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The role of the arts during a global pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This Research Paper describes the correlation between the arts and the Covid-19 lockdown. It explores the psychological implications of the lockdown and the role of the arts as a coping mechanism.

Keywords: Coping Mechanism, Art, Psychology, Covid-19 And Art, Art And Its Healing Power

1. ARTIST FOREWORD

The very act of creating is healing and therapeutic. Most 'creators' will agree that they have an innate need to make. And in that sense, it is true for a painter making a painting or a composer creating a musical composition. The process provides an outlet for creative energies, and at the same time, a sense of empowerment to give birth to something non-existent. This feeling of accomplishment gets accentuated in visual art practices. While using colour on a surface, the dependencies of perfect skillset or to follow any prescribed standard can easily be kept at bay. While history proves that some of the best and iconic works of art originated at the time of crises, it is also medically proven that engagement with creative process is of immense value in support of mental health remedies. This research lays the foundation and hypothesis towards this theory, which gets affirmed through a statistical survey of urban peers dealing with highly uncertain and stressful times during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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2. INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus Disease- 2019, more commonly known as COVID-19, is an infectious disease that has brought the world to its knees. Declared a global pandemic, by the World Health Organisation, on the 11th of March 2020, the virus was first detected in Wuhan city China in late December 2019(WHO). Since it's outbreak, the highly contagious virus has killed approximately 590,000 people, and has infected around 13 million people worldwide(WHO).

Art has always been of personal significance to me, and I have taken it up in many different ways throughout my school life. I was exposed to the art world at a very young age and it was something that I always found solace and serenity in. During the lockdown period caused by the Covid-19, I found myself turning to different art forms more than ever before. It helped alleviate my stress in a great way. I was curious to know whether this was a personal experience, or whether different people felt the same about art and it's healing powers. All of this collectively brought me to my research question- How far has art helped us cope with the ongoing chaos of the Coronavirus pandemic? I used a variety of secondary sources to understand and infer from the historical significance of art in pandemics, as well as primary sources to assess the current scenario through the eyes of an assortment of people.

3. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

While COVID-19 is the first pandemic our generation has been exposed to, it is important to note that the novel coronavirus is not the first pandemic the world has faced. Throughout the course of history, pandemics have had a great influence in shaping human society. From the Justinian Plague of the sixth century, the Black Death of the 14th century, to the Spanish Flu of the last century- pandemics have prompted the collapses of empires, they have weakened powers, and have also played their part in bringing down wars ("Analysis| How Pandemics Have Changed The World"). Most significantly, pandemics have always taken a heavy toll on the mental state of those who live through it. This is something we, more often than not, remain oblivious to. Being confined to the 4 walls of your house is suffocating and monotonous. To contextualise this, upon extensive research, historical demographer Sverre Erik Mamelun, PhD found that the Spanish Flu survivors reported sleep disturbances, depression, mental distraction, dizziness, and difficulties coping at work ("The Spanish Flu Pandemic And Mental Health: A Historical Perspective"). Taking

from this research, it is probable that the 2020 pandemic would draw similar conclusions with regard to mental health. It is in times like these when finding a coping mechanism is of paramount importance. Each person deals with situations differently, however according to a survey I conducted, it has been seen that 88.3% of people have turned to art of different kinds-ranging from visual art, to photography, and music.

Art is a universal phenomenon and every culture has its own kind, moulded by its own history. Art has always had its fixed place in society, however the role of art now has been highlighted more than ever before. Interestingly, the role of art during a pandemic is not specific to the 21st century or to covid-19. In fact, it has been used as a coping mechanism for decades now. The concept of lockdowns and self-isolation was first discovered and implemented as early as in the 14th century, during the outbreak of the Bubonic Plague (also known as the Black Plague) of 1665 in Europe. With countries like England and France combatting the rise of the plague, European art flourished in the age of disease. The crux of art periods became the ongoing chaos caused by the Bubonic Plague itself- this is seen in Renaissance art through pictures depicted by renowned artists such as Michelangelo and Rembrandt. Moreover, great pieces of literature as well as several theatrical performances emerged as a result of the plague, with works like Shakespeare’s ‘King Lear’, which is studied even today (<https://www.artfervour.com/post/a-historical-look-at-lockdowns-and-the-visual-arts>)

4. HYPOTHESIS

The research paper will look into the belief that art was used as a coping mechanism by different people during the lockdown in the Covid-19 pandemic.

5. METHOD USED FOR DATA COLLECTION

In order to validate this hypothesis, a survey consisting of 13 questions about the role art plays in daily life as well as its importance during Covid-19 was carried out. The questions covered several points such as which types of art people have engaged in, whether art has always been a regular feature in their life and whether they think art has helped them cope with the current climate. The survey was sent out to a range of people from different countries, age groups, as well as professions. After collecting over 250 responses, the results were tabulated as seen below.

6. ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

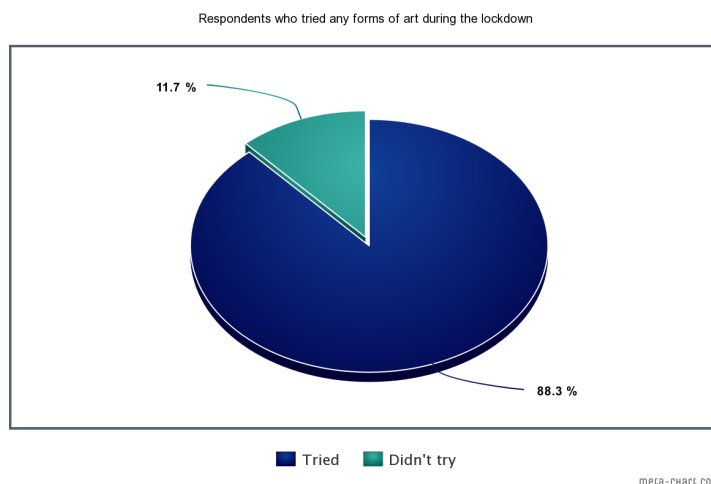


Fig. 1: Respondents who tried their hand at art during the lockdown

According to the data collected, 88.3% of the respondents have tried different forms of art during the lockdown. This immediately tells us that art was a common activity that people engaged in. These results show that people greatly enjoyed exploring a creative side of their personality through mediums that call for out of the box thinking. In addition to this, it can be seen that the results were similar for people across different geographies, professions, and ages showing that there is not a specific demographic that is more likely to turn to art.

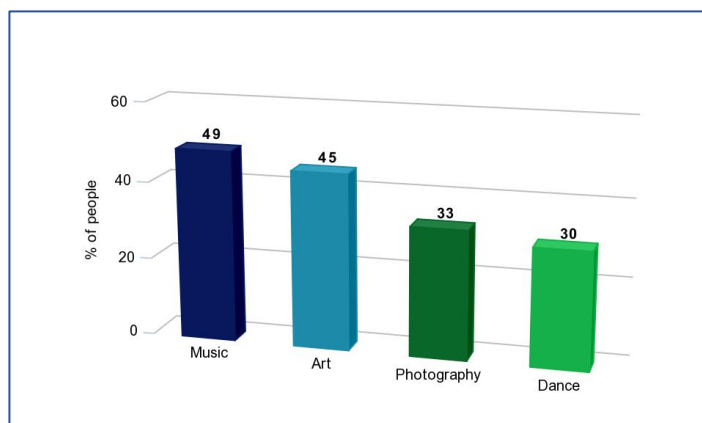


Fig. 2: Most frequently selected art forms

Delving deeper into the specific forms of art people tried, the four answers that were selected the most were- visual art, music, dance, and photography. This has been analysed to understand why these were the forms of art that were the most commonly selected. Firstly, art and photography are forms through which one can capture one's surroundings, thoughts, and feelings. Amongst the many possible reasons for the popularity of these art forms, few important factors include the fact that these forms allow people to capture and record these uncertain times. They also allow people to document their experiences and convey their emotions. Secondly, dance and music are forms that allow one to express their individual emotions. Art is, after all, a form of expression that everyone takes forward in their own unique ways, it is something that belongs to the creator alone, and nobody can take that originality away from them. Having a creative outlet like art is of paramount important in trying times like these, as it allows people to depict a situation in their own way without any boundaries or limitations.

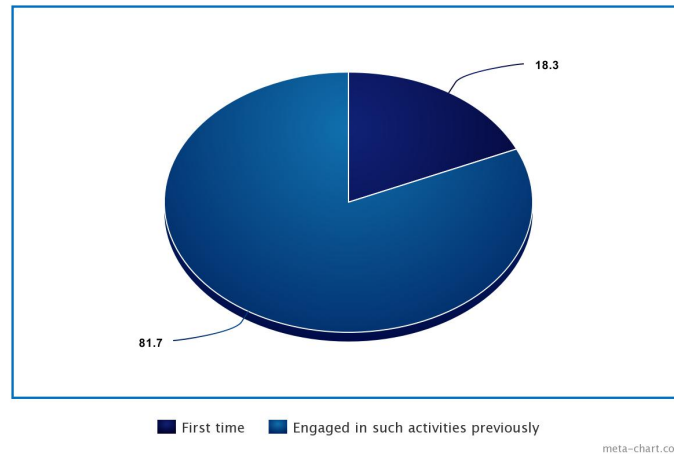


Fig. 3: History with art forms

When asked about their history with the aforementioned art forms, 78.1% of the respondents revealed that they were unable to pursue their respective art forms earlier, due to the lack of time. Art was also found to be a newly developed interest for 21.9% of respondents. With the rigidity of daily life, it is easy to forget to make time for things that help us let go of ourselves. This only results in a never-ending cycle of monotony.

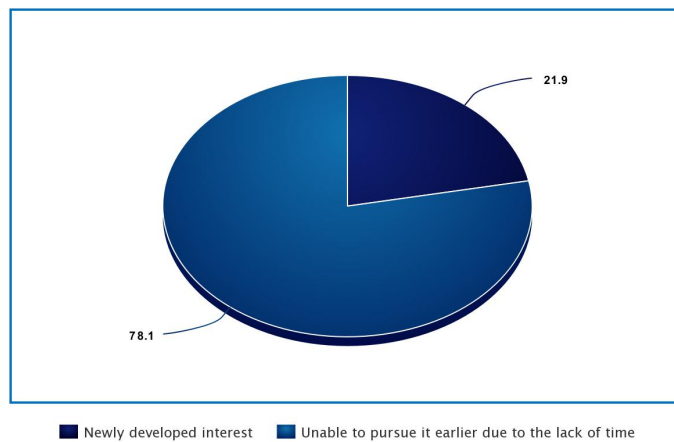


Fig. 4: Respondents experience with art forms

Before the lockdown period, art wasn't a part of 50.3% of respondents' daily lives, however this time proved to be the discovery of a new hobby for many. When asked whether people see themselves continuing with this hobby and further honing these skills in the future, 83.8% responded with a yes, which shows that people do wish to take these skills forward even once a normal life schedule is resumed.

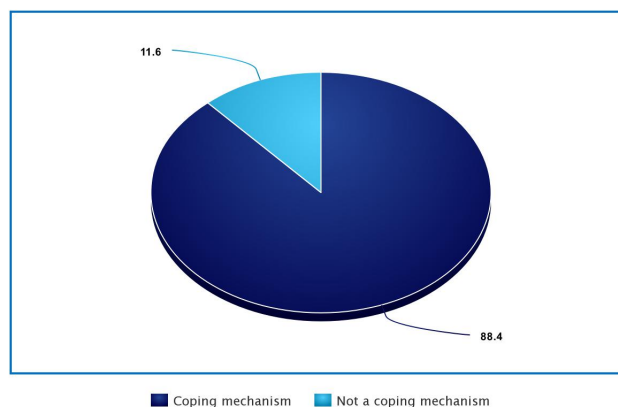


Fig. 5: Respondents who classified art as coping mechanism

After covering the basic information came the most significant question, “Generally do the various forms of art put you at ease and help you unwind”. A total of 97.1% respondents answered yes, which highlights and reiterates the importance of art not just as a creative outlet, but also as a coping mechanism. To further understand this, the next question dealt with whether art helped people deal with the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic specifically. When asked if respondents would suggest art as a coping mechanism to other peers and colleagues, 92.9% answered yes.

7. CONCLUSION

To conclude, the results above support the claim that different people used art as a coping mechanism, during the lockdown in the Covid-19 pandemic. The different forms of art have, yet again, encouraged and enabled many to stay creatively stimulated. The reaction to the arts in this crisis has been extremely positive, and while this pandemic has triggered a global standstill, the world of arts has continued to flourish and heal. As we habituate to this “new normal” perhaps art will lead the way and change the course of events in the near future.

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