broader general public (Glow, Kershaw and Reason, 2021). Engaging new and diverse audiences would enable publicly funded arts organisations to deliver public value (Gray, 2008), enhance box office sustainability (Harlow, 2014), and support authentic and distinctive programming (Mar and Ang 2015). Recent research suggests diversifying audiences requires changes in organisational practice rather than audience development initiatives (Glow, Kershaw and Reason, 2021; Harlow, 2014; Lindelof, 2015).

This paper examines the work undertaken by Australian arts organisations to diversify the social profile of audiences. It does so through a hermeneutics research design that employed the use of metaphor (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2010); arts workers were asked to describe their organisations using an animal trope. The metaphor question aimed to encourage a deeper critique of organisational

practice (Alvesson, 1993). Analysis of this narrative interview data reveals the strengths and weakness in the audience-centric work undertaken by arts organisations. These findings have implications for cultural policy initiatives and organisational change processes that aim for audience diversification in the arts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Audience diversification and organisational change

Audience development involves the nexus of programming, education and marketing. It has as its aim the diversification, broadening or deepening arts audiences. Audience development has been linked to efforts to democratise the arts (McCarthy and Jinnett, 2001), deal with processes of social exclusion (Kawashima, 2006) and increase audience engagement (Brown and Novak-Leonard, 2011).

Diversifying audiences—altering the social profile of audiences and attracting those that are currently ‘non-attenders’—has been the focus of much audience development work (Kawashima, 2006; Lindelof, 2015; Parker, 2012) and is the challenge examined in this current research.

Many scholars argue that an emphasis on audiences is a misguided approach to attracting non-attenders. Rather than resting with audiences, audience diversification is in an organisational challenge. Lindelof observes, ‘it is not the audience, but the institutions that are in need of development’ (2015, p. 202). Harlow (2014) suggests the sector’s long-standing difficulty in diversifying the profile of arts audiences indicates the need for change in the operations of arts organisations. Addressing audience diversification in a museum context Sandel (2003) notes the need for paradigmatic change in the purpose and role of organisations accompanied by changes in working practices.

A commitment to audience diversification requires new forms of practice; arts organisations need to identify the issues in their current ways of working and seek new ways of operating in response to this critique (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Kershaw, Glow and Goodwin, 2022). The change in practice required to shift the social profile of audiences is required at a macro (field), meso (organisation) and micro (practitioner) level (Chandler and Vargo, 2011; Frow, McColl-Kennedy, Hilton, Davidson, Payne and Brozovic, 2014). Change at the meso or organisational level is the focus of this paper, however we recognise the interconnectedness of these three systems (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983).

This paper builds on the work of Harlow (2014) and Glow, Kershaw and Reason (2021) investigating the audience-centric practice needed to diversify arts audiences. It draws on Glow et al’s (2021) eight stage model of the organisational change involved in audience-centric practice (Figure 1).

Acknowledging the dynamic and iterative process of organisational change our current research refers to these eight areas of work as ‘tasks’ rather than Glow et al’s (2021) use of the term ‘stages’.

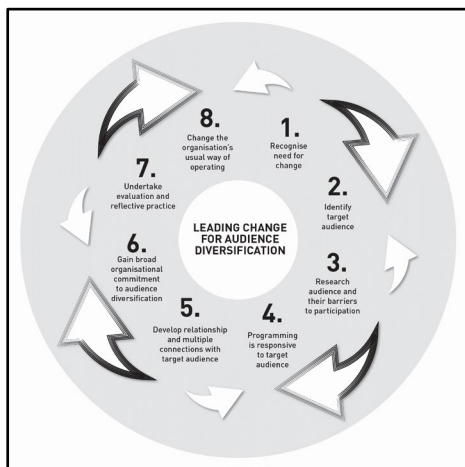


Figure 1: Eight task model of audience-centric practice (Glow, Kershaw and Reason, 2021)

Previous models of audience-centric practice (Glow, Kershaw and Reason, 2021; Harlow, 2014) are process driven. To build on this research we consider the organisational capabilities and attributes required by audience-centric practice and the work needed to diversify audiences. We argue that underpinning these models of audience-centric practice are the need to address the power asymmetry between organisations and audiences (Fisher and Smith, 2011), increase the proximity of organisations to their audiences (Brandsen and Honingh, 2016), and promote value congruence between organisations and audiences (Plé and Rubén Chumpitaz, 2010). We suggest the organisational capabilities and attributes required by audience-centric practice fall into three categories (Table 1): dynamic capabilities; social networking; and business improvement processes.

Table 1: Organisational capabilities required by audience-centric practice

Organisational capacity	Social networking	Business improvement processes	Dynamic capabilities
Description	Ability to move beyond organisational structure and gain new and valuable resources from external networks	Audience diversification is prioritised in strategic processes resulting in the commitment of staff and resources to achieve new strategic outcomes	Ability to shift away from institutional expectations and an organisation's capacity to manage its resources to constantly adapt, reconfigure and innovate
Related tasks from organisational change model	Task 2: Identify target audience Task 3: Research audience and their barriers to participation Task 5: Develop relationship and connections with target audience	Task 7: Undertake evaluation and reflective practice Task 8: Change the organisation's usual way of operating	Task 1: Recognise need for change Task 4: Programming is responsive to target audience Task 6: Gain broad organisational commitment to audience development

Dynamic capabilities The change and institutional entrepreneurship required by audience-centric practice are assisted by an organisation's dynamic capabilities (Battilana, Leca and Boxenbaum, 2009; den Hertog, van der Aa and de Jong, 2010; Greer, Lusch and Vargo, 2016; Kachouie, Mavondo and Ambrosini, 2024). Dynamic capabilities are those that allow an organisation to access and make use of a range of internal and external resources. They are dynamic in the sense that organisations can alter their capabilities as the environment changes and when currently useful capabilities become obsolete (Douglas, Jenkins and Kennedy, 2012). In other words, they are evidence of an organisation's capacity to create, renew or alter its resource mix as environments change (Ambrosini and Bowman, 2009; Greer, Lusch and Vargo, 2016). Dynamic capabilities are linked to service innovation (den Hertog, van der Aa and de Jong, 2010; Frow, Nenonen, Payne and Storbacka, 2015; Kachouie, Mavondo and Ambrosini, 2024). These organisational attributes offer competitive advantages (den Hertog, van der Aa and de Jong, 2010) and an opportunity to access strategic resources that are valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable and non-substitutable (Barney, 1991).

We associate dynamic capabilities with Task 1 (Recognising the need for change), Task 4 (Programming is responsive to target audience) and Task 6 (Gain broad organisational commitment) in Glow et als (2021) model of audience-centric practice.

Social networking Social networks are a source of socially embedded resources and a means by which goods and favours can be exchanged. These networks provide a valuable source of social capital to arts organisations. Social capital is the goodwill offered to us by friends and acquaintances. It results in information, influence and solidarity being made available to the recipient of this goodwill (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Smith-Doerr and Powell, 2005). Social capital plays a significant role in facilitating innovation and change (Agostino, Arena and Arnaboldi, 2013; Carnabuci and DiÓszegi, 2015; Oh and Bush, 2016).

Cultural brokers (Kurin, 1997) or cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu, 1984; Durrer and Miles, 2009) play an important role in arts organisations accessing socially embedded resources. The distinguishing characteristics of cultural brokers is that they are individuals who have agency although embedded within institutional logics (Agostino, Arena and Arnaboldi, 2013) due to their capacity to operate within social networks (Kleinbaum, Jordan and Audia, 2015). As such they are individuals who act as institutional entrepreneurs (Battilana, Leca and Boxenbaum, 2009).

We identify social networking skills within Task 2 (identify target audience), Task 3 (research audience and their barriers to participation), and Task 5 (develop relationship and connections with target audience) in Glow et als (2021) model of audience-centric practice.

Business improvement processes Increased attention to arts marketing and a relational view of art as experience has led audiences to have a central position within the artistic mission of arts organisations (Boorsma and Chiaravalloti, 2010). Successful relationship marketing, based on the need to establish and maintain a relationship with customers or audiences, requires the support and commitment of an organisation's corporate culture (Iglesias, Sauquet and Montaña, 2011). Increasingly the performance of arts marketing is based on the contribution made to the achievement of the arts organisation's artistic mission (Boorsma and Chiaravalloti, 2010). The paradigm shift in arts marketing has led to the prioritisation of long-term relational approaches offered by audience engagement over short-term tactical marketing activities (Walmsley, 2019) A commitment to relationships with customers requires an organisational culture based on trust, commitment, teamwork, innovation, flexibility, and results orientation (Iglesias, Sauquet and Montaña, 2011). An organisation needs new strategic and operational commitments in order to commit to change and prevent a return to traditional work or 'business as usual' (Kershaw, Glow and Goodwin, 2022).

We associate business improvement processes with Task 7 (undertake evaluation and reflective practice) and Task 8 (change the organisation's usual way of operating) in Glow et als (2021) model of audience-centric practice.

Metaphor as a tool for organisational theory and meaning making

Metaphors are an established means of investigating organisational theory (Alvesson, 1993; Morgan, 2006). For Morgan (2006), the emphasis on understanding the organic and biological nature of organisations has facilitated organisational theorists to develop new ideas about how organisations function and has seen a shift away from mechanical science and toward biology as a source of ideas for thinking about organizations and the factors that may have an impact on their survival and capacity to flourish.

Morgan (2006) argues that thinking about organisations as organisms allows us to understand how organisations relate to their environment: 'Just as we find polar bears in arctic regions, camels in deserts, and alligators in swamps, we notice that certain species of organization are better "adapted" to specific environmental conditions than others' (2006, p. 33). This conceptual framework encourages an understanding of organisations as living systems that can be categorised according to 'species':

‘We find that bureaucratic organizations tend to work most effectively in environments that are stable or protected in some way and that very different species are found in more competitive and turbulent regions, such as the environments of high-tech firms in the aero-space and microelectronics industries’ (2006, p. 33).

Such a biological and social Darwinist approach to theorising organisations emphasises the view that organisations are open systems rather than sharply defined structures made up of identifiable parts. Rather, we have the idea of organisations as being like organisms in a constant state of flux and responsive to the environments they find themselves in. In this way, the biological metaphor for organisations allows us to see them less as entities striving to achieve operational goals and more in terms of fundamental processes that are directed to meeting the needs of the organisation and to ensuring its survival. This in turn has consequences for the management of organisations ‘for if survival is seen as the primary orientation, specific goals are framed by a more basic and enduring process that helps prevent them from becoming ends in themselves... The focus on the use and acquisition of resources also helps emphasize that the process of organizing is much broader and more basic than the task of achieving specific goals’ (Morgan, 2006, p. 61).

There are multiple ways in which the biological metaphor, in particular seeing the organisation as animal, allows for a deeper understanding of organisational theory. Metaphors are a form of trope and function by indicating a correspondence between two different phenomenon (Pinto, 2016). This allows people to ‘conceptualize one mental domain in terms of another’ (Lakoff, 1993, p. 20). In this way metaphors help us to see the things we ordinarily take for granted in a new light; metaphors are a way of creatively interpreting the world and refocusing our perceptions or allowing us ‘see the world anew’ (Barrett and Cooperrider, 1990, p. 222).

In this sense, metaphors as an analytical and methodological tool is somewhat akin to the process of ethnographic research; ethnography takes a close-up view of the ‘continual and messy processes that produce cultures’ and is ‘attuned to the objects, materials and symbolic artefacts that help bring them to life’ (Hamilton and Taylor, 2012). While the current research does not explicitly incorporate an ethnographic lens to our analysis, the ethnographer’s interest in ‘symbolic artefacts’ as a way of understanding how people in organisations make sense of their identities and relationships is one that informs some of our methodological approach.

In her analysis of the use of metaphors to frame Human Resource management, Cleland Silva argues that the use of metaphors can be a critical tool in investigating aspects of people’s lived experience and in understanding people’s ‘reality beyond rhetoric’ (2022, p. 214). She identifies a range of conceptual advantages to using metaphor as an investigative tool: metaphors open up the possibility of multiple meanings ‘by opening lived experiences to multiple actors and symbolic dimensions which... may have been underacknowledged’; metaphors bring story-telling into the mix and ‘provide an imaginary space to explore a story that collectively unites the actors’; metaphors are ‘vehicles’ through which change can be facilitated or can point to underlying problems within an organisation; the use of metaphors can capture both process and product in the sense that in meaning-making, metaphors can bring one domain of experience, usually abstract, to shed light upon another domain, usually concrete; and finally, metaphors usefully allow for an interrogation of reality beyond rhetoric so that in understanding people’s lived experience in organisations, theory can go behind or beyond conventional rhetorical frames (Cleland Silva, 2022, p. 213). This last was a significant issue for the present research as the researchers sought to move beyond or behind the rhetorical tendencies of interviewees to say what they thought we wanted to hear or to present their organisation in the best possible light.

The organisation-as-animal metaphor question was hermeneutically influenced, reflecting a desire to understand underlying meaning rather than study causal connections (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2010). Metaphor was used for the purpose of critique and reflection (Alvesson, 1993). The question was

particularly influenced by the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ and brings a sceptical or critical view to the discourse by which arts workers present their organisations. It is based on a desire to probe beyond ‘illusory self-consciousness’ (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2010); in other words encourage interviewees to move beyond political correctness and the desire to second guess the researchers’ intent. The ‘suspicion’ of the researchers was that arts workers follow a ‘script’ in the way they present their organisations.

METHODOLOGY

Research context

This paper presents narrative, case study research conducted as part of a broader investigation of audience-centric practice in publicly funded Australian arts organisations. Australia arts organisations operate within a cultural programming and policy context common to Anglophone countries (Gibson, 2008). The arts play a critical role in ensuring the quality of life for all Australians. Despite the narrow demographic of audiences for publicly funded arts most people have some form of engagement in the arts and creative industries (Creative Australia, 2023).

The initial phase of this research project involved a national survey of arts organisations based on the eight task model of audience-centric practice. Survey data was used to classify organisations as Leaders, Adaptors or Avoiders of the work needed to diversify audiences:

- Leaders: embrace change and are actively programming for new audiences while building networks and connections outside their organisation
- Adaptors: undertake partial change but have not yet made the changes needed to diversify audiences, focusing instead on programming for known audiences and existing stakeholders
- Avoiders: ignore or resist change and maintain a commitment to creative production over and above an interest in audiences, prioritising the existing audience to the exclusion of other potential audiences.

This survey found that arts organisations were generally Adaptors of the eight tasks needed to diversify audiences. When the survey results are consolidated according to the three organisational capabilities needed to undertake audience-centric practice (Figure 2) it is evident Adaptor behaviour continues to predominate across all three organisational capabilities (dynamic capabilities 47%; social networking 46% and business improvement processes 56%).

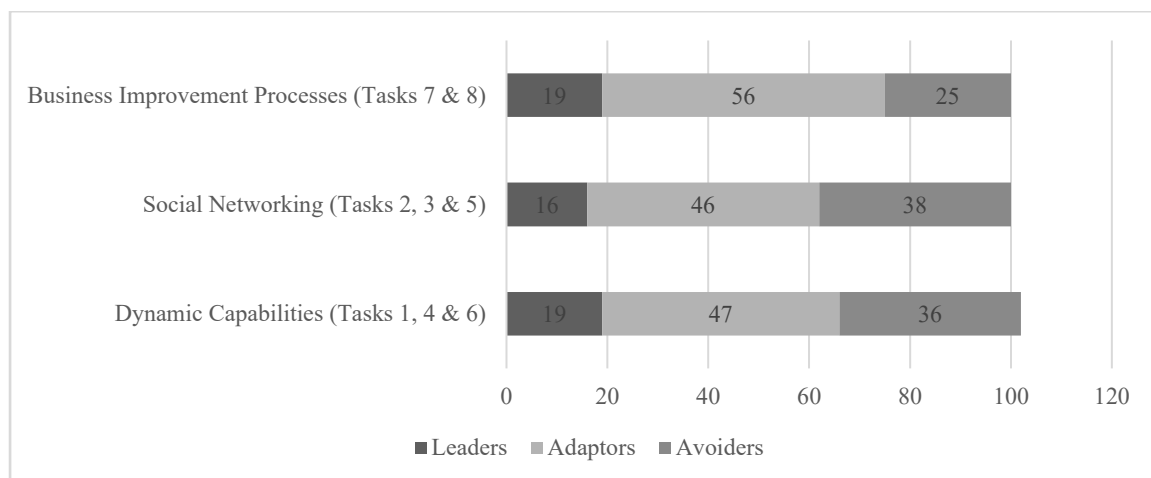


Figure 2: National survey findings in relation to the organisational capabilities required by audience-centric practice

Data collection and analysis

This current paper presents narrative research with case study organisations, undertaken in the second phase of the broader research project. It examines one interview question from within a broader narrative interview schedule: ‘If your organisation was an animal what animal would it be, and why?’ The organisation-as-animal trope aligns with Morgan’s identification of the organisation as organism metaphor, which is one of the dominant metaphors used in organisational theory (Morgan, 2006).

Analysis of the narrative interview question drew on the interplay between metaphor and metonym (Morgan, 2016; Pinto, 2016). A metaphor indicates a correspondence between two different phenomenon (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2010; Morgan, 1991). Metonyms are words or phrases used in place of another with which it's closely associated. The effective use of metaphor requires the image to be articulated and explained through metonyms (Morgan, 2016; Pinto, 2016). The metonyms used to discuss and explain the organisational as animal metaphor were coded according to the organisational capabilities associated with audience-centric practice (dynamic capabilities, social networking and business improvement processes) (Table 2).

Table 2: Illustration of thematic coding of narrative interview data

Positive metonyms/ descriptors used in discussion of metaphor			Negative metonyms/ descriptors used in discussion of metaphor		
Dynamic capability (positive)	Social networking (positive)	Business improvement process (positive)	Dynamic capability (negative)	Social networking (negative)	Business improvement process (negative)
<p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Makes people excited • Exquisite when standing upright • Pollinators 	<p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friendly • Loyal • Companionship 	<p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Big impact • Long term view • Punches above weight 	<p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bending down takes effort • Slow moving • Difficult to divert from chosen course 	<p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scared of small things • Territorial • Loud roar 	<p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not centrally controlled by one brain • Hoards information • Reactive

A total of 36 staff from 13 case study organisations participated in narrative interviews (Table 3). The organisation-as-animal metaphor was the final question in a more extensive interview schedule investigating the strengths and weakness of the organisation’s audience-centric practice. Some interviews were conducted individually, and others in groups of two or three. In some group interviews staff were in agreement about the choice of animal metaphor, while in others a variety of metaphors were offered. The average length of the overall narrative interview was one hour.

Table 3: Overview of case study organisations and participating staff

Case	Type of organisation	Participating staff
1	Venue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Head of Marketing • Manager of Human Services • Head of Public Relations
2	Museum/ gallery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Head of Collection Services • Head of Visitor Engagement • Council Member
3	Museum/ gallery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Director • Gallery Manager and Associate Curator
4	Theatre company	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Senior Creative Producer • Creative Producer • Business development / Marketing Manager
5	Theatre company	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General Manager • Program Manager • Senior Marketing Coordinator
6	Museum/ gallery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assistant Director – Content and Innovation • Head of Engagement • Central Australia Manager
7	Festival	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Head of Audience and Participation • Head of Creative Program • Head of Stakeholder Engagement
8	Venue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Director of Programming • Acting Head of Insights • General Manager Marketing
9	Performing arts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Executive Director • Community Engagement Producer • Program Manager
10	Venue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marketing & Communications Manager • Customer Services Manager • Customer Services Manager
11	Performing arts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marketing Manager • General Manager
12	Local council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arts and Cultural Development Manager • Arts and Cultural Development Team Leader • Programs officer
13	Museum/ gallery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Executive Director • Curator

To increase the robustness of the thematic coding of metonyms from the narrative interview data, this analysis was undertaken by four members of the research team. These four team members independently coded the transcripts for the organisation as animal metaphor interview question. The average score was calculated for the number of positive and critical metonyms used to portray the organisational as animal metaphor. This metonym count was further analysed according to the three organisational capabilities of audience-centric practice (dynamic capabilities, social networks and business improvement processes).

FINDINGS

When asked to describe their organisation using an animal trope, arts workers offered a range of metaphors (Table 4). The animals identified to describe an arts organisation in two or more interviews were: elephant, dog, mythical beast (Cerberus), donkey, giraffe, swan, bird (general) and squirrel. The animals identified on a single occasion were: zebra, beaver, sloth, bear, bee, big cat, flying fox, octopus and platypus.

To explain their choice of metaphor, interviewees drew on metonyms that generally offered positive accounts of their organisations. To illustrate (Table 3), examples of metonyms considered positive descriptions of organisations include: ‘makes people feel excited’ (aligned to dynamic capability); ‘friendly’ (social networking) and ‘long-term view’ (business improvement processes). Conversely, examples of metonyms which suggested critical descriptions of organisations included: ‘difficult to divert from chosen course’ (dynamic capabilities); ‘scared of small things’ (social networking); and ‘not centrally controlled by one brain’ (business improvement processes). The average count of metonyms used in response to the organisation-as-animal metaphor narrative interview question was 55 positive organisational attributes and 31.25 critical or negative attributes (Table 4).

When these metonyms are grouped according to the organisational capabilities associated with audience-centric practice, interviewees predominantly associate the strengths of their organisations with dynamic capabilities (Table 4). The count for positive metonyms associated with dynamic capabilities was largest (average score = 28.25), compared with the number of positive metonyms linked to social networking (= 9.5) and business improvement processes (= 17.75). The discussion of organisational weaknesses was more equally distributed between the categories of dynamic capabilities (average count = 12.75), social networking (= 7.5) and business improvement processes (= 11.25).

Table 2: Findings from 'organisation as animal' narrative interview question

Root metaphor:	Secondary metaphor:		Positive metonyms/ descriptors (Metonym count)			Negative metonyms/ descriptors (Metonym count)		
			Dynamic capability	Social networking	Business improvement process	Dynamic capability	Social networking	Business improvement process
Organisation as organism	Organisation as animal: Elephant (x3) Dog (x2) Mythical beast/ Cerberus (x2) Donkey (x2) Giraffe (x2) Swan (x2) Bird (x2) Squirrel (x2) Zebra, Beaver, Sloth, Bear, Bee, Big cat, Flying fox, Octopus, Platypus	Researcher A	23	8	25	17	7	9
		Researcher B	16	5	12	15	11	16
		Researcher C	61	10	23	12	8	11
		Researcher D	13	15	11	7	3	9
		Average count	28.25	9.5	17.75	12.75	7.25	11.25
		Summary	Positive metonym count (average)= 55			Negative metonym count (average) = 31.25		

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Changing the homogenous profile of audiences has long been a challenge for arts organisations. The lack of diversity within audiences highlights the need for organisational change and the adoption of audience-centric practice. Despite the need for change and new ways of working, when asked to discuss their organisation using an animal trope arts workers gave positive accounts of their organisations. Interviewees were generally uncritical of their organisations when depicting them using an animal metaphor, instead using positive metonyms to describe the case study organisation.

The audience-centric practice needed to diversify the social profile of audiences requires organisational capabilities in the form of (1) dynamic capabilities, (2) social networking and (3) business improvement processes. The discussions that explored the animal trope emphasised the positive dynamic capabilities of case study organisations. Less attention was given to metonyms associated with social networking and business improvement processes. When negative characteristics of the case study organisations were acknowledged, this discussion was more equally balanced across all three organisational capabilities. These findings contradict earlier research (in the form of a national survey) which identified a lack of audience-centric practice across all three organisational capabilities.

The contraction between earlier survey results and these narrative interview findings lend weight to a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2010) research design. Given task one in the model of audience-centric practice is 'Recognise the need for change' (Glow, Kershaw and Reason, 2021) the use of positive metonyms to describe their organisations suggests artworkers have minimal recognition of a need for change. It is possible that audience diversification is an intractable issue in the arts because the sector is not driven by a compelling need for change (Greenwood, Hinings and Suddaby, 2002; Greenwood, Hinings and Whetten, 2014).

Further research is needed to explore how these organisational capabilities manifest and the drivers/inhibitors of audience-centric practice. For example, it is possible that outdated leadership models (Haslam, Alvesson and Reicher, 2024) lead to arts workers emphasising dynamic capabilities over social networking and business improvement process as valuable organisational capabilities. It is also possible that the normative pressures arising from the professional nature of arts work limit the capacity for change and audience-centric practice. Dynamic capabilities may be the organisational capabilities that arts workers prioritise as indicators of professional practice and high standards.

These findings have implications for cultural policy, government bodies and sector development initiatives that seek to diversify audiences and build the capacity of arts organisations to undertake audience-centric practice. The development of all three organisational capabilities is needed to increase audience-centric practice in the arts and engage new and diverse audiences. Increasing the dynamic capability, social networking and business improvement capacity of arts organisations is part of the organisational change needed to engage new and diverse audiences for the arts.

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