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Arts Participation in Canadian Older Adults During COVID-19

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Abstract

Arts participation can be incredibly beneficial for the health and well-being of older adults. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many arts organizations were unable to provide in-person activities, and moved to alternate forms of program delivery. We examined whether and how Canadian older adults continued participating in the arts during the initial wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. A 28-item survey was completed by 141 individuals ($M = 70.5$ years, $range = 55-94$, 66% female). Although the majority of respondents (70%) were engaging in the arts during the first wave of the pandemic, their engagement had declined compared to pre-pandemic times. More than half the respondents indicated that participating in the arts during the pandemic benefitted their well-being. These data support a model of care in which arts engagement can be viewed as an innovative and accessible health promotion strategy for older Canadians, during the pandemic and beyond.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has been especially devastating for the older population in Canada, with 96% of pandemic-related deaths occurring in those aged 60 years and older (Government of Canada, 2021). Even for older adults who did not become ill from/succumb to COVID-19, life since the pandemic began has changed in countless ways. These changes, including restrictions on in-person activities due to concerns about infection control and safety, have likely had innumerable effects on the overall health and well-being of Canadian older adults.

Prior to the pandemic, arts participation appeared to be a key feature in the lives of older Canadians. Using data from Statistics Canada's 2016 *General Social Survey*, Hill Strategies (2019) showed that 70% of Canadians aged 65 years and older attended (passively participated in) at least one arts-based activity (e.g., concert, art gallery, cultural festival) a year. When it comes to more active participation in the arts, almost half (45%) of 194 Ontarians surveyed in 2018 reported taking part in arts-based activities geared towards an older population (Dupuis, 2022). The most common forms of arts participation reported by older Ontarians in this work related to the visual arts (e.g., watercolour painting), and dance.

High participation rates in the arts reflect a growing worldwide "social prescribing" movement, in which health conditions are addressed via participation in social/educational/artistic activities, rather than relying so heavily on the more traditional medical model of care (Clements-Cortés & Yip, 2020). Indeed, the arts can benefit the health and well-being of older adults in multiple domains, including physical, cognitive, mental, and social (e.g., Castora-Binkley et al., 2010; Cohen et al. 2006; Noice, Noice, & Kramer, 2013). Artistic

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activities may be especially beneficial for this age group as they engage participants holistically, and can be adapted to individual needs and contexts (Dunphy et al., 2019).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many arts organizations offering programming for older adults have been forced to close their doors. Research by the Ontario Arts Council (2020) found that 94% of responding organizations had cancelled or postponed performances, exhibitions, screenings, readings or other events during the early days of the pandemic. In response, a wide range of leisure opportunities, including arts-based activities, have been created or adapted to be delivered virtually (Hebblethwaite et al., 2020; Potash et al., 2020). Offerings in this format have included virtual art gallery tours, streamed live music performances, and virtual choirs (Hebblethwaite et al., 2020). The opportunity to take part in these experiences virtually may allow older adults to derive the same/similar benefits of arts-based participation without compromising their physical health and safety.

Cohen-Mansfield and colleagues (2021) found that older adults who transitioned from in-person activities to their web-based complements (e.g., exercise programming, web-based lectures) during the pandemic were highly satisfied with participating in this alternate manner. One commonly reported benefit of in-person engagement in the arts is the opportunity for social engagement (Moody & Phinney, 2012; Greaves & Farbus, 2006; Vogelpoel & Jarrold, 2014). Little is known about the nature and quality of social connections available for older adults through virtual arts programming. Given that the COVID-19 pandemic may have exacerbated pre-existing high levels of loneliness and social isolation often seen among older adults (Hwang et al., 2020; Tyrrell & Williams, 2020), and knowing the importance of social connections during this time (Son et al., 2020), it is crucial to understand how virtual arts programming may allow for the maintenance of existing social ties and facilitate creation of new ones.

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Transitioning to virtual participation in the arts during COVID-19 necessitates a certain level of technological equipment and proficiency. The use of technology among older adults has increased in recent years, with 71% of Canadian older adults reporting internet use in 2018, compared to 48% in 2012 (Statistics Canada, 2019). In 2018, 79% of Canadian internet users aged 65 years and older reported having access to the internet at home (Statistics Canada, n.d.a). While there are opportunities for virtual, arts-based participation during COVID-19, little is known about whether Canadian older adults have been using technology to engage in the arts during the pandemic.

Current Study

The current study explored older adults' arts engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. The three research questions to be addressed by this work are: 1) Have Canadian older adults participated (passively or actively) in the arts during the pandemic? 2) What are the potential benefits (with a particular focus on social well-being) of arts participation for older adults during the pandemic? 3) Has technology been used to facilitate participation in new and innovative ways for an older population, or has it acted as a barrier to arts access?

The overarching goal of this work is to create innovation in the field of arts participation for older adults, and provide actionable solutions for arts organizations wishing to engage an older population, both during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited by email through the database (reaching over 700 individuals) of the Sheridan Centre for Elder Research based in Oakville, Ontario. The Centre also used their social media channels and those of their community partners to recruit participants. Individuals were eligible to participate if they were aged 55 years and older and were currently living in Canada. Data were collected between July 21 and September 15, 2020. This time-frame was chosen to capture findings from the first wave of the pandemic in Ontario, Canada's most populous province; the beginning of the second wave was announced by Ontario's premier on September 28, 2020 (DeClerq, 2020).

Questionnaire Development

A novel questionnaire was developed by the research team for the purposes of this study. It consisted of 31 questions divided into three sections:

- a) Demographics (eight questions, e.g., current age, gender, Canadian postal code, self-perceived health rating before and during COVID-19)
- b) Arts engagement prior to COVID-19/March 2020 (four questions, e.g., How often did you engage in the arts prior to March 2020? etc.)
- c) Arts engagement during COVID-19 (19 questions, e.g., What has prevented you from engaging in the arts during the pandemic, has engaging in the arts during the COVID-19 pandemic provided you with opportunities for social engagement? etc.)

Procedure

Participants used a SurveyMonkey link provided by e-mail or listed on social media to access the questionnaire and provided their informed consent prior to beginning the first

question. There was no time limit, and a thank you message appeared upon completion of the questionnaire. All research methods were approved by the Sheridan Research Ethics Board.

Data Analysis

Demographic data, descriptive statistics of the measures of interest, and qualitative data were analyzed using Microsoft Excel version 15.33.

Results

Participant Demographics

One hundred and forty-one participants (66% female) completed the survey. The average age of participants was 70.5 years ($M = 8.8$, $range = 55-94$ years). The majority of participants were married or had a common-law partner (71%), while 12% were widowed, 12% were divorced, and 5% were single. On a five-point scale from “excellent” to “poor”, the majority of participants (58%) rated their health as “excellent” or “very good”, and 76% did not show any change in overall health rating compared to before the pandemic (health ratings improved for 4% of participants, and decreased for 20% of participants). Eighty-five percent of respondents lived in Ontario; there were also a handful of respondents from Alberta ($n = 1$), British Columbia ($n = 11$), Manitoba ($n = 5$), Nova Scotia ($n = 1$), Prince Edward Island ($n = 1$), and Quebec ($n = 2$).

Arts Participation During COVID-19

The majority of participants (70%) reported that they were engaging in the arts during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. This represented a decline from pre-pandemic levels of 89% participation. As seen in Table 1, more participants ($n = 28$) reported stopping arts participation during the pandemic than taking up the arts at this time ($n = 3$). The division in participation between self-reported genders was very similar both pre-pandemic (68% female/32% male) and during the pandemic (70% female/30% male). For those who were engaging in the arts prior to the pandemic and continued to do so during COVID-19, the majority (50%) reported that the frequency of participation had decreased since the pandemic began (24% reported no change, 26% reported an increase in arts engagement compared to before the pandemic). Although a few respondents worked as art educators (6%) or as professional artists (3%), the vast majority (91%) were participating as a form of leisure activity.

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The most common forms of arts participation reported were reading and passive observation of artistic activities (e.g., watching an artist lecture, watching a movie, watching a concert/musical performance, watching a dance performance). Fewer participants were engaging in activities that involved active participation (e.g., taking an art lesson, creative writing, photography, singing, dancing).

Barriers to Participation

For those respondents who were not participating in the arts during the pandemic, the most common barriers to participation were programs being cancelled/postponed, concerns about health and safety, and uncertainty around how to access arts activities during this time. Fewer individuals reported concerns related to caregiving/work responsibilities, or issues with transportation or personal finances being impacted by the pandemic.

Accessing Art Activities

The most common ways participants learned about art activities during the pandemic were through social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter), television, word of mouth, and newspaper/magazine. Fewer participants learned about activities through institutional websites and mailings (e.g., newsletter from a ballet company).

Arts Participation Post-pandemic

Almost all respondents (91%) indicated that, even post-pandemic, they would like to have the opportunity to participate in the arts from home. Respondents reported that doing so would reduce financial and time costs, eliminate issues related to transportation and weather (particularly relevant during Canadian winters), and allow individuals to access programs that are too far from home (e.g., “I will continue to log on to museums and institutions which are located out of my living area range”, P95).

The minority who responded “no” (“It is a poor 'second best' in my opinion”, P108) indicated that they missed the interaction and stimulation afforded by in-person connections, didn't enjoy having to use technology, and might prefer to have a hybrid option: “While I can read books, watch TV and listen to music at home I cannot engage in the AGO, the museum or local, Niagara on the Lake or Stratford theatre from home”, P88).

Benefits of Arts Participation During COVID-19

The majority of respondents (57%) endorsed self-perceived health benefits to arts engagement. When asked to describe these benefits, the most common responses related to mental health/mood (e.g., “Found ways to create online that gave me satisfaction and joy. Mostly mental health benefits”, P4; “Takes me away from anxiety and worry about my health, my family's health, my financial situation (increasingly dire) and my daughter's future”, P15; “Creativity and relaxation during the class help me feel less stressed/depressed the rest of the day”, P84). In addition to mental health, benefits were found for both physical (e.g., “Lost weight and better posture”, P121; “A healthy feeling of fitness”, P13) and cognitive health (e.g., “Cognitively, continuing to play and sing has kept a few brain cells alive”, P110; “Keeps me sharp mentally”, P59), as well as feelings of gratitude (e.g., “It made me appreciate my life and my abilities”, P134) and exploration (e.g., “Completely rediscovered my passion for making art”, P9). Participants also indicated that the arts served as an excellent distraction to current realities (e.g., “Diversion from negative”, P136; “Has definitely helped my mental health by giving me something to focus on that is life-affirming and completely separate from covid”, P85) and added a sense of anticipation to their days (e.g., “looking forward to an event”, P100).

A little over half the participants (53%) indicated that the arts provided them with opportunities for social engagement during the pandemic, both for staying connected to old

friends (e.g., “Being able to sing and play with friends has helped keep those bonds alive”, P108), form new friendships, and stay connected in a different way thanks to technology (e.g., “A group of us all attended a series of Curious Minds lectures virtually. Afterwards we had a Zoom meeting to discuss what we had heard. When we attended the lectures in person we did not have the chance for a follow-up discussion as we all went our separate ways.”, P118). For those who did not gain social benefits from arts participation during the pandemic, the reasons given included participating alone (e.g., “I am an audience member alone at home.”, P15), having different viewpoints from friends and family related to COVID-19 restrictions (e.g., “I’ve been isolated as I distanced myself from people who are family and long time friends who I might have enjoyed but their beliefs about treating the virus and political issues created emotional upset. ... Surprised as I see them in a different light now”, P4), and missing the quality of in-person connections (e.g., “While it has served as a catalyst for some online discussions, I don't truly consider such exchanges as being socially engaged in the way it would be at the theatre or concert hall.”, P92).

Intergenerational Connections

Participants were asked whether they had connected with children or younger adults through intergenerational art activities during the pandemic. Those who answered in the affirmative ($n = 20$) were connecting both in-person (e.g., “Our 6 year old granddaughter lives with us. Dancing, drawing and painting and reading are practiced each day”, P94) and virtually (e.g., “Zoom book club activities with grandchildren”, P103).

Using Technology to Access the Arts during COVID-19

The most common methods of accessing the arts during COVID-19 were via computer, online meeting platform (e.g., Zoom), tablet (e.g., iPad), and television. The majority of

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respondents (76%) did not have any difficulty using technology to access the arts. Difficulties for the minority of respondents (24%) related to internet connection, lack of knowledge about using the technology required to access the arts activities, poor sound quality, concerns about privacy, and missing the social atmosphere and connection that in-person arts can provide.

Using technology to access the arts allowed approximately half (54%) of the respondents to become more confident with their use of technology overall (e.g., “I just keep expanding what I know and what I can do with technology”, P104; “I am now more confident about using technology to order online and to use various websites.”, P60), and allowed them to overcome barriers to connection and participation (e.g., geographic distance, transportation) that once existed (e.g., “[I] am able to enjoy educational speaker series from the comfort of my home, without having to travel. I find that to be a benefit although it is nice to see people in person.”, P2).

Discussion

This study examined whether older Canadians have been participating in arts-based activities during the COVID-19 pandemic, and what their perceptions of these experiences have been. Given our sample's high rate of arts participation pre-pandemic, it is perhaps not surprising that almost three quarters of respondents had transitioned to an alternate method for accessing the arts during the first wave of the pandemic. This study does speak to the success of arts organizations in offering programming in online/telephone formats that are accessible to and enjoyed by an older population. With a growing body of research highlighting the benefits of the arts for older adults, and a rapidly aging population (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2017), the current data provide additional insight into how to facilitate arts participation both during and after the pandemic.

The majority of survey respondents reported deriving benefits from participating in the arts, even though they had transitioned to virtual/telephone participation. They were able to access the arts using novel methodologies, transitioning online and watching recordings or learning via Zoom, or following along to programming over the telephone. Despite the success of our participants in using technology, arts organizations must consider limitations such as access to and knowledge of technology (e.g., weak or excessively expensive internet connections in more remote, rural areas of the country) for arts engagement, and offer additional resources such as opportunities to participate through telephone, mailed out supplies (e.g., the UK Southbank Centre's "Art by Post" program), and/or increased guidance and support for participants who are potentially new to certain types of technology.

Participants reported key benefits of arts participation during the pandemic for their mental health and social well-being. Intergenerational connections with friends and loved ones,

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including grandchildren, were reported to be facilitated during the pandemic via multiple different art forms (e.g., dancing, drawing, reading, painting, crafts, movies, music). High rates of loneliness and depression have been of particular concern for older adults during the pandemic (Krendl & Perry, 2021); thus, our data support the hypothesis that arts engagement could provide opportunities for social support and connection, potentially serving to combat social isolation, loneliness, and mental health concerns for this population.

Once the COVID-19 pandemic has ended, organizations will likely be eager to return to in-person programming, both for the important social connections available to both attendees and artists, and in order to begin their financial recovery. Our data suggest that continuing to offer opportunities for arts engagement from home may encourage more older adults to take part in activities that can benefit their overall health and well-being. Participants indicated that they wanted the flexibility of a hybrid model of participation (e.g., “[I] would like to add this method for the future, so [I] can choose which I want to do at any given time”, P26; “I will continue to watch movies and performances online; although I look forward to seeing live performances in the future when Covid 19 is no longer a threat”, P94).

Dupuis (2022) found that barriers to participation in the arts during pre-pandemic times included transportation, cost, interest in available programs, and a reluctance to participate alone. Offering arts-based opportunities that can be done from home would help, in many cases, to overcome many if not all of these barriers. From a financial perspective for the organization, charging a nominal fee for a performance (e.g., as the National Ballet of Canada did in Winter 2020 with a recording of *The Nutcracker* that could be accessed for approximately \$30) or creating a subscription model of both in-person/virtual offerings, could help maintain the interest of older adults and capitalize on strides that have been made during the pandemic in terms of

improving access to the arts. As one participant said: “I have much enjoyed the videos from the National Ballet and for elderly people like me who can't get to the ballet in Toronto at the best of times this has been a great way for me to enjoy watching the dance” (P65).

Limitations

The sample's high rates of participation in the arts even prior to March 2020 suggest it may not be fully representative of the Canadian older population, and that additional barriers to arts participation may be found in those who did not reply to this survey. As data were collected through an online survey that was shared by email and through social media, older Canadians who do not have access to such technology/websites may not be fully represented in this sample. In addition, the vast majority of respondents were living in Ontario; therefore, this study may not reflect how older adults in all provinces/territories have experienced the pandemic. Indeed, in Atlantic provinces where COVID-19 cases have remained relatively low, there may not have been such a need for pivoting to a virtual delivery of programming. Recruitment for these types of research studies in the arts can be difficult as Canada does not have a nation-wide organization focused on the study of arts, health, and aging; however, future research should examine and derive learnings from a broader sample recruited from coast to coast.

Conclusions

Participating (be it actively or passively) in the arts may be one key way for older adults to stay connected with others and maintain their mental, cognitive, and physical well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic may present an important opportunity for sharing the arts with more older adults than ever before, and enabling people to experience how beneficial the arts can be for their health and well-being. Arts organizations must harness this enthusiasm for their programming and develop effective strategies to foster continued

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participation throughout and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure that opportunities are both available and accessible to benefit Canada's rapidly aging population.

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