

Arts, cultural and creative engagement during COVID-19: Enhancing the mental wellbeing and social connectedness of university staff and students

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Abstract

Background: Emerging evidence indicates that poor mental health and loneliness increased in the UK population during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, media reports suggested increased public engagement with arts and culture during the lockdown period.

Aim: To explore the levels of and impact of arts engagement amongst staff and students from one UK university during the first pandemic lockdown.

Methods: 112 staff/students completed an online survey which asked about their arts engagement and invited them to write a haiku about their lockdown experiences.

Findings: Participants engaged in a wide range of arts, cultural and creative activities; some engaged more frequently and/or in new activities. Participants reported having more time and opportunity to undertake such activities, which improved their mental wellbeing and facilitated social connections. Forty-seven participants wrote a haiku, and it was evident that the haikus provided a different perspective on lockdown experiences, enabling the expression of emotions including fear, loneliness, and a lack of freedom, as well as hope and optimism.

Originality: Increased creative engagement supported staff and students through the first UK lockdown and haiku poetry was a powerful method for capturing the nuances of their experiences beyond traditional survey responses.

Keywords

Arts, COVID-19, wellbeing, social connectedness, university, academia, Haiku

Introduction

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, poor mental health and loneliness were growing public health concerns (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018; Mental Health Foundation, 2016). In the UK, poor mental health increased during the pandemic, with 1 in 6 adults reporting depressive symptoms in the summer of 2021 compared to 1 in 10 in the pre-pandemic period July 2019–March 2020 (Office of National Statistics 2022). Furthermore, with the

onset of COVID-19 and associated social restrictions, in the MIND 2020 survey of 16,000 people, loneliness was reported as a key contributor to poor mental health for two-thirds of respondents (Mind, 2020).

Meanwhile, the pandemic saw a visibly increased public interest in arts, cultural and creative activities, with the painting and displaying of rainbows in the windows of homes (Mathers, 2020), communal singing from balconies in Italy (Thorpe, 2020), increased sales of arts and crafts materials internationally (Brignall, 2020), and increased virtual access to cultural venues and theatrical, musical and dance performances (Feinstein, 2020).

Over the last two decades, research has demonstrated that engaging with arts, cultural, and creative activities can have positive mental health and social outcomes (e.g. Dadswell et al., 2020; Daykin, 2017; Jensen et al., 2016; Mansfield et al., 2020; Perkins et al., 2021; Thomson et al., 2018; Wilson et al., 2017; Zarobe & Bungay, 2017). Indeed, the power of the arts has been seen as a potential solution to social challenges that have transformed experiences of health and revealed the limitations of technological medicine (Daykin, 2017). This growing body of research shows that actively engaging with the arts (such as playing musical instruments, writing poetry, or painting), and/or passively/receptively engaging (such as viewing visual art/artefacts in galleries/museums, or listening to music), either individually or collectively, leads to positive mental health and social outcomes. Such social outcomes include reduced loneliness and increased social connectedness.

Evidence is beginning to emerge to support the benefits to mental health and wellbeing of arts, cultural and creative engagement during periods of strict lockdowns and social distancing during the pandemic. For example, the delivery of art boxes promoted wellbeing and connection for vulnerable parents and their infants (Armstrong & Ross, 2021); engagement in music provided wellbeing benefits to members of the general population in various countries (e.g. Cabedo-Mas et al., 2021); different arts activities helped members of the UK general population cope with their emotions (Mak et al., 2021); increased creativity decreased feelings of loneliness for Canadian adults (Pauly et al., 2021); and expressive writing lessened symptoms of post-traumatic stress and depression for Italian healthcare workers (Procaccia et al., 2021).

In recent years, concerns about declining mental health among university staff and students has moved up the higher education agenda, and along with drastic transformations of the university experience, the pandemic has exacerbated the issue (Emerge Education & Jisc, 2021). The pandemic resulted in considerable negative mental health and loneliness impacts on university students (Mind, 2020; National Union of Students, 2020; Son et al., 2020). The mental health of university staff is also under the spotlight because of increased workloads due to the rapid implementation of changes to university processes and staff being required to take on additional duties because of self-isolating or unwell colleagues, coupled with the loss of usual informal interactions with colleagues (Emerge Education & Jisc, 2021). Anglia Ruskin University (ARU) encouraged staff and students to engage with various artistic and creative activities as part of their approach to supporting mental wellbeing during the pandemic, through the provision of online creative activities and links to external sources of such activities. This research explored arts, cultural and creative engagement amongst this community of staff and students during the first UK lockdown, and the perceived impact of this engagement.

Methods

An online survey explored how ARU staff and students engaged with arts, cultural and creative activities during the first lockdown, and the perceived impact of this engagement.

Arts, cultural and creative activities were defined as a broad range of activities including the umbrella term 'everyday creativity' such as knitting, crocheting, arts and crafts, doodling, gardening, and baking (All-Party Parliamentary Group Arts Health & Wellbeing, 2017). Ethical approval was obtained from the ARU School Research Ethics Panel, and recruitment for the survey was via the Announcements pages on the ARU staff and student intranet pages, the weekly university email bulletin, and faculty email newsletters. The survey was open between July and September 2020.

Survey questions

The survey was piloted on six members of the ARU Arts and Wellbeing Research Interest Group to ensure face validity. It comprised of closed and open response questions about participants' creative activities over the first lockdown and what this had meant to them, along with some demographic questions. For example, the survey asked: "During the COVID pandemic, have you done any of the following in your own home or with others in your household?" Nineteen different types of arts, creative and cultural activities were listed, with the option of replying 'other' and specifying the other activities undertaken. For each activity, participants were asked to choose a response option to capture any changes in the way that they engaged during the lockdown, from: "I have not done this"; "I have done this and it is a new activity for me"; "I have not done this for a while and I have taken it up again", "I occasionally do this but I have been doing it more frequently"; or "I always do this on a regular basis". In addition, the survey also asked: "During the COVID-19 pandemic, have you joined any online groups to do and/or share about the following", followed by the same list of activities. At the end of the survey there were three open-response questions:

1. "Has the way in which you engage with the activities you have mentioned above changed in any way since the beginning of the pandemic? If yes, how and why?"
2. "Why did you decide to engage with the above-mentioned activities during the pandemic?"
3. "What has being involved in arts and culture meant to you during the pandemic?"

Haikus

Because the focus of the research was about arts, culture, and creativity, it was decided to incorporate an arts-based approach to data collection, and at the end of the survey participants were invited to write an original haiku poem about their experiences during the first lockdown. Arts-based approaches to research enable the understanding of experiences in a way that is not always possible in other research approaches (Greenwood, 2012). In this study, poetry was used as a data collection tool to capture a snapshot of participants' experiences during the pandemic in a creative and meaningful way. Haiku poetry, which evolved in Japan in the seventeenth century, provides a unique opportunity for the study of creativity due to its ease of use combined with a depth of meaning (Blasko & Merski, 1998). For Nguyen and Roth (2019), it captures the depth and intensity of emotions, engagement, and lived experiences of participants. To encourage participants to write a haiku, the following definition from Nguyen and Roth (2019) was provided: A haiku is a Japanese poem of seventeen syllables in total, in three lines. The first line has five syllables, the second has seven, and the third has five. An example written by the research team was also given: "Separated now, But soon we'll be together, Counting down the days."

Data analysis

The research team analysed the closed-response questions using simple descriptive statistics to identify the types of engagement with the different activities. The open-response questions were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach. All authors conducted the initial thematic analysis individually before meeting to agree the coding and reach consensus on the final themes.

The haiku poems represented 'poetry as data' and each haiku was considered as a whole and analysed thematically drawing on Furman (2006) and Kunelaki (2020). All authors read through the haikus individually, first familiarising themselves with the overall sense of haikus. Following a team discussion, it was decided that attempting to analyse the poems line-by-line fractured the meaning, as many of them told a story with the meaning conveyed in the poem as a whole. Therefore, both the content and the structure of each haiku were explored, exploring writing techniques such as metaphor, imagery, syntax, and tone (Bishop & Willis, 2014). The poetry analysis was subsequently considered in conjunction with the analysis of open-response questions to illuminate complexities and nuances within the themes.

Findings

The findings first present the demographics of participants followed by their engagement in arts, cultural and creative activities during the first lockdown in terms of the range of activities as well as how participants had more time and opportunity to engage. The impact of arts, cultural and creative activities is then considered in relation to mental health and wellbeing and social connectedness.

The survey was completed by 112 participants, comprising 64 students and 50 staff members (two participants were both staff members and students), spanning across faculties and professional services. Demographic characteristics are shown in table 1.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants

Gender	Predominantly female (76%)
Age range	32% aged 18–29 26% aged 30–39 23% aged 40–49 15% aged 50–59 4% aged 60–69
Living arrangements	39% were caring for children at home 25% lived with a keyworker 15% lived alone 15% had other caring responsibilities, 13% were working/volunteering for the NHS 13% had been furloughed/had reduced hours 12% were 'shielding' (following additional restrictions due to having been identified as clinically extremely vulnerable by the UK government/National Health Service).

While the range of activities and changes in engagement represent the survey data, the themes draw on the open-response survey data along with the haiku poetry. 47 participants wrote an original haiku about their experiences during the first UK lockdown. Though short, the haikus enabled the expression of intense emotions, providing a powerful insight into participants' reflections.

Engagement in arts, cultural and creative activities

Range of activities

The survey responses indicated a range of activities that participants continued to engage with, engaged with more frequently, reignited, or engaged with as a new activity during the lockdown (see figure 1). Listening to music (91%), reading (71%), and baking (71%) were the most popular activities; many participants had done these more frequently than prior to the first lockdown, particularly in the case of baking. Meanwhile, arts and crafts (40%), knitting or other textile art (36%), and drawing (32%) were less popular, though the majority of participants engaging in these activities were doing so more frequently or as a reignited or new activity.

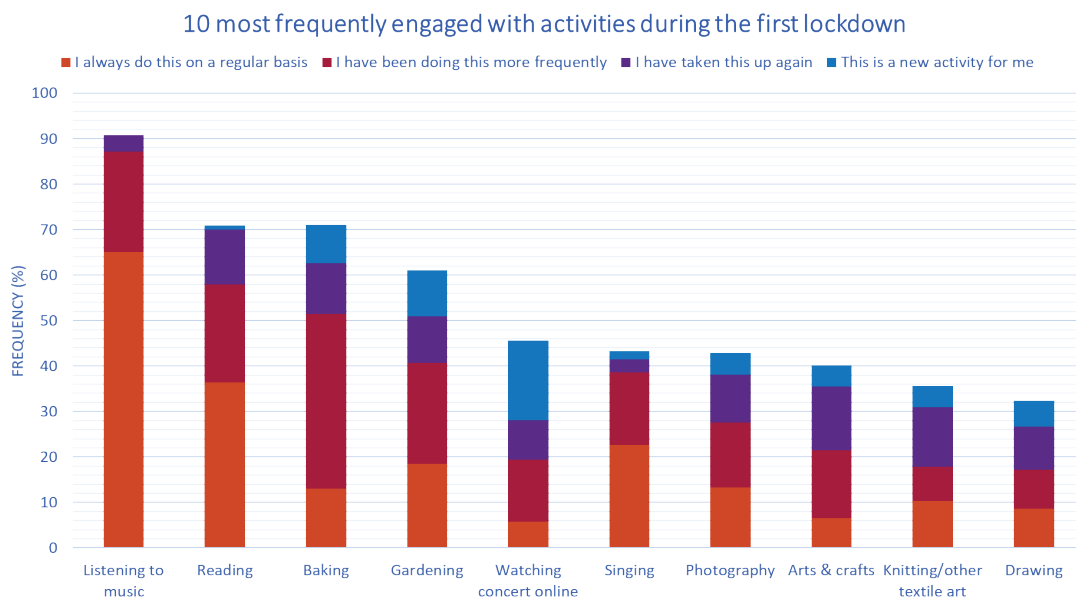


Figure 1. 10 most frequently engaged with activities during the first UK lockdown

It may be that the most popular activities were easier to engage with as something that participants were more familiar with, in comparison to the less popular activities that may require additional resources and may be perceived as requiring artistic skill and technique. Importantly, watching a concert or performance online was a new activity for 18% of participants; one participant suggested how this had become more accessible during the lockdown:

I loved the National Theatre at Home performances ... online. That was something I don't normally get to see as I don't have much opportunity to go to the theatre. (Student and staff member)

In general, the haiku poetry tended to be a creative expression of participants' reflections on the lockdown, rather than being about their engagement in activities. Nonetheless, they provided further insight into activities that went beyond the survey responses. While gardening was included as a popular activity in the survey, the haikus suggested the value of engaging with nature and the outside more broadly during the pandemic.

Between us is space
Where flowers can bloom and grow
When sun shines again

The birds keep singing
The sun keeps shining on us
Beauty in darkness

Although perhaps not traditionally considered an arts activity, it is clear that nature had an aesthetic value and was an important inspiration for some participants that was not captured in the same way by the survey alone.

More time and opportunity to engage

In the survey's open-response questions, 37 participants described having more time and opportunity to engage in arts, cultural and creative activities due to working from home and/or being free from usual social commitments and responsibilities.

Before the pandemic, I tried to find a few moments in the day to either knit or read but being at home all the time, not having the commute, has given me extra time... to do these activities more.
(Staff member)

Students especially seemed to feel more freedom from social pressure and their studies.

I enjoyed my creative activities more and felt more freedom to pursue them ... there was no social pressure ... no disapproval of me spending my time doing these things. (Student)

I felt like I finally had the time to do things that make me happy and to try out new things without feeling guilty. (Student)

The sentiment of having more time and making the most of it was echoed in some of the haikus.

More time to enjoy
Family are together
Life is on a pause

However, there was also a darker side to this newfound time represented in the haikus, alongside the power of creativity when lockdowns prevented other forms of engagement.

Trapped inside a house
with nothing else to do
I create to live

Shielding here at home
Stuck inside for weeks on end
Painting keeps me sane

Furthermore, the haikus highlighted how working from home meant missing colleagues and usual routines.

Working more from home
Missing usual routine
Better days ahead

This demonstrates how incorporating poetry as a creative method illuminated the context behind having more time for arts, cultural and creative activities and therefore gave greater insight into their importance.

Impacts of arts, cultural and creative engagement

Mental health and wellbeing

Seventy-nine participants described how engaging in arts, cultural and creative activities improved aspects of their mental health and wellbeing. Indeed, one participant stated the reason they engaged was “to focus on something other than loneliness and anxiety”, while five participants specifically referenced how creative activities helped them to “keep sane” during lockdown:

... particularly the composing and playing of music has kept me sane and stopped me thinking too existentially by giving me purpose and direction. (Student)

Impacts on mental health and wellbeing were achieved through activities providing relaxation and an escape from the situation, creative expression supporting participants to process the situation, and engagement building a sense of belonging.

I have always seen it as a form of relaxation, a time just for me. I found the beginning of lockdown very stressful ... It very much became an escape from these pressures for me. (Staff member)

Creative self-expression was how I processed everything, and I suppose gave myself an identity during that time and a means to be ‘heard’ even if I didn’t have a lot of contact with anyone ... (Staff member)

Additionally, creative engagement gave participants a sense of purpose both during the activity as well as in relation to a tangible end-product, which was reported as important by seven participants.

It made me feel that I was doing something productive ... an incentive to get it finished and have something to show ... I’m hoping the blanket that I knitted will stay in our family ... the ‘Lockdown Blanket 2020’. (Staff member)

Meanwhile, the haikus emphasised the stress and fear that the pandemic had caused participants.

Stress, work, love and life
Alone in a family
Take the fear away

Fear and terror
are worse than covid itself
Only art can heal

They also indicated that participants were seeking solace; as seen across the findings, art and creativity provided comfort for some. In particular, the haikus exemplified the value of creative expression.

Creative writing
 repeating thoughts consume me
 but words give release

While the world is grey
 Colourful storms in my head
 Can paint brighter days

Social connectedness

In the haikus, some participants expressed their frustrations at being disconnected from other people and how their world was shrinking.

Just meters apart
 Can't wait to embrace you all
 Can't come soon enough

Pulled into my home
 My world has shrunk completely
 I long to break free

However, 29 participants reported that engaging in arts, cultural and creative activities facilitated social connection and bonding with family, friends, work colleagues/student peers, and their wider communities.

It had helped me to continue to feel a part of my local community. (Student)

This connection and bonding could occur through engaging in the activities together (either in person with members of their household or virtually with those outside of their households) and sharing an enjoyable experience together, or through engaging in activities independently which then provided a topic of conversation with others over video calls, phone calls or social media.

... cross stitch has been a great way for me to bond and feel close with my family living in a different household as we have all done it together and can compare and talk about our projects. (Student)

I could only talk to my Mum on the phone or via her window so it was a connection for us to be talking about our sewing and crafts as we were so fed up. (Student and staff member)

For one participant, engaging in creative activities helped her to feel connected to her grandmother, who had sadly passed away due to COVID-19.

I started knitting again to help me cope with the death of my grandmother due to COVID. She did a lot of work for a charity that sends knitted toys to children in war torn countries and it helped me feel close to her to make one. (Student)

Ten participants who were parents reported that engaging in arts activities with their children was a way to spend quality time together, doing something mutually enjoyable which facilitated bonding and connection.

I want to make sure that my children aren't missing out on the activities that they would otherwise be doing at nursery/pre-school and in play groups. It also means I spend focused time with them ... (Staff member)

Something to enjoy with my child and occupy her. Also used to home school in a fun way e.g. baking as a maths lesson. (Student)

For some participants, sharing their creativity with their family, friends and neighbours was also a way to make their loved ones smile and lift their spirits, and for others it was a way to contribute to their wider communities:

Just something fun to do amidst all the doom and gloom, to make my friends/family smile. (Staff member)

I also enjoyed cheering up neighbours/family/friends by sharing the homemade cakes with them! (Staff member)

I wanted to help my community and colleagues from my hospital to fight Covid-19, so I designed a surgical mask, which was successful. (Student)

This sentiment was evident in one of the haikus that suggested a sense of collective solidarity and community action.

Some homes danced alone
We're moving on together
Helping each other

Discussion

The above findings provide insights into how and why a community of staff and students at a UK university engaged with and used the arts to enhance their mental wellbeing and social connectedness during the first UK COVID lockdown. Whilst existing literature reports the role and ascribed benefits that arts, culture and creative activities can play in relation to mental wellbeing and social connectedness (e.g. Dadswell et al., 2020; Daykin 2017; Perkins et al, 2021; Thomson et al., 2018; Wilson et al., 2017), it was not known whether this would be similar or take a different form during such a crisis. Emerging research findings about arts engagement during the pandemic have offered some initial insights (e.g. Armstrong & Ross, 2021; Pauly et al., 2021; Procaccia et al., 2021); however, relatively little is known about the engagement and impact of arts and creative activities during the pandemic amongst university communities.

From the range of activities that staff, and students engaged in, listening to music, reading, and baking were most commonly reported, potentially due to the ease of engaging with such activities. An interesting finding is that across all activities, some participants had engaged more frequently during the first lockdown, while others had taken up something new. Turning to and/or doing more of something that is known to be beneficial for us is understandable; the turn to something new is perhaps more intriguing. Participants mentioned a range of things that may shed some light on this increased activity including having 'more time' because of home working (though for some, not all), feeling 'freed' from expectations and judgement, and connecting with other people.

The notion of finding freedom to engage with creative activities within lockdown is an unexpectedly positive finding.

In terms of why people engaged in these activities, this was described as a way of coping either by distracting themselves or conversely to face the situation head on and reflect on it. The benefits reported resonate with existing findings such as enhancing mood, relaxation, and having a sense of purpose (e.g. Jensen et al., 2016; Mansfield et al., 2020; Zarobe & Bungay, 2017). Having a tangible outcome that could be achieved, shown and shared potentially offered a sense of control at a time when general as well as day-to-day uncertainty about the pandemic endured.

As lives and 'normal' landscapes of relationships and routines shifted, those in the arts responded creatively, moving previously face-to-face events and activities online. This appeared to offer new opportunities to discover what social connectedness means in a virtual world. For the study participants, dominant themes were doing things in the home with others (particularly children), doing things online with others (online performances, poetry, knitting groups etc) and using these activities as a talking point for having conversations with others when little else was happening. This latter finding reflects earlier findings with older people living in residential care homes, whereby arts activities gave residents a topic of conversation with others whilst they were confined to the home (Dadswell et al., 2020).

The use of haiku poetry in health and social care is relatively new and is usually undertaken alongside some form of training (Biley, 2003). In this study, it was included as an option for participants to capture their experiences in a creative and meaningful way. It is encouraging that nearly half of the participants contributed a haiku. There was a notable difference between the haikus and the open-response data. Whilst often referring to the central importance of creative activities during lockdown, the haikus also offered insights into the wider experience of lockdown. It has been suggested that writing a haiku forces reflection on what is essential and "allows text to express affect and context, or affect-in-context, powerfully and evocatively" (Furman, 2006, p. 561). Indeed, the haikus enabled a broader range of – and more extreme – emotions to be expressed than the open-response questions, particularly feelings of loneliness, lack of freedom, fear, and change, yet surprisingly often ended on an optimistic note. Overall, the haikus added further nuance and complexity to the themes, sometimes illustrating the contradictions experienced during the lockdown such as finding 'beauty in darkness'.

The use of haiku as an arts-based method adds to a small but consistent body of research demonstrating the potential of haikus in health and social care research to assist in exploring emotional and practical issues, as well as being a way to reflect to others the experience of facing challenging health conditions and treatments (Biley, 2003; Bishop & Willis, 2014). However, it is important to note that not all the participants wrote a haiku. This may be due to their unfamiliarity with the method and participants needing more time and/or guidance. Although there was an option to send the haiku later via email, this would have compromised anonymity.

Whilst some participants engaged in solitary artistic activities, it was striking that an expanded notion of community is reflected in many of the research findings, including the haikus. Approximately a quarter of participants stated that they used the arts, culture, and creative activities to bond with family, friends and peers, and wider communities, and to enhance the mood of others. These activities, and the new peer communities of interest and practice that have arisen, potentially afford a way for people to find a place of belonging and help retain or build a new sense of identity (Taylor, 2011; Wenger 1998).

Limitations

Despite efforts to reach all staff and students, it is likely the research attracted those with an interest in the arts and with the time to participate in the survey, and is perhaps therefore not representative of the university population as a whole. Nonetheless, staff and students from all faculties were represented, as well as staff in both academic and professional roles at various levels. Although universities are often considered middle class, ARU does not reflect a traditional university profile due to widening participation, which has led to many students (and staff) being the first in their family to attend university. Indeed, one participant indicated the need for a wider conception of 'cultural activities' to be included in such research, for example, social activities in the pub (a retail business establishment that serves alcoholic beverages). Finally, the design of the research survey was bespoke for this research and was not a validated tool, although a pilot was conducted with the ARU Arts and Wellbeing Research Interest Group to ensure it was comprehensive and understandable.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings indicate how a university community turned to and engaged in a wide range of arts, cultural and creative activities in the first UK lockdown. The use of haikus as a creative research method has captured the emotional impact of the pandemic in its early phase and the fear and dislocation it produced. Familiar arts, cultural and creative activities have been used as a way of enhancing wellbeing and social connectedness through new mediums such as online groups and performances.

During the pandemic, for some people the relative ease of access to digital technologies meant that they were able to engage with online activities and connect with others through digital means. However, this was not the case for everyone, and this has implications for policy and the provision of alternative activities to maintain population mental wellbeing during times of crisis. The arts and cultural sector make a huge contribution to the UK economy and employs many thousands of people, but experienced significant cuts as a result of the pandemic. Although the UK government put support packages in place for arts and cultural organisations, venues were closed and artists furloughed, and freelance workers were without work. This has significant implications both for the mental wellbeing of people in the sector but also for the sustainability and continuance of arts and cultural opportunities for the public in the future.

As the world adapts to living with COVID-19, it is hoped that some of the positive ways in which arts, cultural and creative activities have supported individuals and collectives during lockdown may endure. New blended ways to engage with the arts both online and in person also offer more inclusive ways for creativity to flourish. Based on these findings, we would encourage universities to make arts activities accessible to staff and students as a way of promoting their mental wellbeing and social connectedness.

Statement of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest in this publication.

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