

## Contextual barriers to artistic practices among older people: how do older artists perceive them?

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### Abstract

Research on older people's artistic participation has mainly focussed on its benefits. Fewer studies have addressed the antecedents of older people's artistic participation, especially barriers to artistic practices, and particularly those related with contextual factors. In this study, we examined which contextual barriers older artists perceive when they are carrying out their artistic practices from a socioecological perspective. We conducted semi-structured individual interviews with 30 older visual artists and craftspeople. We found four themes relating to contextual barriers to artistic practice: value of arts and crafts, financial difficulties, discrimination against women, and the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Our study expands on previous research on antecedents of artistic participation among older people, and specifically on barriers. Finally, our study suggests the need to decrease these barriers by implementing programmes aimed at older artists to maintain their artistic and meaningful practices for as long as possible.

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## Introduction

In recent decades, there has been increased interest in older people's artistic participation (Reynolds 2015). Research on this topic is significant, since participation in artistic activities among older people is related to numerous individual benefits, such as better cognitive function (Gray & Gow 2020), enhancement of physical health (Reynolds et al. 2011), and contribution to quality of life (Ho et al. 2019). Participation in artistic activities in later life has also been linked to several benefits at social level, such as the preservation of close social networks (Jeffri 2005) and less isolation (Southcott & Joseph 2015).

Research has predominantly focussed on the benefits of artistic practices (Chacur et al. 2022; Gallistl 2021). This emphasis, particularly concerning health promotion and prevention, positions artistic practices as a panacea for potential issues associated with ageing. This overshadows the understanding of artistic practices as a form of self-care and meaning-making (Swinnen 2019). Consequently, there is a need to explore older people's artistic practices beyond a utilitarian perspective that is solely aimed at obtaining specific benefits.

In this context, fewer studies have addressed factors that promote or hinder older people's artistic participation (Chacur et al. 2022). Existing studies in this area are mainly focussed on factors that promote artistic practices, known as facilitators. Examples of this emphasis are studies about motivation (e.g., Fisher & Specht 1999), interpersonal influences that promote artistic activities (e.g., Reynolds 2009), and contextual facilitators of artistic practices (e.g., Keaney & Oskala 2007). Few studies have examined aspects that could hinder older people's artistic participation, particularly those related with contextual factors (Chacur et al. 2022). Understanding these obstacles may contribute to identifying broken or unfulfilled trajectories of artistic participation and suggest factors that help to sustain the participation of older artists and integration of those who do not currently participate in this type of activities.

### *What Do We Know About Barriers to Artistic Practices among Older People?*

As stated above, barriers to artistic practices among older people have not been widely studied. These barriers could be broadly classified considering a socioecological framework (Sallis et al. 2008), which includes a wide range of influences at multiple levels. These influences are not limited to psychosocial variables (McLeroy et al. 1988; Sallis & Owen 2002). They also include environmental and policy elements that could influence an individual's behaviour.

Numerous socioecological models have emerged over time to explain an individual's behaviour and/or to guide behavioural interventions. For instance, Bronfenbrenner (1979) identified four levels of environmental influences. These were the microsystem, a pattern of activities, roles and interpersonal relations experienced by the person in a given setting with specific physical and material attributes; the mesosystem, which consists of the links between two or more settings in which the individual actively participates, for example relations among home, school and neighbourhood peer groups or among family, work and social life; the exosystem, which is comprised of one or more settings that do not include the individual as an active participant but in which events happen that influence, or are influenced by, what occurs in the setting of the developing person; and the macrosystem, which refers to consistencies of lower-order systems (micro-, meso- and exo-system) that occur, or could occur, in the subculture or the culture's level as a whole, with any belief systems or ideology underlying such consistencies. Through their ecological model of health behaviour, McLeroy et al. (1988) recognised five sources of influences on health behaviour: intrapersonal factors, interpersonal processes and primary groups, institutional factors, community factors, and public policy. In contrast, the more recent structural-ecological model proposed by Cohen et al. (2000) identified four categories of structural influences: the availability of protective or harmful consumer products, physical structures, social structures and policies, and media and cultural messages. Although the levels identified by the various socioecological models are not identical, all of them agree on at least three basic levels: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and contextual.

Socioecological models have been used in studies about public health promotion (Stokols 1992), social participation (Gallardo-Peralta et al. 2022) or competitive sports among older adults (Cannella et al. 2022). These frameworks enable us to understand older people's artistic practices at an individual's environment level, including intrapersonal, interpersonal and contextual elements. The primary emphasis on benefits, as outlined in the initial paragraphs of this article, has limited the space for examining context. Context is a crucial aspect, particularly to understand what artistic participation means for older artists themselves (Goulding 2018a). Few studies have addressed barriers at contextual level, with scholars frequently overlooking the collective and social dimensions of creativity (Gallistl 2021), and often analysing artistic practice as an individual phenomenon. In this regard, Becker (1974) described how the creation of an artwork is the culmination of orchestrated actions and interactions among various participants who assume distinct roles at specific points in the creative process. Consequently, the artwork can be considered the result of a collective endeavour that spans production, evaluation, and consumption levels.

Another relevant element is related to the conventions involved in arts practices. Conventions prescribe the abstractions used to convey specific ideas or experiences, and shape the dynamics between artists and their audience by establishing the commitments of both. Furthermore, conventions can shape what constitutes a good work of art and what is accepted in that sphere (Becker 1974). In this context, a study conducted by Gallistl (2018) revealed that creativity in later life is intricately grounded in prevailing norms and conceptions of old age, and that by knowing specific artistic skills older artists distinguished themselves from other agents who were not important in the creative field. The artists' field appears as a social sphere characterised by inherent conflict and competition, where artists engage in ongoing struggles to demarcate the boundaries that distinguish art from non-art (Bourdieu 1996).

In contrast to the aforementioned complexity, research on barriers to artistic practice among older people has mainly focussed on obstacles at intrapersonal level and, in second term, at interpersonal level. The intrapersonal level involves knowledge, attitudes and skills that are directly related to the individual (Sallis et al. 2008). At intrapersonal level, Keaney

and Oskala (2007) found that the influence of poor health, particularly among older adults with a limiting disability, could restrict participation in artistic activities. Even though this study did not examine the motives for this decrease in artistic participation, poor health could visibly act as an obstacle (Keaney & Oskala 2007).

The interpersonal level concerns connections and relations within an individual's network; both primary, for example, with family and close friends, and secondary groups that are larger and broader (Sallis et al. 2008). Some barriers have also been examined at interpersonal level. For example, a lack of social networks could diminish participation in artistic leisure activities, especially in the oldest-old people. While there is no clear age-related tendency in lack of social networks as an obstacle, more older people than younger people cited this as a difficulty (Keaney & Oskala 2007).

In line with interpersonal influences, it has been argued that artists' lives are rooted in relationships with other people and are thus affected by them (Bengtson et al. 2005; Elder 1998). In this respect, life course transitions could influence the artistic trajectories of older adults, particularly among professional artists. For instance, having children can lead to the transitory cessation of artistic practice and the choice of a career in a non-artistic area, to provide greater economic stability (Mullen et al. 2012). Another study among older artists showed that some life course transitions related with the family domain, such as the care of relatives, could hamper artistic practice. It could either decrease the number of hours dedicated to the creative activity or lead to a halt in the artistic activity during a long period (Chacur-Kiss et al. 2023).

In contrast, contextual barriers have been examined to a lesser extent. Contextual level can comprise community aspects, such as workplaces and neighbourhoods; and broad societal aspects including cultural and social norms, and economic and social policies (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2007; Krug et al. 2002). In addition, it can include elements that are inherent to the artistic field, namely valuation in late-life creativity or artworks (Gallistl 2021), and social and cultural capital (Goulding 2013). For example, regarding barriers related to community aspects, a lack of transport may hamper participation among older people in artistic leisure activities by hindering access to creative activities

outside the home (Keaney & Oskala 2007). In the case of professional artists and concerning societal factors, economic aspects could jeopardise the professional career of artists and lead them towards other non-artistic careers (Mullen et al. 2012).

These studies mostly addressed contextual barriers to recruiting older people to participate in artistic activities, and contextual barriers that led to a temporary or definitive cessation of artistic practices. In contrast, few studies have focussed on older people who are actively artistically engaged, and the contextual barriers that they perceived, even if these restrict but do not necessarily halt the artistic practices.

### *Justification and Purposes of the Study*

Notwithstanding scholars' increasing attention to older people's artistic participation, there are some gaps in the study of barriers to artistic practices among older adults that need to be explored to understand them more comprehensively.

Firstly, most studies are linked to the outcomes of artistic participation, specifically to its benefits. This "benefits focus" has some risks. It may show the artistic participation of older adults in a biased way, as it does not examine the potential costs of such participation at different levels. Secondly, research on the antecedents of artistic participation is largely centred on facilitators. Few studies address the barriers. The study of barriers could help to promote the involvement of older adults or sustain their artistic practices. Thirdly, research on barriers has preferably examined obstacles at individual and interpersonal levels, and ignored barriers at contextual level. A better exploration of the context in which older people's artistic participation takes place could help to identify barriers linked to accessibility or the influence of the community on older adults' participation in artistic activities. This would help to promote a friendlier environment for artistic practices and the design of interventions and policies based on the real context that would enable older artists to face these obstacles.

In this sense, the study of barriers to artistic practices in the older population is particularly interesting, because older artists may have had a longer artistic journey, have developed an expert view of the

matter, and have experienced a wider variety of barriers throughout their life. Studies that contemplate larger age ranges and older age could support the construction of a more inclusive, realistic approach to barriers to artistic practices. In addition, due to their long artistic trajectories, only older people can provide a more complete life-course view of contextual barriers, through a retrospective cross-sectional study. For the aforementioned reasons, this study seeks to examine what contextual barriers older artists perceive while they are carrying out their artistic practices.

## Methods

### *Participants*

For this study, three main inclusion criteria were considered: (a) participants were aged 60 years or above, (b) participants carried out an artistic activity, and (c) the artistic activity was valued as significant by the participants. Artistic activity was understood as a voluntary and active artistic practice, at professional or non-professional level, including visual arts and crafts. The purpose of these disciplines is to create tangible items regardless of the level of expertise (Reynolds & Lim 2007). Artistic practices in an intervention or therapeutic context, or training courses were not considered, since these formats might potentially affect the characteristic of voluntary, significant activities. The sampling technique was intentionally kept broad, which is appropriate for examining the perception and meanings of artistic practices as valuable for the participants. In addition, to achieve its purpose, this study did not require the analysis of a specific group of artists, whether professional or non-professional. However, the use of a more focussed sampling strategy might have reduced the study's sample to older people with a legitimate position in their artistic disciplines (Gallistl 2018).

The sample comprised of 30 artists (16 women and 14 men) living in Catalonia (Spain), with a mean age of 68.63 (standard deviation [SD] = 5.3; range = 60–79). Participants actively carried out at least one visual arts or crafts discipline, including painting, sculpture,

photography, drawing, illustration, engraving, jewellery, enamelling, ceramics, embroidery, textile art, basketry, collage, recycled art and woodcraft. In addition to the visual arts or craft discipline, five participants practised another artistic discipline, such as literature, music, poetry and performing arts. Participants were asked if they considered themselves to be professional or non-professional artists, and 20 defined themselves as professional and 10 as non-professional artists. Table 1 shows other sociodemographic characteristics of the sample.

**Table 1.** Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample (in frequencies and percentages) ( $N = 30$ )

Sociodemographic characteristic	Participants	
	<i>n</i>	%
Marital status		
Married	20	66.7
Divorced	7	23.3
Widowed	2	6.7
Single	1	3.3
Educational level		
Primary studies	2	6.7
Secondary studies	16	53.3
University studies	12	40
Self-rated health (compared with one year ago)		
Much worse	0	0
Worse	6	20
Same	21	70
Better	1	3.3
Much better	2	6.7



### *Instruments*

The authors of the study designed a semi-structured interview with open questions to be applied in individual mode. This interview covered the following main topics: life course transitions and relevant events during the artistic trajectory, meaning of ageing and artistic practice, and the influence of life domains on artistic trajectory (and vice versa). The last part of the interview included a thematic section about contextual barriers regarding artistic practice. In this paper, we analyse answers to this section.

### *Procedure*

Participants were contacted in two ways. The first was through formal contact by e-mail with numerous arts and crafts institutions in Catalonia. Three institutions decided to collaborate. Subsequently, an online or face-to-face meeting was held with the manager of each institution, who agreed to distribute information about the research project and invite those interested to contact Author 1 by phone or e-mail. Twelve participants were recruited in this way. The second way was through informal contact with artists living in Catalonia through the researchers' networks or through new contacts given by other participants. Eighteen participants were recruited in the second way.

Twenty-nine interviews were conducted face-to-face and one via video call. Participants chose the setting for the interview, which was most often the artist's residence or studio. Interviews were conducted individually and in a single session by Author 1. She had previous experience in qualitative research and was trained to carry out the interviews in this study. As part of her training, she conducted one interview with a person who met all the inclusion criteria, and the results were discussed with Authors 2 and 3. This interview was not considered for the final sample.

The Ethics Committee of the University of Barcelona (IRB00003099) approved the study. All participants received and signed a written formal consent form, which included exhaustive information on the purposes of the study, data collection methods, confidentiality and

anonymity aspects, and the right to refuse to answer any questions and to abandon the study at any time. Regarding the video call interview, the information document was sent by e-mail and informed consent was given verbally and audio recorded. The image of this interview was not recorded. We pseudonymised data before analysis and use pseudonyms to quote interviews in this paper, to maintain the participants' anonymity.

### *Data Analysis*

Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed through thematic analysis with the support of ATLAS.ti 9 software. The interviews took between 46 and 170 min. We based the analysis of the interviews on the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021), following an inductive process. This process allows data coding without incorporating it into a pre-existing coding framework. Six stages of analysis were included. Firstly, we became familiar with the data through reading and re-reading it, and we registered our preliminary ideas. Secondly, we created the initial codes from the data. Thirdly, we ordered the codes into possible themes and gathered all important data for each theme. Fourthly, we revised all the themes by evaluating their link with the coded excerpts and with the whole data set. Fifthly, we determined and named the themes, by analysing them to refine aspects of each one, and the overall narration that the analysis states. Lastly, we revised all the themes by analysing examples (excerpts) and connecting the analysis to the research purposes and literature. All authors contributed to the data analysis.

### *Findings*

We identified four themes or categories regarding contextual barriers to artistic practice among older people in the participants' narratives. These were value of arts and crafts, financial difficulties, discrimination against women, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the participants revealed at least one contextual barrier to artistic practice, and some of them described two or more barriers.

### *Value of Arts and Crafts*

The value of arts and crafts refers to other people's recognition of the artistic discipline or artistic work and how relevant they think it is, and is linked to the manner in which 'others' attribute value (or not) to their artworks or artistic disciplines. This could be expressed in different ways. For instance, Juan, a professional craftsman, described how the perception in his family and social context of being a craftsman acted as a barrier to engaging in basket weaving at the beginning of his crafts career.

I don't find barriers now, but I did find them then as... I was dedicating myself to something that... this guy is a bit... crazy, right? because... I mean... socially, when I started, socially it was not well considered [being a craftsman]. And here, I'm not sure if everywhere or in some places, but here in Catalonia, 'what will they say', in Catalan, what will the neighbours say if you do this. I didn't care, but my parents cared a lot about this, I've never cared about this (...) Well, it's not true that I don't care about their opinion, of course I care... because we live socially, right? (...) I prefer it now, that in any case, when people come here [to the basket weaving studio], they say 'oh, great!' (Man, 64 years old)

In Juan's narrative, some ambivalence is evident in his contemplation of the value that others attribute (or not) to his craft trade. He highlighted the social context in which crafts practices unfold. Additionally, it stands out that 'others', namely the audience, non-artists and other artists, play a significant role in the artistic process, by contributing to the recognition bestowed, or withheld, from the creative endeavour. In some cases, a lack of recognition of arts arose from the artistic circle's attitude towards certain artistic disciplines. The conflict between 'fine arts and applied arts' was the focus of professional textile artist María's narrative on contextual barriers to artistic practice.

(...) there was the fact of making... let's say an applied art, right? I have no problem with that, I mean, they say to me, 'well, you don't do art, but applied art' and I say 'well, so what?' [Interviewer: Uhm, I understand...] I mean, but... I realise that although I don't care much, it is still a negative thing. Because it is [negative]. Because... art... I mean, the famous, the famous dividing line, the famous boundary that separates arts from crafts, or applied arts... It is something that is there. And those who are involved in art with a capital letter, take great care to ensure those who according to them are involved in 'less important' art, we never cross the border, right? (Woman, 73 years old).

Later, she added that “I currently have, and I have had, many artist friends, and within this group of artist friends there were few who really didn’t consider that you were below them, instead you were on the same level....” This dynamic meant more challenges in the incipient stages of her artistic career. However, in later life, she feels comfortable with her identity as a craftswoman. More experience in the craft field gave her confidence: “I have already accepted this, I think that with all the work I have behind me I don’t have to be ashamed anymore [laughs].”

Other artists pointed out that new generations have undergone a transformation in terms of the recognition and value ascribed to artistic practices today. This topic was mentioned by Julio, a professional painter, who talked about new generations’ lack of interest in arts, which was influenced, from his point of view, by changes in values.

Of course, if that [art] is not promoted, finally people... they lose the... I don’t know... the interest, and I think that a long time ago, you would see the father, the mother and the child [in art] galleries, and now in galleries or museums, recently I haven’t seen any children (...) I think society has changed, now you can order what you want online, and instead of a painting painted at home, you have a poster or you have a photograph that costs... ten or fifty times less... (Man, 70 years old)

Ageing as an artist has given Julio the opportunity to discern and compare the diverse audiences his artwork has garnered throughout his artistic journey. In his opinion, these audiences have changed over the years. Similarly, narratives about the dissemination of artistic work were associated with difficulties in obtaining a public exhibition. Sometimes these obstacles were specifically related to the way art galleries handle the dissemination of artwork. Jordi, a professional painter explained his experience and point of view regarding how art galleries tend to manage them as a business.

The galleries when they became a movement of... ‘snobbism’, eh, this was common, it made a good impression to have a gallery, and they had a gallery in the same way people had a shoe shop, a clothes shop, a fashion shop, anything (...) And the real business was done with the... with the artist. When it should be the other way round. (...) But... the galleries that... say ‘hey, you can exhibit here, but you must pay’ (...) they are living off the painters. (Man, 71 years old)

In line with Jordi, Salvador, a professional artist (sculptor, painter and jeweller) highlighted how in the context of art galleries, artists are often relegated to being perceived as 'just another element' in a production chain. Furthermore, he stated that galleries express disdain for artists who seek fair pay for their artworks. He was of the view that galleries primarily prioritise the unique objective of selling.

At this time, galleries don't believe in artists, but they take advantage of them. You must sell, and you are a manufacturer... underappreciated, if they want, they don't pay you... that feeling of... where they should value you, where they should appreciate you... where they should support you, it's a place where they hate you, because you want to get paid. (Man, 72 years old)

Obstacles linked to the dissemination of artistic work were perceived by professional and non-professional artists. Pablo, a non-professional painter and craftsman, owner and designer of a furniture store in the past where he had exhibited his artwork, described a lack of access to ways of exhibiting, and how retirement had reduced the spaces available to exhibit his work.

(...) if I want to exhibit for... I've done a whole... a series of paintings because I've been on a journey (...) so I have a collection of works that I've painted, twenty paintings... where will I exhibit them? If I want to sell my paintings, for example, I can't... before I could... now I'm retired, but if I want to exhibit, I mean, I'm not an artist, then... in galleries, the first thing they ask you (...) what curriculum do you have, what exhibitions have you done, with whom... (Man, 71 years)

Beyond the role that the art galleries play in the dissemination of artistic work, access to opportunities for exhibiting can be complex. This was described by Ximena, a professional costume designer who is currently dedicated to painting. She described the obstacles for some artists to enter a well-known artistic circle and revealed that in later life this issue becomes more complex. She stated that it is more difficult for her to join these artistic circles than in the early stages of her artistic journey.

(...) It is very difficult. Because... let's see, those who sell and who have... those who have a 'name', it is because they have people who... well... naturally, they have been interested and they have moved before to... to obtain, to have these contacts. But, of course, these people... are the ones who sell, and they are the ones with 'names'. There... there

are thousands of... artists who are in the dark, nobody knows us (...) we haven't had the way to... to be able to integrate... to enter this world. (Woman, 72 years old)

The identification of a lack of resources, specifically at a social level, opens the topic of other obstacles in terms of resources in later life. This topic encompasses potential challenges related to material and financial resources that may have a negative impact on artistic practices.

### *Financial Difficulties*

Some interviewees stated that financial aspects act as barriers to the development of artistic activity, an element that could take different forms. For Rita, a non-professional painter, the difficulty lay in the high cost involved in painting, for example to pay for materials and tuition fees for taking classes to improve her artistic technique.

Well, I think there is also a barrier that is the economic aspect. Because it is a hobby that isn't cheap, it isn't cheap... and if now he [her husband, an artist too] goes once and I go twice, maybe without this economic barrier, we could go almost every day to spend some hours on it. And we would progress much more. (Woman, 68 years old)

Rita mentioned that economic difficulties tend to increase in old age, and potentially contribute to a more complex ageing process. Despite this, she stressed that ageing as an artist (regardless of the difficulties) is different from 'other types of ageing': "these [artistic] goals are illusions... and well, I believe that we lengthen our lives. You don't stay there on a couch, you don't stay there in front of the TV, you don't have the typical conventional retirement." According to other artists, financial barriers acted at macro level: the fact that there were economic problems at country level meant that people acquired fewer artworks, with the consequent negative effect on artists. This is the situation described by Teresa, a professional illustrator and engraver:

"Well, there isn't... there's no money... that... that... that people [artists] don't sell. The youngest illustrators don't have a job (...) Now there is a total crisis. Economic, total, total, total. And people are now concerned about repairing the house, being able to eat..." (Woman, 79 years)

Alberto, a painter and photographer, highlighted that as a non-professional artist starting his creative practice in later life (post-retirement) the economic element is challenging. In his opinion, his situation contrasts with that of well-established professional artists who have enjoyed lengthy artistic careers. He pointed out that although “I would like this artistic activity to be part of my life on an economic level, the barrier is total.” Alberto noted that “it is impossible to make a living from painting if you are not a guy who has already set up a structure from years of work.” In his view, ageing is a complex issue, as “a retired person or an older person who has dedicated himself to doing this [from this stage] has very little economic opportunity. You go to exhibitions, you set up, you pay for everything.”

The age at which creative practice begins to be considered an obstacle, prompts reflection on other social constructions and their potential interference. One of these is gender in artistic practices; a topic that is referred to by some participants.

### *Discrimination Against Women*

The narrative of María showed how gender aspects, in her own words “being a woman” along with other types of barriers, such as recognition inside the artistic circle of her artistic discipline, acted as an obstacle to developing her art in an ideal way.

Well, being a woman, of course. I mean... without any doubt, right? I mean, but this is so obvious that it almost does not need to be said. [Interviewer: No, it is equally important to verbalize it, because...] Yes... yes, yes, no, no, evidently... as I told you before, I've always been able to live from my work, I've been... very lucky at the level of recognition and at the level of dissemination... at the level... I've been in a lot in magazines, in... so... but, but... on the one hand, on the one hand... there was the fact of being a woman, and on the other hand, the fact of making, let's say, an applied art, right? (Woman, 73 years old)

In contrast, Sophia, a professional sculptress and ceramist, spontaneously stated that neither old age (“[at my age] this work, which is a very considerable physical effort, does not affect me”), nor the fact of being a woman has been a barrier to her artistic practice.

The fact of being a woman has not caused me many problems either. I have been quite... well... my work has... been recognised. If I had been a man, I would have been recognised more maybe? Well, I don't have any problems with this. I have many [male] friends who are ceramists and sculptors, and well, they have also had their problems like me, so I don't... I haven't noticed that because I'm a woman I've lacked something, right? (Woman, 77 years old)

While it is important to consider the social constructions of the particular moment in which an artistic practice takes place, it is equally relevant to acknowledge broader contextual factors that have a global influence on the execution of these practices. A pertinent example is the COVID-19 pandemic, a circumstance that was mentioned by some of our interviewees.

### *COVID-19 Pandemic*

This study was conducted in the global context of a pandemic. A few artists mentioned the outbreak as a factor that hindered their artistic practice in some way. Teresa explained the harmful consequences of the pandemic linked to a decrease in sales of artworks: "This year, our workshop has been almost empty of people. People haven't come here to buy, 'look, I'm going to a dinner, I want to bring a cup [artistic piece], I don't know what.' No, that was all over".

In the case of Julio, the consequences are related to the search for inspiration for his creative work since he was used to photographing landscapes on his travels that he would then use in his paintings. He explains how due to lockdown and travel restrictions, this aspect has been disrupted: "I can't travel anywhere to... to... look for topics, right? because I'm running out of relevant topics that... motivate me a lot, I can continue painting because there are always things, right? But those topics that you go to look for and that you find (...) are what I miss". He added: "I have an exhibition in October in León, which was already organised last year, I have had to cancel it..."

While Salvador observed: "now I have an exhibition in Paris that cannot take place, the paintings are there, everything is ready to start the exhibition and it is actually closed, Paris is closed". In addition to affecting the level of sales and exhibition of their artworks, the pandemic and its restrictions reduced the possibilities of meeting with others, as arts



workshops and learning spaces were shut. Concerning this, Martín, a non-professional photographer and painter stated: “Now, due to COVID, that has remained ‘dead.’” (Man, 70 years old)

## Discussion

This study aimed to examine which contextual barriers older artists perceived in relation to their artistic practices, to contribute to previous studies on barriers to artistic participation (e.g., Fancourt & Mak 2020) through the use of retrospective narrative data, and the employment the socioecological model as a reference framework (Sallis et al. 2008; Stokols 1992). It also helps to problematise the contexts where creative production among older individuals takes place (Gallistl 2021). A range of contextual barriers to artistic practice were identified by the participants, related to the value of arts and crafts, financial difficulties, discrimination against women, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Considering a socioecological framework, framed by insights from arts sociology, this study showed that contextual barriers perceived by older visual artists and craftspeople make up a complex system of diverse community, societal, cultural and economic influences. Importantly, the findings show that contextual barriers are experienced as closely linked to the social sphere. They operate in the most immediate context (e.g., family and the close artistic circle), and in the broader one (e.g., the audience, gallery owners and consummate artists). These insights are in line with Becker’s approach (1974) in relation to the collective nature of artistic creation.

The value of the arts is still an underexplored topic in research on the field. Older artists and craftspeople considered the theme of the value of arts and crafts, and described an environment where values have been altered. For our interviewees, this concept refers to the intrinsic (or symbolic) value of the arts, which is linked to, and shaped by, the perceptions of other people – that is, the extent to which other people recognise their artistic practices and products as being valuable. In this way, the present study shows that a large amount of research on artistic participation in later life has considered older people’s artistic activity to be valuable due to its tangible or material benefits, especially on health. This reaffirms the biased vision of older people as fragile, and therefore in need of

health interventions, beyond other values that can be attributed to artistic practices.

Older artists and craftspeople made various distinctions in terms of what is valuable or not. For instance, they addressed the struggle between 'fine arts' (valuable) versus 'applied arts' (not valuable); 'the rapid, disposable, mutable' (valued by new generations) versus 'traditional arts and crafts' (not valued); and the 'older, active, creative, entrepreneurial artist' (valuable) versus the 'passive older person' (not valuable). These findings fit perfectly with previous research conducted by scholars on late-life creativity that showed how creativity is currently commodified in terms of productivity and innovation. Furthermore, it illuminates the challenges that older individuals face in terms of their perception and evaluation of the ageing process (Gallistl 2018).

Additionally, many older artists explained that a common concern is the difficulty in accessing channels of artistic diffusion, and some of them experienced this as particularly challenging in old age. These narratives reaffirm that there is still a lack of equality and diversity in the artistic field. This was reaffirmed by Oakley et al. (2017), who examined the role of space and place in relation to social inequalities in the artistic field. They suggested that artists who live in cultural hubs tended to come from privileged backgrounds, in terms of class, gender and ethnicity. The current scenario shows us that nowadays creativity is valued in terms of entrepreneurship, innovation and constant production. Indeed, innovation (mostly related to the young) is appreciated for the ability to produce creative content that is commercially successful (Bal et al. 2019); an element that inevitably shaped the participants' perceptions and understandings.

Their narratives alluded to a "new" society where products can be requested online and delivered (and discarded) immediately, where art does not fit with the new ideals. Technological dominance was also a topic addressed by the interviewees in that context. Policies tend to seek a balance between technological changes and artistic tradition. Although artistic tradition is not in a position of disadvantage, older artists could build a new type of artistic participation, one that values legacy. At a time when technology could both isolate and facilitate connections, subjective experiences can offer access to new forms of learning for younger generations (Jeffri 2011).

The theme of financial difficulties, particularly the topic about the ‘impossibility’ of living from art, was in line with previous research that showed that even though strong evidence shows the impact of arts and culture on national and local economies, there is substantial evidence that artists can face a precarious personal economy (Arts Council England 2014). In fact, in many cases creative work was distinguished by insecurity, reflected in frequent freelance work, and short-term work with little or no salary (Lindström 2018). In line with this, Jeffri (2011) pointed out that the irregular nature of an artist’s career, with multiple jobs, arts jobs versus day jobs and documentation on major career turning points, frequently distinguishes artists as contingent workers or freelancers. Visual artists are exposed to occupational risk, with the lowest income in the group of general artists (Lindström 2018). Even if these experiences are common throughout artistic careers regardless of age, our study revealed that in later life some aspects were amplified, for instance due to the increase in financial obstacles after retirement, and because of the difficulty of creating new networks in old age. In this sense, although artists have long experience with self-sustaining mechanisms, ageing creates specific challenges, which range from establishing health and retirement cover to dealing with the loss of a community of colleagues and finding an inspiring setting where artistic creation can be cultivated at a moment when older artists are maturing in their art (Jeffri 2011).

In this context, resilience is intricately tied to the artists’ capacity to adjust to changes at any stage of their life. In our study, participants continue to develop their artistic practices despite encountering barriers. In addition, they frequently mentioned how they overcome these obstacles. This adaptability not only enables them to navigate challenges but also contributes to the evolution of their artistic practices. While strategies developed by artists to get around obstacles could be considered an inspiration for new paradigms for ageing (Jeffri 2011), this could be risky. Exalting artists’ resilience in the face of contextual barriers, for instance economic difficulties or a lack of recognition of their artworks, may obscure finance-related struggles. Therefore, it could reinforce the oppressive mechanisms of the market (Arslanovic et al. 2019). Furthermore, beyond being an individual trait, resilience can be defined as a complex, dynamic concept that is shaped by the life course, whose resources vary

over a lifespan, and it is intricately interwoven with psychological, social and cultural dimensions (Goulding 2018b).

The topic of discrimination against women appeared in some female narratives, showing again that there is still a long way to go to achieve equality and diversity in the artistic field. Closely related with previous themes, some scholars argued that if artistic success is defined in strictly neoliberal and economic terms, then there is discrimination in terms of gender and class. This is especially true considering that lifestyle and cultural resources could increase class inequalities in contemporary, post-industrial societies (Bennett et al. 2009). Miller (2016) noted that “the ideal artist” should be completely committed to their work. This commitment matches traits that are more socially acceptable for men than for women. Indeed, women are underrepresented in artistic fields, such as contemporary art, fashion and popular music. Identities intersect: white men are overrepresented in numerous artistic disciplines and most other gender-racial/ethnic groups are almost absent (Topaz et al. 2022). This finding underscores the need to expand and diversify contextual barriers studied by scholars, and the relevance of exploring in an inclusive manner in terms of age, gender and race.

Finally, the theme concerning the COVID-19 pandemic described by our interviewees showed that the global pandemic did not leave the artistic field unaffected. The COVID-19 pandemic can be classified into broad societal factors, which involve not only health, but also economic and social consequences. A study by Radermecker (2021) showed that since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, a paradoxical condition has affected the art and culture sector. Even though the requirement for cultural and creative subjects increased during the lockdown period, including digital access, economic indicators expected that the cultural and artistic sector would be one of the most impacted, and possibly one with more obstacles to recovery. In this aspect, the role of cultural and artistic organisations will be crucial. Policies to help recovery in the field of arts and crafts could highly benefit from ageing artists, who may have extensive professional experience and have developed in diverse artistic roles, as trainees, mentors and master artists (Jeffri 2011). However, beyond all the knowledge, skills and experiences that older artists and craftspeople can teach, a more valuable legacy is the ability to express themselves through

their creative practices during their life course in a meaningful way (Bal et al. 2019). Therefore, intergenerational exchange among visual artists, craftsmen and craftswomen that considers these issues may be an important vehicle for learning, meaning-making and support. In addition, it could be interesting to explore in greater depth the symbolic value of arts and crafts as another axis of artistic participation among older people.

Despite the variety of contextual barriers depicted by our participants, they did not mention public policies as an obstacle to their artistic practice during their careers. In this sense, it could be relevant to investigate this topic in a more specific way, to assess whether current public policies related to culture and artistic field work as facilitators or obstacles to artistic practice, and consequently promote significant improvements. For instance, programmes that encourage intergenerational exchange between younger and older artists, advocating for the conservation and dissemination of their creative work, and facilitating joint artistic projects could prove valuable. Such programmes have the potential to foster a view of the arts that goes beyond valuing it for its benefits and can deconstruct the pervasive association of “creativity,” “emerging” and “innovative” with youth. However, it is important to exercise caution against instrumentalising artistic practices and uncritically incorporating them into neoliberal policies that seek to encourage activity in older people for economic reasons. Neoliberal agendas may seek to leverage older individuals’ engagement in artistic activities to reduce healthcare costs (Swinnen 2019) and simultaneously ignore policies that pursue the promotion of meaning of artistic practices in later life.

### Limitations

This study was exploratory, and its design has some implications for the interpretation of the findings, and for future research on the topic, which should be noted. The condition of a small cross-sectional study, including only 30 Spanish older artists, craftsmen and craftswomen living in Catalonia, limits the generalisation of the findings to other artistic disciplines, such as music, theatre or literature that could present other types of obstacles to older people. Future research on other types of artistic disciplines or cultural contexts would add useful, valuable comparative data.

Furthermore, the criteria of being active artists at the time of the interviews restricted our conclusions, since we did not include participants who had ended their artistic career due to the contextual barriers they might have perceived. Thus, other obstacles that could potentially cause a definitive end to artistic practice may have been omitted, since we only examined “successful cases” in which potential contextual barriers were overcome by older artists and did not imply the cessation of the artistic practice. Finally, the selected sample included professional and non-professional artists, craftspeople and visual artists. However, certain barriers mentioned by the participants may be experienced differently in each of these groups, given that the contexts may contain distinctive elements and affect people differently, depending on the level of expertise and the artistic discipline that is practised. Therefore, future studies that focus on specific groups may be necessary to delve deeper into these nuanced aspects.

## Conclusion

Despite these limitations, our study expands previous research on antecedents of artistic participation, particularly by analysing contextual barriers to artistic practice among older people, using a socioecological model as a reference framework. Our study helps to understand that contextual aspects are key to promote the permanence of artists who are currently engaged in artistic practices and to overcome the obstacles they face, and consequently continue to benefit from their artistic, meaningful participation throughout later life.

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