

ARTS ENGAGEMENT DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted our daily lives in different ways and many of us are experiencing high levels of uncertainty, anxiety and stress. Two-thirds (65%) of Australians are extremely or very concerned about the current situation and are increasingly fearful about its impact on their finances, relationships and health.¹

For some Australians, widespread closures have resulted in devastating unemployment or reduced hours,² for others, work has moved online, and they find themselves just as busy, if not busier, than before.³ For people with children, juggling childcare, home-schooling, and domestic chores can leave little time for leisure, especially for women.⁴

There has also been a significant impact on the Australian cultural landscape. Necessary restrictions have resulted in the closure of venues and the cancellation or postponement of events and programs. However, many artists and arts organisations have pivoted to digital content to attract audiences, including streaming live performances, creating virtual galleries and delivering online classes and tutorials.

In the UK, the National Gallery London has seen visits to its virtual tour pages increase almost 2,000% compared to the same time last year.⁵ New research carried out by Nesta has found that engagement with digital culture, such as music, film and tv, has dramatically increased since the lockdown began, with a quarter engaging for the first time.⁶

The crucial role arts and culture can play in helping people through this crisis can be seen worldwide. From balcony sing-alongs in Italy to rooftop flamenco performances in Spain to the *Together In Art Kids* program in Australia,⁷ cultural and creative activities offer hope, joy and connection in these uncertain times.

Australians are finding new ways to engage with arts and creativity online and the current situation may be providing more opportunities for Australians to undertake creative activities at home, both individually and collectively.⁸

¹ Clemenger BBDO 2020, [Australia Now Report 1](#).

² ABS 2020, [Weekly Payroll Jobs and Wages in Australia, Week ending 18 April 2020](#).

³ Citrix 2020, [Remote Work: The New Normal?](#)

⁴ Graves, L 2020, [‘Women’s domestic burden just got heavier with the coronavirus’](#), *The Guardian*, 16 March 2020.

⁵ The National Gallery 2020, [Visitors asked to picture ‘staying in’ as National Gallery’s new digital programme brings art to the home during closure](#).

⁶ Nesta 2020, [Digital Culture - Consumer Tracking Study](#).

⁷ Art Gallery of NSW 2020, [Together in Art Kids](#).

⁸ Leake, J 2020, [‘Coronavirus: Lockdown could be mother of invention’](#), *The Australian*, 5 April 2020.

To better understand creative and cultural engagement in Australia during the COVID-19 lockdown, the Australia Council commissioned Lonergan Research to explore this topic as part of their online Omnibus Survey.

Between 17 and 20 April 2020, 1,006 people aged over 18 were surveyed across Australia. As part of the broader omnibus, respondents were asked eight questions relating to online arts engagement, creation, reasons for engaging and their general activities. The survey was nationally representative with data weighted to the latest population estimates from the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Online arts engagement

- Since the start of the lockdown, just **over a third of Australians have engaged with arts events online (34%)** – music events are the most popular (20%) followed by visual arts and craft (16%) and book or literary events (14%).
- A third (31%) of Australians who have not engaged with the arts online would like to or have an interest.
- **More than four in ten Australians have changed their engagement habits with the arts** since the lockdown (44%) – **19% say they have engaged more** than they normally would, 24% say their engagement has not changed, and 25% say they have engaged less.

As an international comparison, in the UK, arts events, such as filmed performances of theatre, concerts and/or dance shows, have also seen a significant increase in online engagement by people who had not accessed this type of content before (27%) or had done so only rarely (24%).⁹

Similarly, engagement with online art content, such as paintings and photographs from a virtual collection or museum, also saw an increase, with 24% reporting never having accessed this content before and 23% having done so rarely.¹⁰

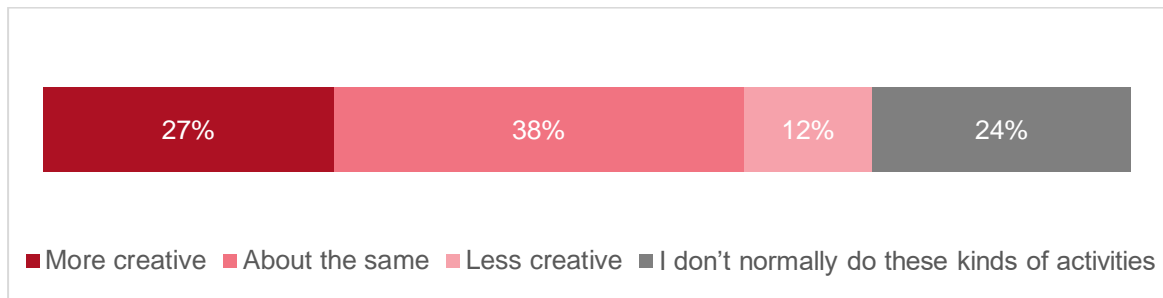
Creation

- Since the lockdown began, **more than four in ten Australians have creatively participated in the arts (43%)** – visual arts and craft have been created most (25%) followed by music (16%) and creative writing (14%).
- **More than a quarter of Australians say their creativity has increased** since the lockdown – **27% feel more creative** than before the lockdown began.

⁹ Nesta 2020, [Digital Culture - Consumer Tracking Study](#).

¹⁰ As above.

Figure 1: Change in creativity during lockdown (% respondents)



- Since the start of the lockdown, **half of children have engaged in arts more** than they normally would (49%).

In the UK, almost four in ten people reported an increase in creating and sharing original content (e.g. videos/written/audio content online) of their own (38%) – 17% did this for the first time.¹¹

Reading

- Since the lockdown began, **more than a third of Australians have been reading more (36%)** – 42% are reading about the same as they normally would and 6% believe their reading habits have decreased.

Reasons for arts engagement

- **Entertainment and having fun is the top reason why Australians are engaging with the arts** during the lockdown (65%). This is followed by passing the time (54%) and improving their wellbeing (48%).

Figure 2: Reasons for engaging in arts and creativity (% ranked top 3)



¹¹ Nesta 2020, [Digital Culture - Consumer Tracking Study](#).

General activities

- During the lockdown, **nearly all Australians are doing an activity to stay connected and support their wellbeing (97%)**.
- Three of the five **most popular activities rely on the cultural and creative industries and the skills and talent of artists**.
- The most popular activity overall is **'watching films/television programs or listening to the radio/podcasts' (72%)**, followed by 'keeping in touch with family and friends via phone or videoconferencing' (68%), 'exercise/backyard activities' (59%), **'listening to music' (55%)** and **reading for pleasure or relaxation (54%)**.

In the UK, the arts are also playing an important role in supporting well-being during the lockdown, with nine in ten people agreeing that music helps them deal with challenging life circumstances such as COVID-19 (90%).¹²

¹² Nesta 2020, [*Digital Culture - Consumer Tracking Study*](#).