

1 **Bridging the Digital Divide: Older Adults' Engagement with Online Cinema Heritage**

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10 Is there a way to ensure older adults can bridge the digital divide and engage with online
11 cultural heritage? How can cinema-going memories encourage cross-generational
12 engagement? This article proposes to address these issues by using the *Italian Cinema*
13 *Audiences*¹ research project as a case study, and specifically cinema-going memories as
14 intangible cultural heritage². Here we adopt UNESCO's (2003) definition of intangible
15 cultural heritage as 'the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as
16 the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that
17 communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural
18 heritage'. This definition is particularly relevant to our research as it recognizes that, as
19 'transmitted from generation to generation', intangible cultural heritage 'is constantly
20 recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with
21 nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity'(ibid.).
22 This cross-generational dimension is, in fact, one of the fundamental concerns of our project,

23 whose challenge is to engage older adults with the digital world in order to bring them closer
24 to younger generations.

25 Through a mixed methods ethnographic approach, this article will investigate different
26 strategies to resolve this issue: the use of social media platforms; a cross-generational activity
27 involving Historypin, a digital, user-generated archive of crowdsourced historical material; an
28 online dedicated archive (www.cinericordi.it) built in collaboration with the older adults
29 involved in the project, with a series of dedicated activities for younger users. These different
30 solutions aim not only at increasing digital engagement among older adults, but also at
31 furthering younger generations' involvement in shared cultural heritage in an online context.
32 By focusing on the memories of cinema-going in 1950s Italy, collected in the ICA project,
33 the article will explore the implications of the advantages and disadvantages of these different
34 approaches. It will also test Anja K. Leist's (2013) research findings on the key role of
35 moderators (the younger generation) to help novice users (the older generation) in the
36 'continuous engagement' in digital environments. We conclude that in order to bridge the
37 digital divide two components are necessary simultaneously: the creation of digital platforms
38 in which the older generations are both curators and users, and the support of and interaction
39 with younger generations.

40 The ICA project (2013-2016) is the first study of cinema audiences in Italy in the
41 1950s, when Italians went to the cinema more than almost any other nation in Europe. The
42 project extends the findings of the pilot project undertaken in 2009 on cinema-going in Rome
43 in the same period. It explores the importance of films in everyday life in Italy, and the social
44 experience of cinema-going, by interviewing surviving audience members, analyzing their
45 responses, and contextualizing these responses through further archival research, adapting
46 Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs' audience project framework (2008). The oral history
47 approach is the core of our project³.

48 In order to engage both project participants and the general public with the research
49 material collected, multimedia digital platforms have been created. These include a website
50 (<http://italiancinemaaudiences.org/>), which contains a section on memories where video-
51 interviews from the Rome pilot project are available⁴, and two Facebook groups. The first
52 one, *Spettatori cinematografici romani degli anni 50* (in Italian only), was created in April
53 2012 during the pilot project, with the aim of engaging with older Roman cinema-goers and
54 inviting them to share cinematic memories of the 1950s. It has just over 110 members, and is
55 described as ‘Memorie del cinema, dei suoi attori e memorie dei cinema romani’ (memories
56 of cinema, of its actors and memories of Roman cinema theatres). The second one, *Italian*
57 *Cinema Audiences*, was created in March 2014 and currently has over 200 members. While
58 its main target users are Italian cinema-goers of the 1950s willing to share their memories,
59 this is a bilingual group, and, whenever possible, team members have posted in both Italian
60 and English. This is because one of its objectives was to publicize our project and its
61 activities, disseminate its findings and share information relevant to the Italian cinematic
62 culture of the period in question.

63 Moreover, a Historypin collection was created based on our research on cinemas in
64 1950s Rome and related materials, including photos, exhibition data, and memories of the
65 experience of cinema-going. Historypin is a digital, user-generated archive that collects
66 historical photos, videos, audio recordings and personal recollections. Here users are able to
67 ‘pin’ their content to Google Maps using its location and date. The platform targets the
68 cultural heritage sector while enabling cultural organisations to ‘engage and grow their
69 community’ (Historypin, 2017). The platform’s website describes its projects as being able to
70 ‘bring communities together’, as they get people talking about ‘shared experiences [...] their
71 connections with each other [...] places they’ve lived, worked and played [...] the history
72 that’s alive in the buildings and spaces around them’ (ibid.).

73 Lastly, a digital archive (www.cinericordi.it) was created to allow users to explore the
74 history of Italian cinema-going through a portal that reconstructs the historic cinema
75 networks across the country, while – through the process of ‘deep-mapping’ – integrating the
76 video-interviews with new and unexplored archival resources, such as digitised artefacts
77 related to cinema-going, as well as crowd-sourced collections from private archives
78 (comprising of photos, programmes, leaflets, private letters, signed posters, etc.). The
79 promotion of intergenerational engagement in Italy’s cultural heritage is encouraged through
80 a programme of community outreach with schools, libraries, and audiovisual archives, where
81 different generations of cinema-goers will become curators of their shared cultural heritage.
82 The key aim of this project is to engage both older and younger generations with the research
83 gathered during the first phase of the ICA project by facilitating their participation in the co-
84 curation of an archive that will preserve and promote the history of Italian film culture.

85

86 **Methodology**

87 For the purposes of this study, we used a mixed methods ethnographic approach. Our
88 research on older adults’ usage of and participation in Facebook groups draws on Christine
89 Hine’s formulation of *virtual ethnography*. Hine (2003: 4) claims that ethnography is an ideal
90 methodology for the study of ‘everyday practices around the Internet’ because it ‘can look in
91 detail at the ways in which technology is experienced in use’. Indeed, observation of older
92 users’ behaviour in the Facebook groups above-mentioned (over several months between
93 2014 and 2015) allowed us to gain direct access to their engagement, while, at the same time,
94 avoiding self-reporting bias issues, as the researchers participated in online exchanges at the
95 same level of other group members.

96 In the case of one user, Elena, participant observation was enhanced by a face-to-face
97 video-interview (conducted in September 2014). This enabled us to carry out a qualitative
98 analysis of the participant's use of Facebook in general, and the group under scrutiny in
99 particular, while focusing on the individual experience, and reading this against group
100 behaviour and exchange dynamics. The semi-structured interview included questions about
101 Elena's reasons for using Facebook, frequency of use and typical activity, along with a series
102 of questions focused more specifically on her engagement with the *Italian Cinema Audiences*
103 group. We also addressed the issue of user experience in order to elicit feedback and
104 suggestions on how to facilitate greater engagement among older-users of the group (see Fig.
105 1).

106 *[Insert figure 1 here]*

107 Fig. 1 Elena I: Elena describing her use of Facebook (September 2014)

108
109 The second stage of our study involved the observation of a small number (five) of
110 older adult (over-65s) volunteers from a Roman community and a middle school class of
111 eighteen students aged thirteen as they discussed the older generation's experiences of going
112 to the cinema. The pilot project took place in May 2016 at the Istituto Comprensivo Guido
113 Milanesi school in Rome. The main aim of this project was to enable interpersonal digital
114 encounters between older people and schoolchildren, thereby empowering the older
115 generation to share ownership of their own cultural history. At the same time, our objective
116 was to test a model that would enhance older users' engagement with digital content
117 pertaining to cinematic cultural heritage, through the mediation and facilitation of a
118 generation of digital natives (Prensky, 2003).

119 Working in small groups, students conducted unstructured video-interviews with the
120 volunteers about their experiences of cinema-going in Rome in the 1950s – and, more
121 specifically, in the neighbourhood to which all participants belonged. Students filmed the
122 interviews on their smartphones and later uploaded the content to Historypin. Following the
123 interviews, students showed the interviewees the *Italian Cinema Audiences* collection on
124 Historypin, with the aim of eliciting further recollections via visual triggers, including
125 topographical visual data and old photos of local cinemas. These interactions were filmed by
126 the students and subsequently sent to the researchers. In this phase of the study, our
127 ethnographic approach combined observational field work and unstructured follow up
128 interviews with the older adults who participated in the activity. The interviews were
129 conducted by the researchers immediately after the student-led oral history interviews. Our
130 interview questions aimed at finding out details about participants’ digital engagement in
131 general, their thoughts on the Historypin platform (and our collection), and on the
132 intergenerational exchange. In order to mitigate the much-discussed power imbalances
133 generated by the fact that the researcher is perceived as an expert or authority in ethnographic
134 encounters, throughout the interviews and the Historypin interaction we explored the
135 dynamic that Patrick D. Murphy (1999: 209) calls ‘the power of the participants of the
136 research to direct the enquiry’: we assumed the role of members of the younger generation
137 receiving first-hand accounts of past cinema-going experiences, thus framing the older
138 generation’s voices as the authoritative ones. In this way we were able to gain insights into
139 the varied dynamics of the intergenerational digital encounter (with a focus on engagement
140 with digital cultural heritage) in an everyday life setting that was deeply anchored to a shared
141 social context, as both students and older cinema-goers lived in the same neighbourhood and
142 were part of the same local community.

143 The last phase of the study is the creation of the digital archive CineRicordi,⁶ where we
144 have worked with the members of the University of the Third Age UNITRE (co-investigators
145 in this specific part of the project) who have guided us in the construction of the archive and
146 its features through a series of meetings with UNITRE representatives. This was followed by
147 three sessions in three middle schools in Rome, where we have discussed the archive with
148 students and conducted user-experience analysis by asking them to describe the most
149 important features they would need in such an archive to be interested in engaging with it.
150 This stage is still in progress and we will use the findings that have emerged from user-
151 experience analysis to reflect on how the archive can be further developed to effectively
152 bridge the digital divide.

153 Throughout the different stages of our study, we were guided in our methodology by
154 the concept of ‘interpretative ethnography’, as defined by Ien Ang (2006). Advocating for a
155 critical cultural studies approach to ethnographic research – in particular to media audience
156 research – Ang argues:

157 It is not the search for (objective, scientific) Truth in which the researcher is engaged, but
158 the construction of *interpretations*, of certain ways of understanding the world, always
159 historically located, subjective and relative. (2006: 38)

160 In our case, this meant investigating older users’ engagement with cinematic cultural heritage
161 through several digital media platforms and analysing the extent to which the encounter with
162 and mediation of a generation of digital natives can determine significant changes in such
163 engagement. As such, our analysis is firmly anchored to a specific cultural context – Italian
164 film culture – and to a time in which an age-based digital divide or ‘grey divide’ (Morris and
165 Brading, 2007) still presents notable challenges in relation to digital inclusion. Through the
166 CineRicordi project, we aim to tackle digital exclusion by running a series of public outreach

167 events and workshops with our target users. In collaboration with UNITRE, these events will
168 give older adults – some of whom may have limited access to digital technologies – the
169 opportunity to learn to explore cultural heritage online.

170

171 **Challenges of Older-users' Digital Engagement**

172 The issue of on-going digital exclusion and the digital divide in Italy is highlighted by a
173 recent study of Internet usage across the EU. According to the report published in 2016, 25%
174 of Italians have never used the Internet, making Italy the country with the fifth highest
175 number of non-users among EU nations (Eurostat, 2016). While the gap between users and
176 non-users has narrowed somewhat in recent years, the persistence of the digital divide is
177 attributed to two key factors: age and level of education (Eurostat, 2016). .

178 When it comes to considering older Italians' engagement with digital technologies, it
179 should be noted that 22.1% of Italy's population is made up of over-65s (ISTAT, 2015). With
180 an increasingly ageing population, Italy faces a major shift in its demographic make-up: it is
181 estimated that by 2050 29.9% of the European population will be over the age of fifty, the
182 proportion of the 'oldest old' (over eighty) will be greatest in Italy at 14.4% (Bond, 2007).
183 The country's ageing population is comparable with Germany where 20.7% of the population
184 fall into the over-65 bracket; however, in contrast with older Italians, 43% of Germany's
185 over-65 population are classed as on-liners (Niehaves and Plattfaut, 2013). Such differences
186 point to the complex nature of the digital divide. Studies examining the age-based digital
187 divide have identified a number of key factors which hinder older users' engagement with the
188 Internet and digital technologies. Niehaves and Plattfaut (2013) note the physical and mental
189 challenges which new technologies can present for older users who may have visual or
190 auditory problems. A further barrier to engagement for this demographic is related to mistrust

191 and security, and, as Gatto and Tak (2008) highlight, some users have concerns surrounding
192 their privacy and are reluctant to share personal details online.

193 In general, the lack of access to digital technologies among this demographic has been
194 found to be higher among people who are single, widowed or living alone (White et al.,
195 2002). Older users in the Italian context also face greater challenges accessing the Internet
196 via mobile devices than many of their EU counterparts. In their study of mobile phone usage
197 among over-65s in Italy, Comunello *et al.* (2016) note that just 1% of 65-74 -year-olds access
198 the Internet via a smartphone, whereas the EU average is 4%.

199

200 Nevertheless, studies show that the 50+ age bracket is one of the fastest growing online
201 users groups (Hogeboom *et al.*, 2010: 95). Italy follows this global trend whereby 65-74-
202 year-olds represent the fastest growing user group. According to ISTAT (2015), the number
203 of 65-74-year-olds using the Internet has grown by 556.4% in the last decade . In 2014,
204 20.2% of people in the 65-74 age bracket were recorded as Internet users; by 2016 this figure
205 had risen to 28.8%. While this increase is to be welcomed, ISTAT warns that the lack of
206 widespread digital literacy among older-adults in Italy leaves people in a state of ‘digital
207 primitivism’ (*ibid.*).

208 Despite Italy’s low EU ranking for Internet usage among the over-65s, there is evidence
209 of a positive trend in the uptake of training and education in this area. In 2009, 43.4% of 60-
210 64-year-olds attended digital literacy training, while the figure recorded for the older age
211 bracket of 65-74 was 32.7% (Correra, 2014)⁷. It is against this backdrop of challenges and
212 opportunities that the ICA project and its follow-on, CineRicordi, have sought to engage
213 older users in digital cultural heritage. In the following section we highlight some of the

214 challenges, as well as propose some solutions to the abovementioned problems as they have
215 emerged from our research on the digital engagement of older users with different platforms.

216

217 **Older Users and Social Media**

218 In the two Facebook groups we have created, the participation of older adults has proven to
219 be extremely low. In this section we will focus particularly on the participation of two older
220 users, Carmelo and Elena, who are presented as case studies. In *Spettatori Cinematografici*
221 *romani degli anni 50*, contributions from older users are almost entirely limited to the posts
222 of one individual, Carmelo (60+ years old), a proactive and apparently tech-savvy user, who,
223 besides discussing his special relationship with cinema since his childhood, thanks to his
224 parents' passion for cinema, shared photos of film posters, actors, cinema theatres (both new
225 and old), as well as general information and personal memories of Roman cinemas.
226 Unfortunately, Carmelo's numerous and varied posts generated little interaction other than
227 some 'likes'. In other words, most group members did not actively engage in discussions. On
228 several occasions, he noticed the lack of interaction from other members and invited them to
229 keep the group alive: 'Ragazzi! Non posso scrivere o caricare foto, ma teniamolo vivo questo
230 gruppo, altrimenti sembra che subisca la crisi del cinema...' ('Guys! I can't write or upload
231 photos, but let's keep this group alive, otherwise it seems like it's going through cinema's
232 crisis...').

233 Elena (b. 1934) first joined the *Italian Cinema Audiences* Facebook group in 2014 and
234 has continued to be one of the groups' most responsive members. Frequently commenting
235 and reacting to posts shared by team members, Elena has responded positively to requests to
236 share her memories of cinema-going, but her participation tends to be limited to commenting
237 on the content posted by others. Her joining the group coincided with Elena's early

238 experimentation with social media, as she opened her Facebook account just weeks before
239 discovering the *Italian Cinema Audiences* group. As will be discussed, this detail is
240 significant in that Elena's comments and engagement with the content posted in the group
241 chart some of the challenges that older adults can face when attempting to negotiate the world
242 of virtual interaction that is social media. In general, Elena's, and indeed other older
243 members' participation in the group is indicative of a global trend which has seen an increase
244 in the number of older adults subscribing to Facebook (see Greenwood *et al.*, 2016).

245 Elena seems to be aware of the difficulties she has in engaging with social media. In
246 fact, from her comments, two fundamental difficulties emerge: a technological one and a
247 behavioural/communicational one. Elena apologizes for her spelling mistakes, making clear
248 that she has issues typing on the small keyboard of her smartphone (her only device to access
249 the Internet) but also that she is still learning to use the device:

250 Chiedo sempre scusa per qualche lettera errata (colpa del piccolo. Smartfon e della vista,
251 la punteggiatura la saprei però (ad esempio mi devo fare insegnare gli accenti), devo
252 ancora imparare. [As always, apologies for the odd spelling mistake (the fault is with this
253 small Smartfon [*sic*] and my sight, I know how to spell but (for example I need to teach
254 myself how to use accents), I still need to learn.]

255 Elena clearly reflects Niehaves and Plattfaut's (2013) study on physical and mental barriers
256 faced by older users. In an interview with one of the researchers, Elena also offers an
257 interesting insight into the difficulties faced by digital immigrants when trying to acquire the
258 skills and knowledge needed to use new technologies. She tells the interviewer about her
259 daughter's comment that 'there are no instructions'. This alludes to the challenges which
260 'intuitive' technology can present for older generations that arguably are accustomed to a
261 more traditional textbook style of learning.

262 The discrimination faced by technologically-challenged older users is clearly an issue
263 and has its consequences. For some users, technological and behavioural difficulties may
264 result in a loss of interest in using new technologies (Van Deursen and Helsper, 2015).
265 However, for others there is motivation to learn how to overcome these challenges – as is the
266 case with Elena. However, she manifests a sort of awkwardness in terms of social media
267 communication as she is unfamiliar with Facebook netiquette:

268 Grazie sono felice di contribuire devo aspettare domande o se rammento qualcosa lo dico
269 [Thank you I'm happy to contribute should I wait for questions or if I remember something
270 can I say it]

271 This is a typical issue that often generates critique from digital natives against digital
272 immigrants. This 'perceived *lack of code of social conduct* in online communities' (Leist,
273 2013: 380) makes Elena initially reluctant to participate in them, especially as online social
274 norms differ from offline ones. In her article on older adults' use of social media, Leist
275 observes that:

276 Participation in social media can range from quite passive behaviour such as reading
277 posts and online discussions (often called lurking) up to active participation by posting,
278 blogging or uploading multimedia content. (2013: 379)

279 This general trend in social media behaviour, where 'few older adults engage in actually
280 creating content such as uploading pictures or videos' (ibid.: 380), has been observed in our
281 case studies. In the next section we explore the ways in which we have encouraged older
282 social media users to de-lurk.

283

284 **Encouraging Older Users to become Active Participants**

285 How can elderly users be encouraged to de-lurk? More specifically, how can they engage so
286 that they become active participants in heritage projects? The exchange dynamics we have

287 observed in a Facebook group associated with memories of cinema-going [*I vecchi (e i nuovi)*
288 *cinema di Roma (e provincia)*] present a possible solution to the problem of lurking. The
289 group (which is not directly associated with our project) counts over 380 members including
290 both digital natives and immigrants. The younger age range of its members is revealed by
291 memories of going to the cinema in more recent decades. Importantly, the group is also a
292 space for interaction between younger and older generations. Arguably, this is also the key to
293 the group's success in terms of active participation from older users. Given that many older
294 users learn how to use new technologies from their children and grandchildren (Correra,
295 2014), there is merit in exploring the possibility of a collaboration between young and older
296 Internet users, as in the successful case of the *I vecchi (e i nuovi) cinema di Roma*. In fact, as
297 Leist (2013: 381) recommends, novice users (in this case the older generation) should be
298 supported by moderators (Internet-savvy mentors – typically part of the younger generation)
299 who could help in removing the barriers in the de-lurking process by 'instantly rewarding for
300 active participation' and thus promoting 'continuous engagement of users in the network'.

301 Research has shown that 'there is no evidence that older people want to network
302 exclusively among their own age group' (Berry, 2011: 12). Moreover, while a user-oriented
303 approach plays a key role in facilitating the sharing of online content as well as encouraging
304 active participation, preselecting dedicated web content for older people entails the risk of
305 perpetrating and generating ageist stereotypes and keeping the digital immigrant passive
306 (Leist, 2013: 381). This means that a user-friendly approach must be a cross-generational
307 integrated one, i.e. one that is accessible to technologically-challenged older users but does
308 not alienate digital natives.

309 This is again confirmed by Elena, who states the importance of the younger generation
310 in her relationship with social media. Elena's Facebook profile was set up by one of her
311 daughter's friends, while her friends are often younger people, as users of her generations are

312 reluctant to use Facebook. This is because they perceive it as a source of gossip or feel
313 inadequate about interacting with younger users. As Barber (2012: 29) has pointed out in her
314 research on ‘Understanding On-line Audio-visual Content’, ‘nowhere is user-driven
315 collaboration more evident than on social media sites such as Facebook, Myspace and
316 Twitter’. In our case, older users’ engagement and participation is more evident on Facebook
317 rather than Twitter or our website. It is Elena again who not only explains to us the role
318 Facebook plays in her social life, but also offers possible solutions to the de-lurking process
319 of older users. For Elena, Facebook offers a window on the world as well as the possibility to
320 enjoy virtual company. She says that in the silence of the evening she can talk to people and,
321 even if she does not know all of them, it helps her to feel less isolated:

322 Alla sera nel silenzio, quando vado a letto, mi metto a fare Facebook e comincio a
323 dialogare con delle persone. Certe le conosco, certe sono amici di loro che non conosco,
324 però dialogo. E quindi sono lì da sola, nel silenzio completo, però mi sento la
325 compagnia di queste persone [...] mi sembra di averli attorno.

326 [In the silence of the evening, when I go to bed, I go on Facebook and I start to talk with
327 people. Some of them I know, some are friends of friends, but I talk to them. And so
328 I’m there alone, in complete silence, but I feel the company of these people [...] it’s as if
329 they are around me].

330 She points out that she makes funny comments but also discusses more serious topics (such
331 as religion) and she feels people have started to know a different side of her personality.
332 When Elena is asked why she is not particularly active on our Facebook group, she raises a
333 question about the suitability of her comments: ‘non so se sono utili’ [I don’t know if they are
334 useful]. However, she also advises her interviewer on possible strategies to encourage
335 engagement: she observes that if we added some short videos, people may start commenting
336 on them.

337 Elena's suggestion demonstrates a great awareness of what can prompt social media
338 activity. Following Leist's advice about encouraging the older users' de-lurking process, we
339 have rewarded Elena's participation in our project by publicly thanking her on our Facebook
340 group. At the same time, we have followed Elena's suggestion to share more videos/photos in
341 the group by posting the trailer of a film she mentions during the interview. This has resulted
342 in her increased involvement in the group but also, to use Leist's words (2013: 381), in
343 'continuous engagement [...] in the network'. In fact, after this, Elena finally accepts our
344 request to share a photo of herself wearing a dress inspired by *Love is a Many-Splendored*
345 *Thing* (1955, dir. Henry King, Otto Lang), one of her favourite films (see Fig. 2). Elena's
346 active participation and content sharing was, again, rewarded by a team member by posting a
347 still taken from the film in question. This, in turn, triggered Elena's memories of watching the
348 film with her late husband: this was 'their film', 'their music', she says. Elena even talks
349 about her emotions as she watches the photo and recalls a happy time of her life when her
350 husband was still alive. The sharing of such a private and emotional memory also indicates
351 that Elena is overcoming two typical barriers encountered by elderly users, i.e. mistrust and
352 difficulty in adjusting to online behaviour.

353 *[Insert figure 2 here]*

354 Fig. 2 Elena II: Elena wearing dress (in 1956) inspired by the film *Love is a Many-*
355 *Splendored Thing*

356
357 A further example of Elena's more active engagement in the group is her proactive
358 'recruitment' of a Facebook friend to the group. Elena praises her contemporary Gianpaolo
359 for his first contribution to the group in which he describes his memories of growing up in a
360 small rural town with no cinema where his first 'experience' of cinema took the form of
361 'spoken cinema', as those who had attended a film screening recounted the film's story to

362 those who had not. Gianpaolo's comment prompts a reply from Elena who compares her own
363 experience to his, thereby shifting from a passive lurker to an active participant. However,
364 her subsequent participation to the group in the period of observation has shown that she very
365 rarely took initiative in posting comments or uploading material. In this sense, Elena's
366 participation – which was often characterized by long and numerous response comments in
367 discussions initiated by the researchers – can be described as 'reactive' rather than 'active'.
368 Such behaviour confirms the importance of sustained mediation by the younger generation of
369 users (in this case the project's researchers) for the older user's continuous engagement, as
370 argued by Leist.

371

372 **From Participation to Curation: Active Engagement with Digital Heritage across** 373 **Generations**

374 While the number of older users that engage with our project through social media platforms
375 has been significantly low, the participation of elderly cinema-goers in public engagement
376 events has been more successful. At our 'Sharing memories' events with over 750 UNITRE
377 members across Italy, their enthusiastic reception of our findings has emphasized the increase
378 in confidence older Italians experienced when seeing their memories communicated in
379 audiovisual format, stimulating them to re-discover and share memories, and to feel that they
380 were part of a community forged through cinema-going. In those events, participants have
381 expressed the desire to share these memories with younger generations.

382 The benefits of online interactions with a younger generation observed in the Facebook
383 groups under scrutiny, as well as the evocative power of audiovisual material that emerged in
384 the 'Sharing Memories' events, prompted us to find an interactive digital platform that
385 allowed for intergenerational engagement with cinematic cultural heritage. Being specifically

386 aimed at tackling ‘the divide between the generations’ and enabling its users to ‘create a
387 communal history of the world that everyone could contribute to and enjoy’ (Armstrong,
388 2012: 294), Historypin proved to be the ideal platform for our project. However, this
389 approach had started much earlier on, when we discovered the significance of topographical
390 memory for our participants and we created affective and emotional maps, where we
391 geotagged and visualized the position of the cinemas attended by one of our respondents,
392 embedding her comments on the significance of each cinema (Ercole *et al.*, 2017: 2).
393 Building on this activity, and bearing in mind the growing interest in cultural geography, the
394 use of Geographical Information System (GIS) has been explored further in the Historypin
395 project, in order to investigate the potential of this mapping technique for capturing the
396 affective geographies of respondents.

397 The first phase of the Historypin pilot, in which small groups of students conducted
398 video-interviews with older cinema-goers, had a two-fold function. Firstly, it allowed
399 interviewees to quite naturally assume the role of the authoritative voice who could provide
400 information on and memories of first-hand experiences of film consumption in a time when
401 students were not yet born – the temporal element of the generational divide is stressed by
402 several older participants, as if to establish their undisputed position of privilege in relation to
403 knowledge of the topic discussed. Secondly, a sense of shared community and shared cultural
404 history was created as interviewees described neighbourhood locations and local film stars
405 known to students. For example, Felice, in explaining the exact location of what was
406 previously a parish cinema, uses shared topographical knowledge of the neighbourhood when
407 he tells students that it was ‘close to the post office...where those tall pines are’, to which
408 students comment affirmatively. He subsequently gives other details about the location of the
409 venue and is interrupted by a student who enthusiastically exclaims: ‘oh yes, I know, it’s
410 where the hardware store used to be!’ When he talks about the films he watched in the past,

411 he mentions popular Roman actor Aldo Fabrizi. He firstly tells students that they cannot
412 remember him, but then he carries on describing his physical features, until some of the
413 students interviewing him say they know the actor, to which he comments: ‘you have seen
414 him sometimes...black and white films are still shown today’. Moreover, intergenerational
415 communication developed based on the dynamics of family roles, sometimes even in explicit
416 ways. For instance, Felice encourages students to ask him more questions saying ‘don’t be
417 afraid to ask questions, I could be your grandfather, so there’s no problem’.

418 Navigating the Historypin map, and browsing the visual content of the collection,
419 together with the students, allowed the interviewees to virtually ‘revisit’ the cinemas of their
420 youth, many of which are no longer in existence (see Fig. 3).

421 *[Insert figure 3 here]*

422 Fig. 3 Historypin event: students show an older cinema-goer how to navigate the project’s
423 Historypin collection.

424 This interweaving of geographical visualization and memories demonstrate Tasker’s (1999:
425 1) statement: ‘Thus, maps become far more than expressions of cartography, they become
426 holders of our memories; part of our personal journeys and to some extent, records of our
427 passage through life itself [...] old maps with personal annotations [...]’. This facilitated a
428 vibrant exchange among students and interviewees who frequently discussed how the
429 function of the venue had changed over time or, in cases where the cinema is still in
430 operation, students were able to compare their experience of going to the cinema today with
431 the past experiences of the interviewee, including cinema-going habits, ticket prices,
432 programming, and characteristics of the theatres. The engagement with the digital platform
433 functioned as a powerful trigger of memories for all older volunteers. For example, Felice in
434 the interview phase only talks about cinema Regilla and says he cannot remember going to

435 any other cinema. However, travelling through the digital map of his neighbourhood and
436 ‘seeing’ other cinemas pinned in it, he recollects frequenting other venues, about which he
437 talks at length with the students.

438 The pilot project proved that this form of intergenerational collaboration holds much
439 potential. Both students and older cinema-goers responded positively to the experience. For
440 the students it was an opportunity to display and share their technical knowledge and learn
441 about Italian film culture and history, while the interviewees were enthusiastic about learning
442 how to navigate new technologies, while sharing their memories of cinema-going. As one
443 female interviewee put it, the experience was a way for her to ‘keep her mind active’. The
444 unstructured interviews carried out by the researchers after the Historypin activity revealed
445 that, although all the older participants have access to the Internet (mainly through
446 smartphones), their online activities are very limited and, when they do access the Internet,
447 their behaviour is mostly passive. One participant said that she uses Facebook, but only to
448 read other people’s content – while her daughter, she observed, ‘uploads things’ – thus fitting
449 into the typical lurker profile.

450 When asked about their experience of the pilot project, older participants mentioned
451 that they enjoyed the ‘exchange’ and ‘contact’ with the students. The development of
452 personal relationships can have significant implications in terms of increasing and enhancing
453 older users’ digital engagement, as research suggests that viewing technology ‘as being
454 personally relevant and useful’ can help overcome technology-related barriers (Broady *et al.*,
455 2016: 479). Older participants also offered positive comments on the Historypin platform and
456 the material in our collection, but said they would use it again only if they were helped or
457 trained by the students. This attitude confirms the findings of recent research on digital
458 technology and older Italians that shows that the older generation believes that younger

459 individuals possess superior technological skills as they were ‘born technological’
460 (Comunello *et al.*, 2016: 10).

461 Teachers at the school were excited about the ways that this kind of project work could
462 supplement the history curriculum, while the students were positive in their feedback
463 referring to it as a ‘valuable project’. Their interest in the project, and specifically in using the
464 platform, was confirmed by their post-pilot activities. Students individually interviewed older
465 members of their family on their memories of cinema-going, and some of them collected
466 cinema-related photos to be uploaded onto the platform. The material collected included on-
467 set pictures of relatives that worked as extras in post-war film productions shot in Cinecittà.

468 The positive response obtained in the Historypin event has led us to extend the legacy
469 of our ICA project by developing a participatory project using a co-curated digital archive.
470 This archive will enable two different generations of cinema-goers to become the living
471 curators of their shared cultural heritage through this virtual archive, and engage older people
472 in online learning and research, an activity which is currently regarded as out of reach for a
473 large part of Italy’s older generation. In the first instance we have created, tested, and
474 disseminated a digital archive (www.cinericordi.it) allowing older people to ‘map’ their
475 memories of cinema-going by attaching them to cinemas. In this sense, the curation of the
476 collections is co-produced by its users. This user-led approach to curation is driven not only
477 by having discovered the dominance of the cinema space itself in the memories of this
478 generation, as a source of pride, humour, nostalgia, and identity, but also by the ways in
479 which its very location was ‘mapped’ onto participants’ memories (Ercole *et al.*, 2017). The
480 idea was tested in the Historypin pilot project and, building on the success of this pilot, the
481 use of the digital archive aims to enable interpersonal digital encounters between older people
482 and schoolchildren, empowering the older generation to share ownership of their own cultural
483 history, while at the same time bridging the digital divide.

484 Like many Western European countries (Bond *et al.*, 2007: 2), Italy's ageing population
485 constitutes a major challenge for its future. Within this changing demographic, the valuing,
486 transmission, and interpretation of memory has a key role to play in creating cohesive
487 communities across generations. In particular, as the older generations are living repositories
488 of memory, recognizing those memories as a fundamental part of Italy's cultural heritage,
489 safeguarding them, and enabling their transmission through dialogue with younger
490 generations is essential to understanding and valuing this rapidly growing social group's role
491 as 'heritage-bearers' (Beardslee, 2016)⁹. The ICA project revealed these memories to be
492 central to the participants' sense of identity, and, more importantly, it showed that their
493 generation does not feel that its memories have been fully valued as part of Italian history,
494 nor shared with younger generations. Working with school students in partnership with older
495 people, we are just beginning to explore ways in which different uses of the platform can
496 generate intergenerational dialogue through an active sharing of memory, but also through a
497 series of pedagogical tools and methods that can ensure the longevity of Italian cinema
498 heritage.

499

500 **Conclusions and next steps**

501 As Boyd and Larson (2014: 5) point out, digital technologies pose 'numerous opportunities to
502 explore new models for automating access and providing contextual frameworks to
503 encourage more meaningful interactions with researchers as well as with community
504 members represented by a particular oral history project'. Over the past decades, cultural
505 heritage institutions such as galleries, archives, and museums have invested resources to
506 digitize their collections, with the purpose of increasing public access through digital
507 platforms (Ercole *et al.*, 2016). Indeed, digital cultural heritage made available through online

508 platforms allows for unlimited access to content and promotes active user participation – two
509 aspects which have become critical for an archive’s visibility and public existence (Prelinger,
510 2009). Digital technology provides unprecedented access to objects and stories that are
511 crucial for the formation and understanding of cultural identity. At the same time, the digital
512 age poses challenges to accessibility and participation, such as an increasing divide between
513 the digitally ‘literate’ and those ageing citizens who lack ICT skills and knowledge, and thus
514 are unlikely to access and engage with digital cultural heritage. Ercole *et al.* (2016) have
515 observed that in recent years ‘a number of initiatives have demonstrated the requirements for
516 responsive interfaces’. At the same time, numerous experiments with crowdsourcing in the
517 cultural sector have shown that online platforms allow members of the public to contribute
518 valuable time, memories, and knowledge to the cultural heritage collections in public
519 repositories, while also promoting active engagement with this heritage (Oomen and Aroyo,
520 2016; Noordegraaf, 2014).

521 The ICA project and its different digital platforms have relied on the contributions of
522 participants who have generously shared their knowledge and memories of cinema-going. As
523 our case study with Elena and the Historypin pilot project have shown, collaboration between
524 younger and older generations can be instrumental in assisting older people to get online and
525 share their individual stories and memories. In proactively considering how to involve older
526 adults in the creation, curation, and consumption of digital cinema heritage, it has been our
527 aim to create different forms of online spaces that facilitate discussion and interaction among
528 users, and allow them to enjoy a sense of community in remembering a shared past, while
529 also involving younger users who wish to gain insights into their cultural heritage.
530 Specifically, in order to foster greater inclusion of older users, we believe it is necessary to
531 encourage heritage content production by providing a virtual environment that is accessible to
532 technologically-challenged older users but does not alienate digital natives. This is a crucial

533 aspect because, as we have illustrated above, constant mediation from a younger generation is
534 necessary to ensure older users' sustained engagement within digital contexts. Moreover, in
535 our case, seeking feedback on online content, as well as rewarding active participation, have
536 proven to be successful ways to understand older users' interaction with digital resources.

537 The CineRicordi project has been carefully designed to reward the active participation
538 of both older and younger generations in a number of ways. Firstly, the project's online
539 platform has been developed alongside a programme of community outreach initiatives,
540 which aim to stimulate a series of activities with the archive's content. Chief among these
541 initiatives is a competition for high school students, which has been developed in
542 collaboration with educators and e-learning experts. The competition is supported by the
543 Italian Ministry of Education (MIUR) and was rolled out nationally to over 10,000 schools in
544 November 2017. The aim of the competition is to encourage students to explore the archive
545 and use its content – as well as the older content creators – in different ways (story writing,
546 video production, and original research). Complementary to this, in mid-2018 the project's
547 community outreach programme has included a series of public engagement events and
548 workshops for older users who wish to explore the archive and learn how to contribute with
549 their own memories. This can promote a greater sense of inclusion among members of the
550 older generation who, as a result of the digital divide, often feel disconnected from the virtual
551 world.

552 According to UNESCO (2003), intangible cultural heritage manifests itself as follows:

- 553 (a) oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible
554 cultural heritage;
- 555 (b) performing arts;
- 556 (c) social practices, rituals and festive events;

557 (d) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe;

558 (e) traditional craftsmanship.

559 As such, the intangible cultural heritage linked to memories of cinema-going shares
560 characteristics with areas as broad as visual and performing arts, as well as leisure activities.
561 More specifically, as our research findings show that the social dimension is the prominent
562 aspect that emerges from memories of film consumption, our model can be applied to any
563 other type of cultural heritage activity that brings people together both in real life and online
564 environments (e.g. music, theatre, festivals, sports, etc.).

565 Therefore, an integrated multimedia strategy that entails dedicated archives, crowdsourcing,
566 and social media platforms can provide an effective solution to the digital divide by
567 promoting and enhancing engagement and inclusion online, not only in cinema-related
568 projects, but also in other cultural heritage areas.

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¹ ICA hereafter.

² For a discussion on memories of cinema-going as intangible cultural heritage see Ercole *et al.* (2016).

³ We have collected over 1,000 questionnaires on the experience of cinema-going. This quantitative phase has been used to identify the recurrent themes and patterns, which we have explored in structured video-interviews with 160 participants.

⁴ The interviews are also available on the project's YouTube channel, as well as in the digital archive CineRicordi.

⁵ For an in-depth discussion of the methodological and ethical implications of power relations between researchers and participants, see Karnieli-Miller *et al.* (2009).

⁶ The platform was created in collaboration with the Digital Humanities Institute at the University of Sheffield.

⁷ More recently, inter-generational digital literacy training for older adults have started to emerge in Italy. For example, the Abcdigital initiative, which was established by the Assolombardo Association, has created a programme through which young people volunteer their time and expertise to help older adults develop digital competencies.

⁸ These were public engagement opportunities, where we screened films and clips from our video-interviews, offering space and time afterwards for audiences' recollections of their favourite cinema-going moments.

⁹ See also Boyd and Larson (2014).