

Arts engagement and wellbeing during the Covid-19 pandemic: a survey of Canterbury and District u3a members

Abstract

Background

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a negative effect on the wellbeing of individuals and societies, with little research as yet available on how to address this. There is, however, evidence from pre-Covid times, of the wellbeing potential of the arts and creative activities. This research sought to explore this potential in relation to the wellbeing of a defined demographic experiencing the initial lockdown phase of Covid.

Methods

Research methods comprised an online questionnaire survey of the membership of one u3a (University of the Third Age), followed by a series of focus group interviews with volunteers drawn from the survey participants. Survey data were analysed using summary statistics. Focus group data analysis was informed by two theoretical frameworks.

Findings

Data from a sample of 173 individuals showed the most popular creative activities were: reading and poetry; listening to music; horticulture; and culinary arts. Focus group volunteers reported that such activities helped to block out the negative psychological aspects of the pandemic and gave rise to opportunities for socialising, learning and improving health. A number of substantive and methodological issues arising from the research are discussed.

Background

Wellbeing is a vital component of human health, producing 'a positive state experienced by individuals and societies. Similar to health, it is a resource for daily life and is determined by social, economic and environmental conditions' (World Health Organisation [WHO], online). One such environmental condition, the recent Covid-19 pandemic, has had a marked effect on the wellbeing of the UK population, with around 21% of adults experiencing some form of depression in early 2021, more than double pre-pandemic levels (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2021). Although there exists, as yet, little research on effective ways of managing such consequences of the pandemic, various interventions have been recommended, such as mindfulness training, stress management and other psychosocial approaches. Rashid & McGrath (2020), in a review of such measures, suggested that a strengths-based approach might play a role in helping to reappraise the pandemic's challenges, and identified a number of self-care actions which might help, including arts and creative activities such as listening to music, dance, inventing a recipe, watching a movie or planting a herb garden.

There is now considerable pre-pandemic evidence for the benefits of engagement in such arts and creative activities for mental wellbeing (WHO, 2019). However, during the pandemic many of the means to accessing normal activities became unavailable. Many arts venues (theatres, museums/galleries, community venues, concert halls) were closed and group activities (performing, singing, interest groups) were not allowed. However, instead, there has been a growth in online and virtual arts initiatives, both participatory/interactive and receptive/passive. These include virtual choirs and orchestral performances, theatres and opera houses streaming live performances, virtual tours of museums and galleries, online drawing and painting, poetry online, TV and radio programmes (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2020).

The u3a (University of the Third Age), a UK-wide movement of locally run groups providing a wide range of opportunities to come together to learn for enjoyment, has also been quick to pick up on this. A quick glance at the national programme of events online lists a large and varied programme of courses available for members, including: painting and painters, creative writing, poetry, play reading, singing, dancing, music appreciation and playing, crafts, opera and photography.

There is initial evidence from the UCL National Covid-19 Social Study that engagement with the arts has increased since the Covid-induced lockdown, and can be used as approach and avoidance strategies to help cope with emotions, as well as to help improve self-development (Mak et al, 2020). Further evidence is needed, however, on how these different strategies relate to the broader aspects of wellbeing and how these mechanisms work at the individual level. This proposal seeks to fill this gap and to add to the existing evidence base in the current changing and challenging conditions by focusing on the experiences of members of a specific u3a.

Research questions

1. What arts and creative activities have members of Canterbury and District u3a been engaging in during the pandemic?
2. What are the potential benefits to wellbeing of engaging in these activities?

Methods

This research study was carried out using a mixed methods design. Both a survey and focus group interviews were used in order to maximise coverage in quantity and depth of responses. For the survey two questionnaires based on the work of Fancourt et al (2019) and Mak et al (2020) were distributed.

The study by Fancourt et al (2019) developed and validated a tool inviting a response to fixed choice options covering types and frequency of arts engagement of a selection of arts and culture formats; a comparison of use with pre-Covid levels; and degree of agreement with a number of statements about the wellbeing effects of engagement using the Emotional Regulation Strategies for Artistic Creative Activities (ERS-ACA) scale, completed with the respondent's favourite arts activity in mind. Fancourt et al derived three subscales within the ERS-ACA, which characterise the types of strategies which the different arts activities represented: avoid strategies (6 items), approach strategies (7 items), self-development strategies (5 items). The questionnaire, with some additions, was circulated electronically to the database of Canterbury and District u3a members using Google Forms. A u3a was chosen as representing a specific demographic, that is, individuals who are retired or no longer in full-time work.

A focus group is a discussion based interview that produces a particular type of qualitative data generated via group interaction (Breakwell et al, 2006). This method helps people explore views and experiences in ways that are less easily achieved using one to one interviews (Traynor 2015). This is helpful for researchers seeking to understand the breadth of shared experiences within a group, without necessarily trying to come to any consensus. The conduct of a focus group includes the setting of ground rules and the presence of a moderator to pose questions and ensure that all members are able to contribute.

Focus groups were recruited through the local u3a newsletter and interested parties responded to a central point providing email contact details, with availability for Zoom meetings. A total of twelve focus groups were set up facilitated by six u3a volunteer researchers. The focus group volunteers were divided into groups of three and allocated to researchers based on their availability. It was decided to have small groups due to some devices only having four people at a time visible on screen. Each researcher arranged a 40-minute Zoom meeting with each of their groups, preceded by a ten minute introductory Zoom meeting. Most researchers facilitated two focus groups. The volunteer researchers facilitated and moderated the discussion having explained the purpose and the ground rules. The discussions focused on the types of creative activity undertaken during lockdown, whether or not they were new activities, whether the participants planned on continuing them, what benefits were derived and whether they would recommend them to others. All sessions were recorded on Zoom and transcribed using Otter. AI software.

Ethics

The study complied with u3a ethics guidelines. Participants confirmed informed consent via integrated information and consent forms within survey and online consent forms for focus groups. <https://forms.gle/4HPhwGDg3oU9S6up7>

Analysis

Analysis of the survey was based on the summary statistics within Google Forms, with further exploration of data using SPSS v26. Data were tabulated and weighted responses placed in rank order to demonstrate popularity of various art forms and why particular arts were engaged in during the pandemic.

The analysis of the Focus Group data involved firstly a brainstorming session to identify any benefits to wellbeing mentioned in the scripts. Researchers then worked individually on scripts to build up a template of categories, together with illustrative quotations to back up any stated benefit. Finally the categories were organised within two existing health/wellbeing frameworks which together encompass all the dimensions or components of wellbeing expressed by respondents. The biopsychosocial model of health (Engel, 1977) was the first major attempt to move away from the narrow medical model then prevalent within the medical profession. In identifying three different types of wellbeing it recognises the interplay between the physical, the mental and the social dimensions of a health state, meaning that none of these elements should be considered in isolation. However, the model fails to include the cognitive element, which the researchers felt was reflected in the data. A more recent model, which focuses more on actions needed to attain wellbeing, as opposed to outcomes, has been adopted by the NHS. The Five Ways to Wellbeing (New Economics Foundation [NEF], 2011; Stephens, 2020) was felt to complement the Engel model, adding the needed cognitive dimension for the analysis. The five ways of the title are: Be active (equivalent to bio), Take notice (psycho), Connect (social), Keep learning (cognitive) and Give (psycho).

Findings

Findings are reported in two sections, firstly the responses to the survey, secondly the data from the qualitative data. The focus is on answering the two research questions, which correspond to the two sections of the findings.

Survey findings

A sample of 173 individuals responded to the survey. The four activities reported most frequently by respondents in the fixed-choice list were: reading literature or poetry every day or most days (73%); listening to music every day or most days (53%); horticulture or floristry every day or most days (38%); culinary arts every day or most days (36%). Table 1 outlines in more detail the popularity of the various activities, including rank and weighted score.

Table 1. Arts & creative activities by popularity (n=173)

Activity	Rank	Weighted score
Reading literature and poetry	1	506
Listening to music	2	411
Horticulture	3	335
Culinary arts	4	323
Streaming live/recorded material	5	144
Watching creative tutorial	6	135
Playing a musical instrument	7	130
Singing	8	120
Crafts	9	104
Textile art	10	100
Painting and drawing	11	94
Creative writing	12	84

Performing art	13	40
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Comparing activities with time spent on these prior to lockdown showed that 34.5% engaged for less time than usual, 38% engaged for about the same amount of time, and 27.5% engaged for more time than before lockdown.

Table 2 below itemises in rank order the benefits felt by respondents from the activities listed in the ERS-ACA, along with the weighted score, numbers responding to each item and allocated subscale as identified by Fancourt et al (2019). It is of note that respondents largely appeared to adopt ‘avoid’ strategies through their art as a way of coping during the Covid pandemic.

Table 2. Benefits (n=173)

How activities help	Number responding	Rank	Weighted score	Subscale 1.Avoid 2.Approach 3.Self-development
Block out thoughts	166	1	494	1
Gives me a sense of purpose	167	2	473	3
In own little bubble	168	3	466	1
Helps disengage	167	4	456	1
Forget about worries	168	5	455	1
Shake off anxieties	168	6	445	1
Redirects attention	163	7	425	1

Detach from negative things	165	8	408	1
Puts worries in perspective	167	9	400	2
Contemplate what's going on	169	10	396	2
Feel more confident	166	11	390	3
Boosts self-esteem	166	12	381	3
Refocus on what matters	166	13	377	2
Reaffirms my identity	166	14	371	3
Come to terms with emotions	168	15	360	2
Feel stronger	162	16	352	3
Understand feelings	167	17	343	2
Reflect on emotions	165	18	328	2

Focus group findings

Researchers identified 24 categories (see Appendix) from the 11 transcripts of focus group interviews which averaged 3 participants per group. Originally 16 groups had been identified, however 4 of these subsequently failed to take place for various reasons. Further, a combined interview took place with what had originally been designated two small groups.

Using a four-dimension framework (incorporating the biopsychosocial plus the ‘Five Ways’ models) some 12 areas of benefit were created, as illustrated in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Focus group findings

Dimensions of wellbeing (Engel 1977; NEF 2011)	Benefits	Approach Subscale	Avoid subscale	Self development subscale
Biological/Be active	Nutrition benefits	x		
	Exercise	x		
Psychological/Take notice	Enjoyment	x		
	Mastery	x		X
	Therapy	x		
	Generosity	x		
	Disengagement		x	
	Prevention		x	
Social/Connect	Personal and group connections	x		
	Community cohesion	x		
Cognitive/Keep learning	Maintaining learning			x
	Cognitive growth			X

Biological/physical wellbeing

Because of the limitations imposed by the pandemic and its attendant lockdown imperative, it was not anticipated that physical wellbeing would feature greatly, linked as it is in the ‘Five Ways’ model to activity. In addition this does not readily align with creative activities. However, because of the

inclusion of cookery and horticulture in the survey list of activities, this became a feature for some respondents. Both of these activities may be said to denote an 'approach' tendency:

This [involvement in community garden] is our outdoor exercise. And so we went on doing it. (Group D)

We set ourselves the task of cooking from scratch, and picking a new meal every single week. So he cooks half, I cook half and so we've been doing that. And in the course of that we've lost a stone and a half, both of us just by simply, you know, shopping for fresh ingredients, and cooking from fresh. So getting back into having the time and getting back into cooking, and also feeling the health benefits of that has been really, really enjoyable. (Group F)

Psychological/mental wellbeing

In terms of the aspects of wellbeing in the frameworks discussed above (Engel, 1977; NEF, 2011) the most popular responses, perhaps predictably, concerned mental wellbeing. In contrast to the survey findings, the majority of these indicated what might be described as an 'approach' mentality (10 categories).

Enjoyment, which has been shown to be associated with mental wellbeing (Pressman et al, 2009) was possibly the most frequently mentioned response to arts engagement, across a range of different activities:

I would do my vegetable garden out there [pre-pandemic]. Well, I did it here instead. And I got incredible pleasure out of doing that. It really is a joy. My husband does all the artsy stuff in the garden. I do the practical stuff. But I really enjoyed it. (Group A)

I joined one of the creative writing courses, in fact, I had the last session this morning, which was something completely new for me. And I really enjoyed it... I can access that whenever I want. And that's really enjoyable. (Group N)

I did some acting. And oh, my God, I just loved it. It was really lovely... So I invented this character, and I had to speak like her. And it was just so amazing..I wouldn't have enjoyed it so much if I hadn't been talking (Group P)

The engaging nature of creative activities was also mentioned by a large number of respondents and various related descriptors were mentioned including 'fulfilling', 'absorbing', 'sustaining', 'provision of a focus or goal', and 'something to look forward to':

The allotment has been a great saviour for me. It's kept me occupied (Group F)

... and so I bought the Angela Hewitt set and been listening to those [Beethoven piano sonatas] and got totally fixated on one particular one called The Tempest... which was very fulfilling (Group N)

I've been playing with a recorder friend and we first of all, when we first locked down, we played twice a week, we met twice a week on zoom. It's not quite the same but it was definitely well worth doing; it gave us something to focus on practising (Group P)

Some individuals directly referred to the therapeutic nature of taking part in creative activities, describing this as relaxing and relieving stress and worries:

I started doing cookery in my 20s. And it's always been a hobby of mine. But it's been to me during lockdown, it's been therapeutic. It's where I relax. (Focus group D)

And I've become much more creative in what I do in our garden and it's looking a lot better and it's extremely enjoyable, especially if you've got really good old radio four on in the garden or some lovely music it's extremely therapeutic. (Group F)

The quality of mastery was a feature of many discussions within the focus groups and has been used as a general term to include sentiments such as a 'sense of achievement', 'doing something for myself', 'having permission' to engage in an activity, providing 'a sense of independence' and for some, taking them out of their comfort zone:

This is the first time in my life that I could spend every day in the garden without thinking I should be doing something else. (Group A)

I decided to revert to trying to play the piano again and then I've been trying to accompany myself with simple pieces and I've managed. It's not very good but it's better than nothing and so I'm really pleased with myself that I've managed to do a bit of sight reading and learning of new pieces (Group B&H)

But then I did like to have a day where I felt that I had achieved something that was important to me. (Group O)

I did some acting...you wouldn't believe it. But I'm actually quite shy. You know, I'm quite a shy person. I could go into a room full of people and not say a word for like, eight hours. (Group P)

Linked to wellbeing in the 'Five ways to wellbeing' model (NEF, 2011) is giving, and such generosity was seen as providing a benefit (to self and others) for some individuals in their discussions. This included sending items abroad for those in need for one individual and knitting for family for others:

And the pile of old T shirts, you know, the boys old T shirts, just sort of cobble them together into quilts [for Africa] (Group M)

It's just early days and since then it's just been [knitting] a cardigan for my granddaughter. (Group G)

The bit that is creative, [knitting bears for grandsons] that's something I've never thought of before ... I decided to surprise them because nobody was expecting this....it's the feelgood factor that we all need. What we're doing is making a bit of a difference somewhere else rather than in our comfortable lives here. That's what makes me carry on really. (Group F)

A few of the psychological benefits mentioned by participants align with the 'avoid' subscale of

Fancourt et al's (2019) model. One of these was the ability to disengage or lose oneself amid the negativity attendant on the pandemic:

in my garden ... I just found that was really what kept my, my head clear and just to get out there and lose myself out in the garden. (Group A)

having to concentrate [on the piano] and doing it takes the strain out of having other worries and thinking about it. You have to concentrate so hard, it [takes] the strain out of worrying about other things. (Group K)

A further beneficial outcome identified was the ability to ward off and avoid potential negative effects such as depression and the general pressures of life:

And then I, you know, decided to be a bit more constructive with my time. And so I started with, you know, my painting in the afternoons. And I've not felt depressed the whole time at all. (Group A)

I think it's just forgetting what's, you know, the news has been so depressing. That is just nice to concentrate so hard, like D said, and just shut everything else out. (Group K)

I think the situation we're in it's affected everybody in so many different ways, you know, with stress and anxiety or what have you. So I think when you're doing something creative, it's great. (Group O)

Social wellbeing

'Connect' appears as one of the components of the 'Five Ways' model, while social wellbeing is integral to the Engel (1977) model. Paradoxically, perhaps, at a time when socialising was forbidden under lockdown rules, a number of those in the focus groups reported on ways they had managed to connect with others through replacement 'approach' activities. This appeared particularly valuable for the u3a members who lived on their own and where technology enabled existing individuals and groups to maintain connectivity:

I do belong to the choir, the u3a choir and sing but I just love it really for the social side of it. (Group A)

Those words now are made into stories which we tell each other so it evolved into something really, really good and I got to know these people in a way that I never would have known any other way because we meet every week instead of every fortnight, because nobody's got anything else to do so this group has actually created a whole interest - social contact because I live on my own and my family don't live very near. (Group G)

doing stuff like this [singing] on zoom has given me the opportunity to at least see other people. Because I mean, I live on my own... but to have conversations with other people has been really, really important. (Group N)

In addition, new and creative ways of bringing people together appeared to lead to a new community cohesion:

I've got two parterres or pottinger gardens, where I grow vegetables and it's been it's brought the neighbourhood together. (Group O)

When I'm on my zoom class dancing ... you can see little other people, including ourselves, and we're all moving ... But you know, you just feel part of the community. (Group B&H)

Cognitive wellbeing

Cognitive wellbeing can be said to represent the 'self-development' subscale of Fancourt et al's (2019) work and was a topic of discussion for most focus groups. For some, the maintenance of learning, despite the conditions imposed by lockdown was important, often finding a replacement means of doing this, such as via technology:

I'd have done lots of art and art history courses through the WEA. So I like to think that I have learned a lot. So I try to really just keep my brain going. (Group A)

We went all over the world [on You Tube] we did pirates, you know, all different things and I learned a lot too. (Group O)

I decided to revert to trying to play the piano again and then been trying to accompany myself with simple pieces and I've managed. It's not very good but it's better than nothing and so I'm really pleased with myself that I've managed to do a bit of sight reading and learning of new pieces (Group B&H)

For others, lockdown appeared to provide an opportunity to go beyond the continuation of previous practices to areas of potential cognitive development through starting new activities and for one participant even making up for not having gone to university when younger:

I love English literature and reading, but particularly English literature and always regretted that I never went to university to study English literature. So actually I've been involved in u3a, quite a lot of their, well a couple, two or three of their literature courses. And I joined the Dickens reading group, and that, again .. what was brilliant about it is that you get to study it, you get to read it, you get to hear what great lecturers, think about it, what you yourself, think about it, but you don't have to do any homework or write an essay or anything. So that's really got me, you know, way back into English literature (Group F)

that moved my classical music information on a lot further because when I joined that orchestra, I had no idea really about that sort of music and so it's moved me on a lot. (Group G)

I think it's, how can I put it, it's a certain amount of concentration from going back to learning to play piano, which, if I hadn't gone back to playing piano, I would have been frustrated because of inactivity, because I've always done things. (Group K)

I participated in the (u3a) course run by R on psychology, which is stretching the mind a bit occasionally. (Group M)

Summary of findings

The use of two data collection methods in the research provided complementary means to answering the research questions. While the two questionnaires in the survey yielded an overview of the range of arts and creative activities which u3a members took part in, as well as responses to a pre-set list of benefits, the focus group conversations yielded richer, more personalised accounts of how individuals had benefited from particular activities. On the one hand, some 13 different types of activities and 18 specific benefits were identified, while, on the other, 24 categories, reducing to 12 benefits of wellbeing were formulated from transcript analysis. The following discussion section offers a critique of these findings.

Discussion

The research data highlight how members of Canterbury and District u3a used a variety of arts and creative activities to cope with the constraints of the Covid-19 pandemic and promote their wellbeing. As such it goes further than Fancourt et al (2019) in considering a specific demographic and integrating the individual level accounts of particular benefits from specific activities within this group.

Looking at the popularity of different art forms in the survey, reading literature or poetry and listening to music proved the most popular, with both of these also being mentioned in the focus groups. This is in keeping with previous literature relating to different demographic groups. A similar study of university staff (Skingley et al, 2022) found the same two activities to be the most popular among respondents, though in reverse order. Rizzolo et al (2009), in a (pre-Covid) study reported that reading for 30 minutes decreased acute stress in students, while Mak et al (2020), based on a large, heterogeneous sample, suggested that reading was used during Covid for self-development purposes.

Regarding music, it is of note that active music engagement (singing, playing an instrument) appeared more common than passive listening in discussions, in contrast to the survey findings. Much debate has surrounded the relative benefits of participatory/active versus passive/receptive engagement in music, with more evidence supporting the former seemingly due to the more recent move in arts agendas to co-production and an aim for the activity to appear less elitist in public perceptions (Rutten, 2018). However, Theorell et al (2019), in a pre-Covid study, found that listening to classical music acted as a distraction from worries. This, along with the difficulties of engaging in group musical activities, could account for the need expressed for this in the current survey and applied to the greater number of respondents to the survey than took part in focus groups.

Comparing activities with time spent on these prior to lockdown showed that the 27% who increased their time was comparable to the percentage found in Mak et al's large heterogeneous (2020) sample, but, interestingly, far less than the survey of a working age sample. On the other hand, there were fewer who decreased their time spent involved in these activities, suggesting

perhaps either a more stable situation existed for this age group, or that they were more able to continue activities in a creative way by adaptation, for example relocating activities to technology-based methods. A third possible explanation is that most participants in this study were semi or fully retired, perhaps resulting in more time to spend on chosen activities than those of working age.

Turning to the benefits of engaging in the arts, the survey indicated that 'avoid' strategies predominated. In other words, respondents felt that their activities enabled them to disengage from the Covid reality and become less anxious. Again this is supported in similar research (Skingley et al 2022). Given the opportunity, however, to enlarge on reasons for taking up their activities in the focus group discussions, participants were clearly adopting both avoid and approach strategies. Of note, is the relatively large number of focus group members who referred to learning/keeping the brain active, corresponding to Fancourt et al's 'self-development' strategy. This may be explained by the fact that all respondents were members of a u3a, whose values are underpinned by a social learning model, emphasising the interplay of the cognitive and social dimensions of wellbeing (u3a, 2018) apparent in the data. Indeed, several interviewees referred to relevant courses which the local u3a had continued to run online during the lockdown.

A number of issues arise from the findings of this study. In particular it is important to note the context against which they are set, since much existing research on the value of arts and creative activities is based at times pre-dating the Covid pandemic. It may seem paradoxical, then, at a time when socialising was off limits, and there existed shortages of certain items in shops, that the wellbeing dimensions of 'connect' and 'give' (NEF, 2011) were displayed in our data. However, both of these are, arguably, basic characteristics of human nature which are not new, even given challenging times. Hansen et al (2021), in discussing the proliferation of what the authors term 'coronamusic' (recordings made during lockdown of socially-based rituals, such as the 'balcony musicians') traced a history of this type of activity back to a plague in Milan in the 16th century. Similarly, there is a considerable corpus of literature around giving and generosity as forms of prosocial behaviour, which psychologists have been researching since the 1960s (Collett & Morrisey, 2007). It could also be argued that it is manifested in actions well predating that time, for example in a previous well documented pandemic, when the small, and now well known, village of Eyam put itself in quarantine to prevent the spread of the plague in seventeenth century Derbyshire.

Mention should be made of the apparent contradictions between the findings of the survey and focus groups, especially in terms of the approach vs. avoid strategies. Rather than a limitation, though, this should be regarded as a strength in that a qualitative component can be used as an explanatory element in mixed-methods research. For example, the contributor from group A who commented that *I've not felt depressed the whole time at all* (= avoiding depression) since taking up painting, prefaced this with a statement about deciding to be more creative (= approach: a positive step).

Of course the avoid/approach strategies as conceptual artefacts are not amenable to great scrutiny and, particularly in the analysis of focus group data, were somewhat intuitively applied. Nevertheless, the findings are supported by Porges' (2022) polyvagal theory. Porges' thesis is that humans feel a need for safety and the drive to achieve this involves underlying neurophysiological mechanisms where the role of the autonomic nervous system (ANS, of which the vagus nerve serves

a key role) influences mental and physical health, as well as social relations and cognitive processes (which constitute the dimensions of the framework used in our analysis). When a threat to safety is perceived (such as the coronavirus), the ANS can detect this and assist the body to adapt from a shutdown ('avoid') state to one where the individual feels safe and can engage in ('approach') positive activities, as illustrated in the example above.

Methodologically, the two wellbeing frameworks were felt to be a good fit when combined to subsume the categories identified by the participants. The frameworks demonstrate well how the largest group of benefits fell within the psychological area. This is not surprising, given one of the premises of this research, outlined at the start, was the doubling of the incidence of depression following the introduction of the pandemic lockdown (ONS, 2021). But the frameworks also provided scope to tease out other dimensions of wellbeing which are not often the focus of existing research in this area.

The study has limitations. It relied in both phases (survey and focus group discussions) on self-report on the part of participants, though it can be contra-argued that this is the most appropriate way of collecting data on this topic area since wellbeing, by its very nature, is about how a person feels, rather than it being objectively quantified. The sample was self-selecting from a small demographic (u3a members) and likely represents those individuals who had purposefully engaged in the arts and, for those in the discussion groups, felt strongly that this had affected their wellbeing. But the research does not claim that any art or creative activity is necessarily going to appeal to everyone, rather it provides a snapshot of the range of potential benefits that might exist. Another issue, particularly in qualitative research, is the degree of inference that is made in the analytic process. It is hoped that by detailed description of how the authors moved in stages from data to findings, this provides some assurance of rigour. Finally, the findings are not intended to be generalisable, since the sample was not representative. However it is suggested that instead, generalising to context may be a possibility, that is, the findings might be considered as relevant to other contexts where individuals and communities are experiencing challenging times. For example, in addition to the historical plague contexts referred to above, it should also be noted that at such times there were also examples of the arts flourishing; Boccaccio's Decameron which related stories from the 14th century, was a product of the Black Death, while the Dance of Death (or Danse Macabre) was a symbolic trope frequently occurring in European art work also at the time of the Black Death. Looked at in this way, engagement in the arts and creative activities during the Covid pandemic might be considered as maintaining a human and historical tradition.

Conclusion and implications

This research sought to explore how members of Canterbury and District u3a engaged with arts and creative activities during the lockdown resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic and how they experienced any related benefits. Findings support much existing research in suggesting that a wide variety of arts-related interests were pursued at this time, with a range of attendant benefits for wellbeing. The research adds to existing knowledge in focusing on a particular demographic (u3a members who are retired or semi-retired), indicating that the findings may be similar across different age groups. Further, hearing the voices of individuals adds an explanatory dimension to the findings in terms of identifying some of the mechanisms at work in this 'arts and wellbeing' area.

Given these conclusions, there are potential implications for individuals, arts and health practitioners and the u3a. For individuals, it is suggested that engaging in arts and related activities which are enjoyable can lead to mental, social and cognitive wellbeing, even in times which may be challenging. For arts, health and social care practitioners it is therefore important to identify individual client preferences and aims (for example from the list within this research) when 'prescribing' non-medical solutions and to signpost to providers where relevant. u3as may like to consider using such evidence to promote relevant courses in future.

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Appendix: Initial categories identified in transcripts

Provides a focus and goal
Doing something for myself/sense of achievement
Having permission to do something
Disengaging from the everyday
Social connection
Learning
Filling time/preventing depression
Keeping brain active
Enjoyment
A counter to sadness
Something to look forward to
Absorbing/concentrating/fulfilling
Picking up a previous hobby/picking up a new one
Exercise
Generosity and providing enjoyment for others
Promoting harmony with nature
Therapeutic/relaxing
Relief of stress
Sustaining
Taking me out of my comfort zone
Health benefits
Independence
More time/slower pace of life

Canterbury and District u3a Health Research Group, July 2023