Performing Arts and the Pandemic - A Study on the Consumption Behavior and Attitudes of Hong Kong Performing Arts Audiences During COVID-19

Abstract

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been felt globally, affecting people from all walks of life in personal, social and commercial contexts. The performing arts sector is not exempt from the devastation caused by the pandemic; theatres and concert halls were closed, bringing all forms of arts performances to an abrupt end. This study focuses on the situation in Hong Kong and aims to examine possible changes in audience behavior and attitudes, in particular in respect of onsite and online programs during the period from August 2020 to January 2021. A mixed method approach was used for data collection, including a quantitative questionnaire survey and qualitative focus group interviews. The findings provide clear evidence of changes in behavior and attitudes among audiences since the outbreak of the pandemic. This study should hence provide a useful reference for the future planning of performing arts programs in Hong Kong.

Keywords: Performing Arts, audience behavior and attitudes, post-pandemic era, Hong Kong

Introduction

During 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted almost every aspect of normal life across the globe. All the stakeholders in the performing arts industry, including performing groups, performance venues, artists, public arts institutions, stage workers, and even the audience were strongly affected. In Hong Kong, the closure of performance venues was first implemented in late January. After that, venues were allowed to reopen for a short period, during June to July, with seating capacity restricted to 50% (first re-opening). The third wave of the pandemic forced venues to close again in August (second closure). When the third wave of the pandemic gradually eased, the government relaxed social distancing measures and performance venues were once again allowed to reopen in October with a 50% restriction in seating capacity (second re-opening). As the situation improved, the government allowed venues to open 70% of their seating capacity in late October. All performance venues were closed again in December 2020, during the fourth wave of the pandemic (third closure) (news.gov.hk, 2021).

Given the unpredictable availability of performance venues, countless artistic productions had to be postponed or cancelled. The entire 2020 Hong Kong Arts Festival in February /March was cancelled with two weeks' notice. All live performances of the New Vision Arts Festival 2020, hosted by the Leisure and Cultural Service Department (LCSD) in October & November, were also cancelled. However, the Department created an online platform to showcase collaborations between foreign and local artists (康文署表演場地最少關閉至八月底新視野藝術節取消, 2020). The cancellation of performances and restrictions on seating capacity significantly diminished the incomes of most arts practitioners.

Local arts organizations, in particular established ones, gradually started to curate online programs to sustain their audiences and brands. Hong Kong Ballet was amongst the first to launch a free online channel offering performance highlights, workshops, talks, and fun videos such as dancers cooking. Some groups like the Hong Kong Repertory Theatre attempted to live-stream special productions. Anthony Chan, Artistic Director of Hong Kong Repertory Theatre, pointed out that the potential of the online audience was high; audience numbers attending a paid online performance were four times that of onsite performances, including people from overseas (戲劇移師網上舞台 觀眾倍升潛力大, 2020). At the same time, some were very enthusiastic about attending onsite performances despite the pandemic. When a production by Windmill Grass Theatre could not complete its original run and the company decided to schedule an additional performance on the final day before the venue's closure, demand for tickets was overwhelming, with many people queueing up to buy tickets.

It is notable that Government and public funding bodies in Hong Kong actively encouraged the production of digital programs during the pandemic. The Leisure and Cultural Services Department launched the "Click for Arts" online performing arts channel and commissioned local groups to produce programs. The Hong Kong Arts Development Council also created an "Arts Go Digital" funding scheme to support medium and small arts groups to produce online programs. A large volume of online programs produced by local artists and art groups is now available.

When this study was planned in early summer of 2020, the researchers could not have predicted the length of the pandemic or that performance venues in Hong Kong would be closed down and re-opened so many times. We observed that live performances becoming either impossible or unpredictable, alongside a rising number of online programs, might have an impact on consumption behavior and attitudes. We therefore embarked on this study with the following research questions:

- How has the pandemic changed consumption behavior (from before to during the pandemic)?
- What are the latest attitudes of consumers towards online and on-site programmes (including possible changes during this period) which might influence their current behavior and future consumption (likely behavior)?

Research Design

Changes in performing arts audiences have been a common topic of study during the pandemic; some scholars highlight the importance of collecting specific data to obtain a comprehensive view of changes in behavior and attitudes, suggesting that this will influence the sector's recovery. The information required would include consumers' cultural practice data, consumers' and digital cultural experience, engagement with and loyalty to the arts and culture, and consumers' wellbeing (Radermecker, 2021; Rurale et al., 2020).

Radermecker (2021), highlights the consumer-oriented approach, suggesting researchers should not neglect the performing arts sector's public, and should be wary of lending too much weight to the views of artists or arts organizations. Researchers should therefore understand the extent to which, and under what circumstances, people would be willing to consume arts and culture in the near future. This highlights the crucial importance of cultural operators providing appropriate responses to these changing attitudes and behaviors.

The above studies show that examining changes in audience behavior and attitudes is vital to seeking solutions that will aid the recovery of the arts and culture, and that one of the most significant solutions is digital transformation. This research will therefore examine both changes in audience behavior and attitudes and how online programs affect consumption by local audiences.

A mixed methods approach was used, applying both quantitative and qualitative methods to data collection. The rationale for a mixed method approach is that, while large data sets are essential to verifying possible changes in audience behavior and attitudes, in-depth and meaningful insights from an audience sample is also important in revealing the reasons behind any changes.

Quantitative Method

In designing the online questionnaire, we referred to the COVID-19 Audience Outlook Monitor: Australia Snapshot Report: May 2020 (Australia Council for the Arts, 2020). Questions and answers were drafted according to Hong Kong's special context, in order to collect useful data from local performing arts audiences. The questionnaire consisted of four sections: (1) demographic information, (2) participation in the arts before COVID-19, (3) online participation in the performing arts during the pandemic period, and (4) participation in the arts after the re-opening of performance venues. The text of the questionnaire was fine-tuned following a pilot test.

We enlisted the support of the two biggest performing arts presenters in Hong Kong to distribute our online questionnaire: the Leisure and Cultural Services Department and the West Kowloon Cultural District. They included an introduction to our survey and provided a link through their Facebook posts and e-newsletters. The questionnaire was distributed online for four weeks from November to December 2020, targeting performing arts audiences in Hong Kong aged

16 or above.

At the time our questionnaires were distributed, performance venues in Hong Kong had been re-opened (from late October 2020) following two periods of closure that year (January to June and August to October). Respondents should therefore have been aware at this point that the availability of on-site performances had become unpredictable. Altogether we received 406 responses, which we consider a reliable sample size.

Qualitative Method

Following completion of the questionnaire, we invited survey participants to volunteer for focus group interviews. This proved to be a considerable challenge as the pandemic worsened and face-to-face meetings were prohibited. The focus group interview was initially proposed as a face-to-face format, and we found that few of those who had signed up were willing to join a Zoom format instead. A possible explanation for this hesitancy is that in Hong Kong many people have insufficient space at home for online meetings; this inconvenience leads to a reluctance to turn on the camera during interviews and a preference for face-to-face meetings.

After much persuasion, six interviewees participated in our first focus group - an online interview in December 2020; a second-round focus group was conducted in January 2021, when a further six interviewees participated in a face-to-face interview. The 12 participants consisted of four females and eight males, aged from 20 to 40. They were all active performing arts attendees and the art forms they attended included musicals, drama, dance, music, and family entertainment.

Research Findings

We present our findings according to our main research questions:

1. Background of respondents (Figure 1-7)
2. Changes in consumption behavior
   2.1 Attendance at on-site programs before the pandemic (Figure 8, 9)
   2.2 Watching online programs (pre- & during the pandemic) (Figure10-15)
   2.3 Comparison between online and onsite participation for different art forms (Figure 11, 16, Table1)
3. Attitudes which influence consumption
   3.1 Views about online programs (Figure 17, 18), and focus group comments
   3.2 Preferences for local or overseas artists (Figure 19), and focus group comments
   3.3 Intentions about future consumption of online programs after reopening (Figure 9, 20, 21), and focus group comments
   3.4 Intentions about future attendance of onsite programs after reopening (Figure 22), and focus group comments
4. Focus group suggestions

Background of Respondents

95% of the respondents resided in Hong Kong, 1.4% resided in mainland Chinese cities including Shenzhen, Guangzhou, and Shanghai, and 1.5% lived in other regions namely Taiwan, Japan, Canada, and the United Kingdom (Figure 1).

Most of the respondents were female (73%) (Figure 2) and rather young; 35% were aged 16-24 and 24% aged 25-34 (Figure 3). Over half were single (56%) (Figure 4). 65% of the respondents possessed a college degree whilst 25% had a qualification at master's level or above (Figure 5). Close to half (45%) were full-time workers whilst full-time students accounted for 29% (Figure 6). Nearly half of the respondents claimed that they or their family's income was affected significantly because of the pandemic of COVID-19 (49%) (Figure 7).

Figure 1

Residency of respondents

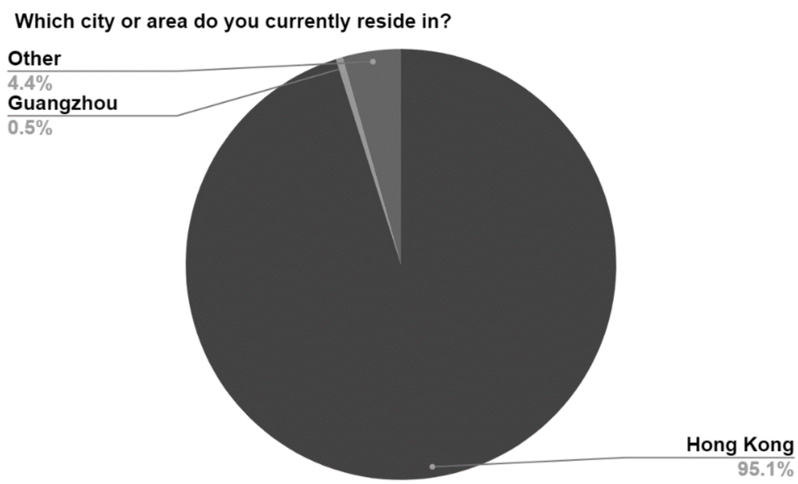


Figure 2

Sex of respondents

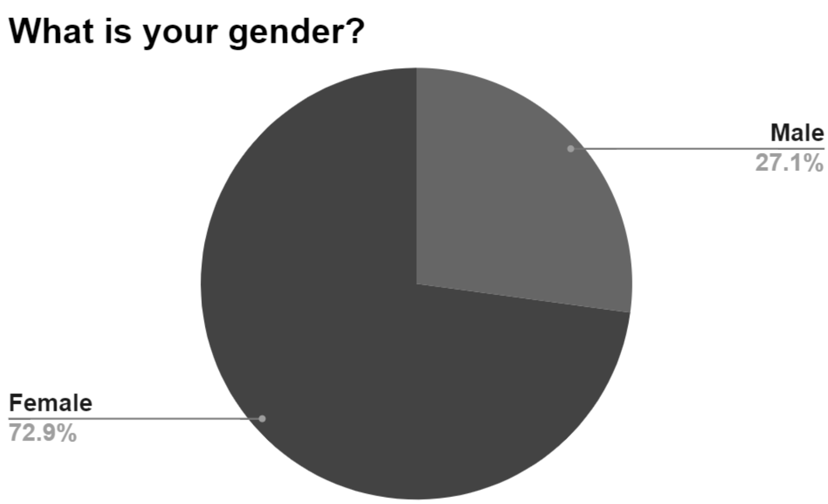


Figure 3

Age group of respondents

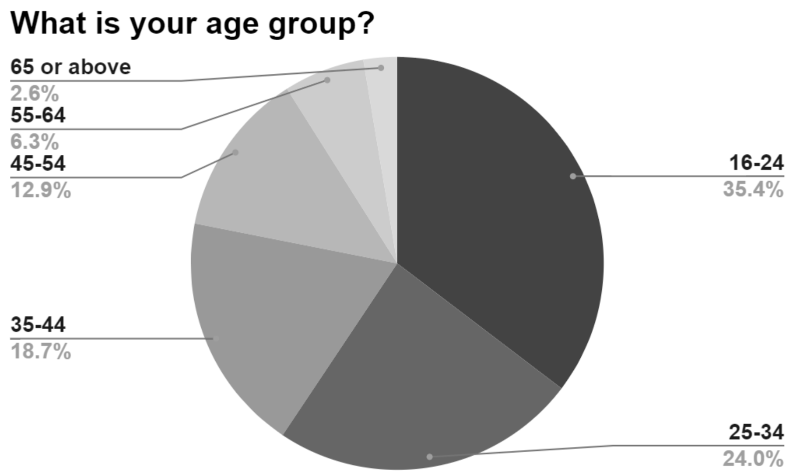


Figure 4

Marital status of respondents

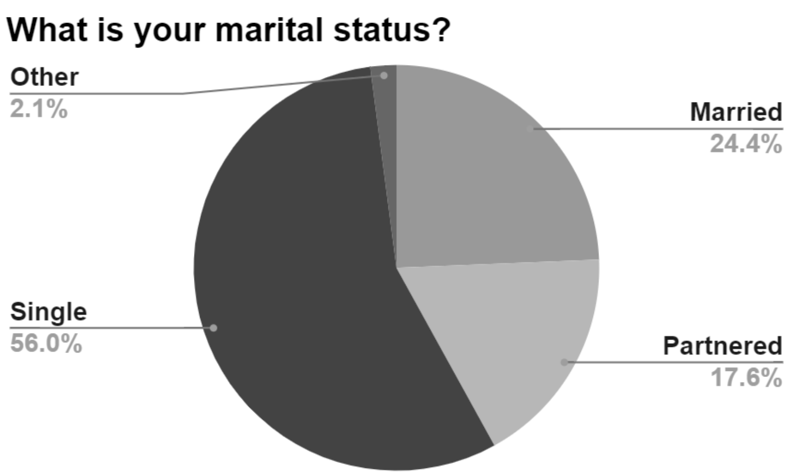


Figure 5

Education level of respondents

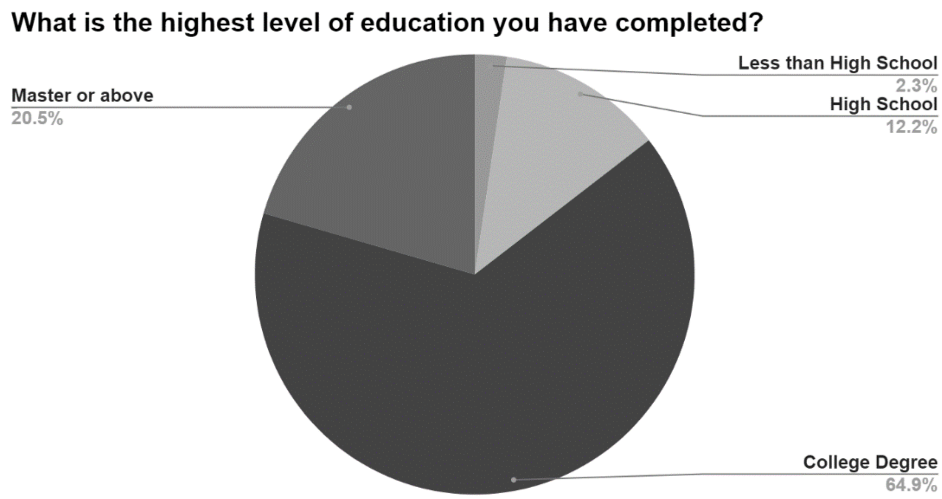


Figure 6

Employment status of respondents

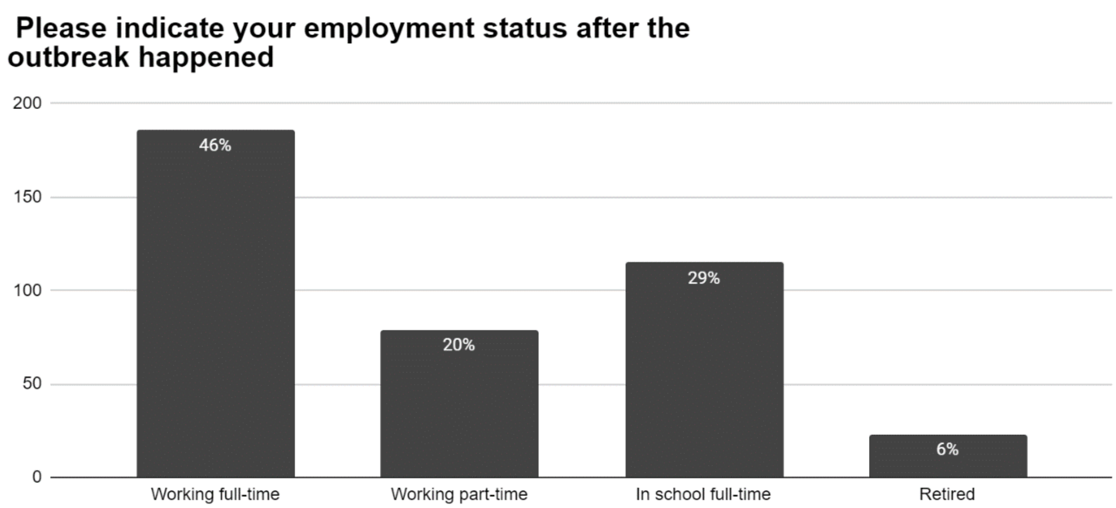
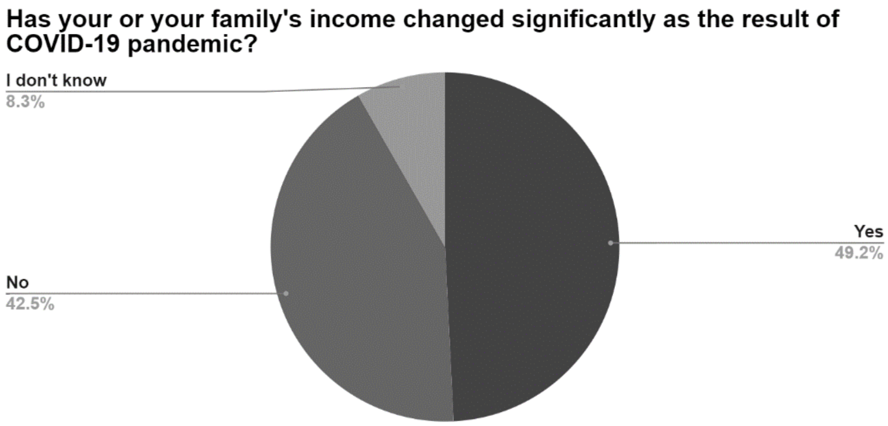


Figure 7

Change in respondents' incomes during the pandemic



Changes in Consumption Behavior

Attendance at On-Site Performances Before the Pandemic

Before the pandemic, the biggest group of respondents *attended 1-2* live performances in 2019 (40%), followed by those attending *3-7 times* (37%). 22% attended *more than 12 times*, while 13% of them *had not attended any* live performances or activities in 2019 (Figure 8).

Before the pandemic, the majority of respondents spent on average either *HK$101-300* (46%) or HK$301-500 (20%) attending each live performance. Meanwhile, a small minority spent on average either below $100 (10%) or *HK$501-700 (6%),* and 10% *did not pay* for live performances (Figure 9).

Figure 8

Respondents' attendance in 2019

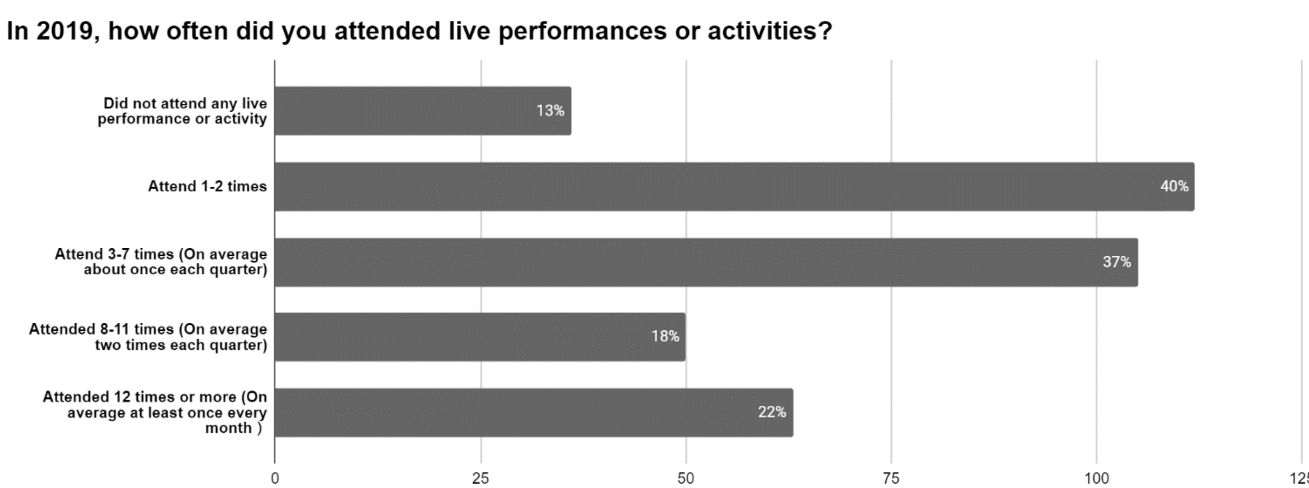
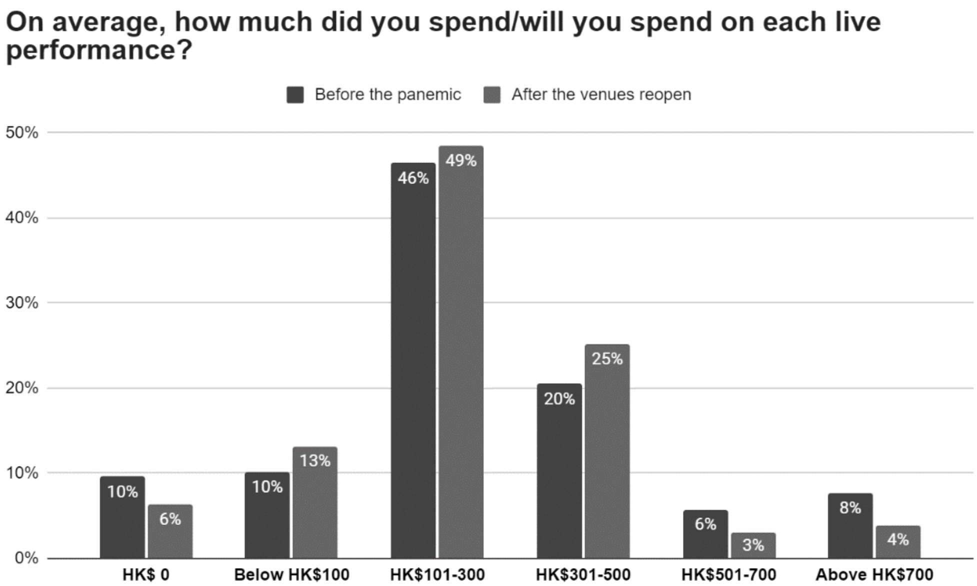


Figure 9

Respondents' expenditure on live performance



Watching Online Programs (pre- & during the pandemic)

With the cancellation of on-site performances, arts institutions around the world have offered numerous online arts programs. We examine the consumption of online programs in terms of frequency of watching, types of programs watched, spending, and the art forms concerned.

Although 85% of respondents watched online performing arts programs before the pandemic, 15% did not (figure 10). During the pandemic, 84% watched online programs (Figure 11); close to half watched online programs *2-4 times in the past six months* (47%), 24% watched once, and 29% watched more than *5 times in the past six months* (Figure 12). Comparing watching frequency for online programs before and during the pandemic, the majority of respondents indicated that they watched either more frequently (35%) or much more frequently (17%), while 25% said they *watched about the same*. Respondents who *watched online programs less or much less frequently* than before the pandemic amounted to 23% (Figure 13).

Figure 10

Respondents' experience of watching online programs before the pandemic

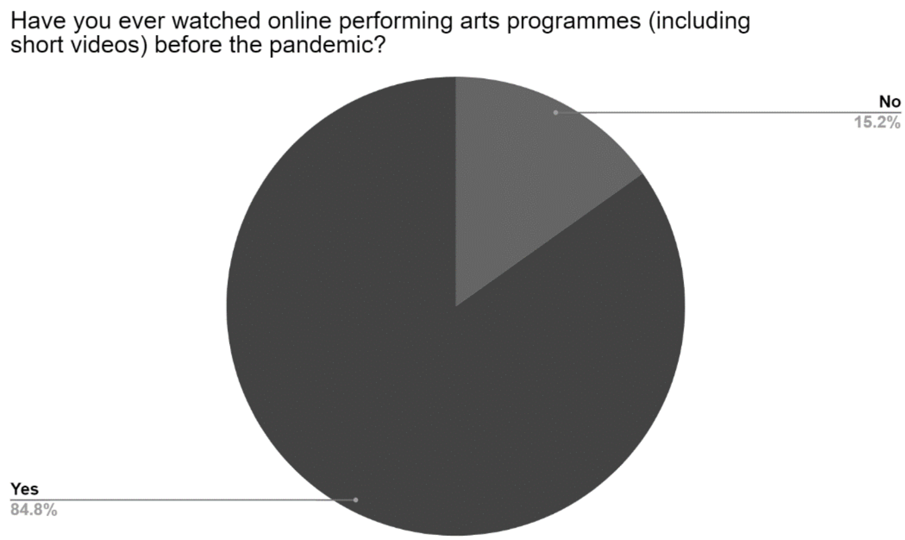


Figure 11

Respondents' experience of watching online programs during the pandemic

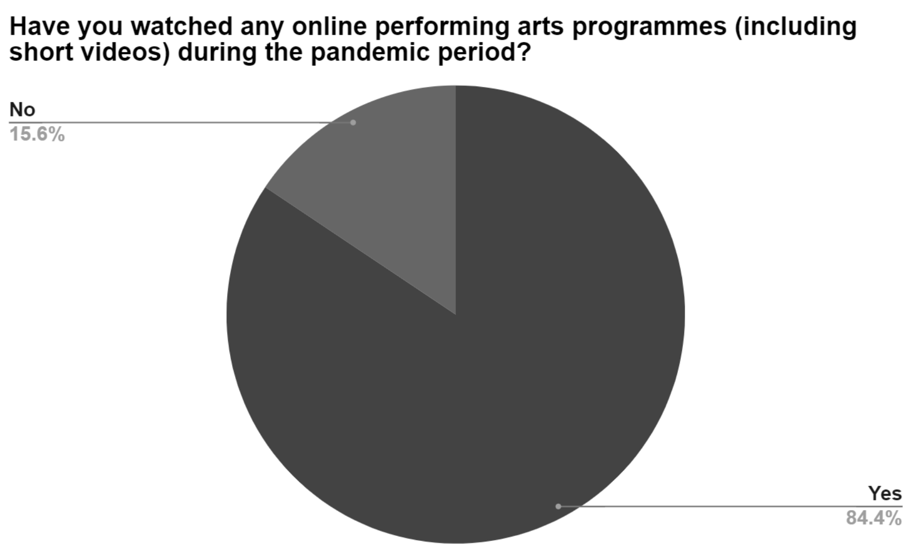


Figure 12

Frequency of watching online programs during the pandemic

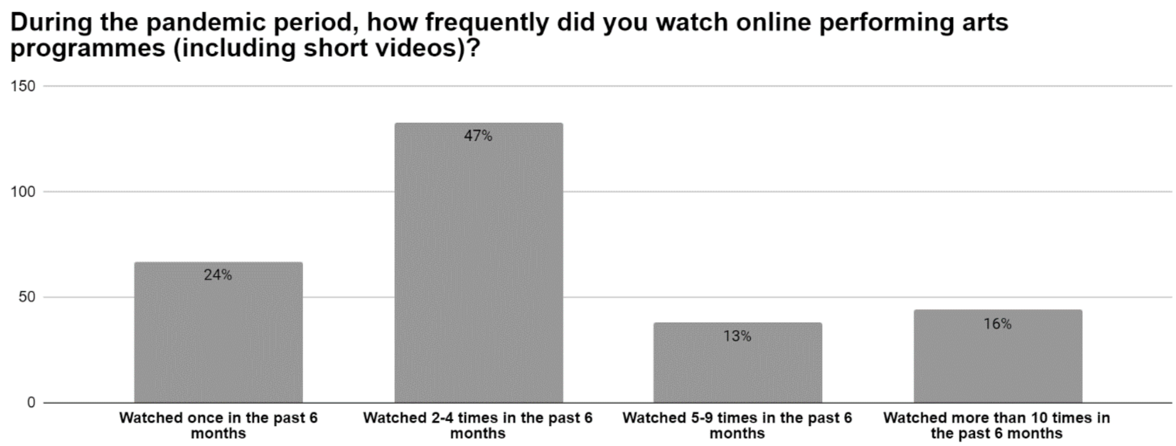
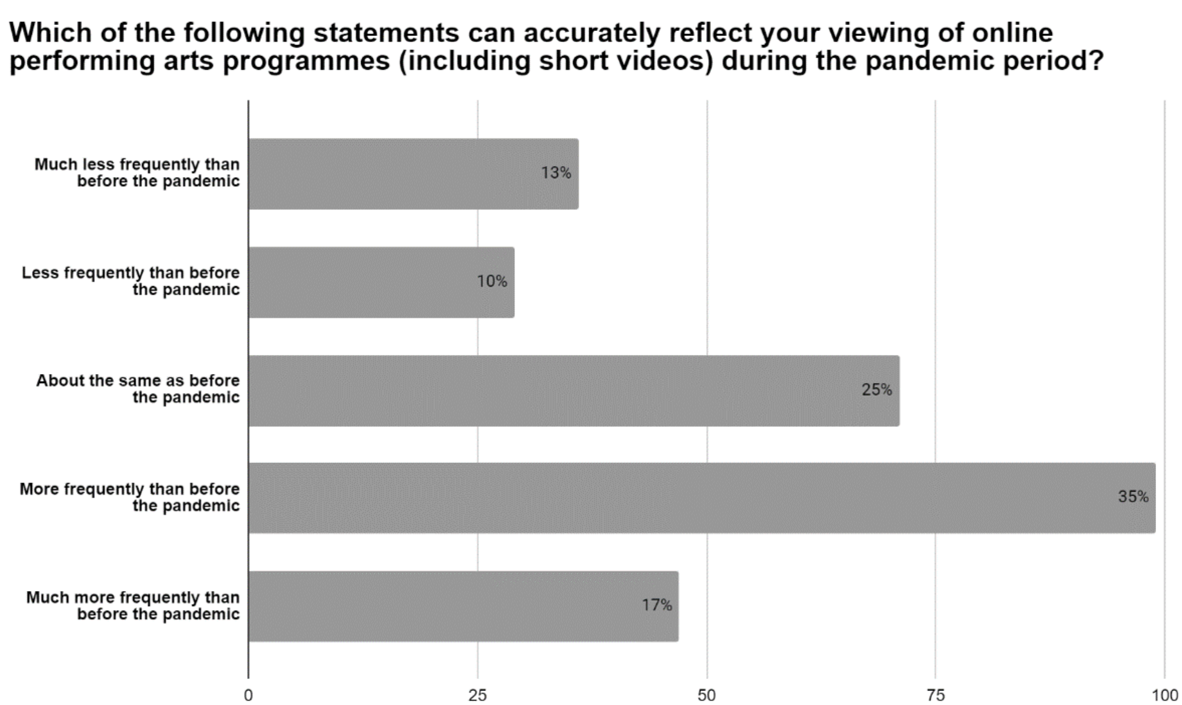


Figure 13

Comparison of watching frequency for online programs before and during the pandemic



Among the different types of online performing arts programs offered during the pandemic, *recorded program (free)* was the most popular (27%), followed by *live stream performance/rehearsal (free)* (22%), and *classes, lectures, forums, or workshops (free)* (13%). The fact that respondents could watch recorded online programs at a time of their choosing (downloadable or on-demand), may explain why they watched recorded more often than livestreamed programs (Figure 14).

Among paid online programs, *live stream performance (paid)* was the best supported with 9%, followed by *recording of online performances (paid) (6%)*, while *art course (paid)* had the lowest percentage (2%) (Figure 14).

As mentioned above, 15% of respondents stated that they *did not watch any online performing arts programs* in 2019 (figure 10), whilst the majority stated that *they only watched free online programs* in 2019 (63%). Among the patrons of online programs, most paid on average *HK$51-100* for each performance (5%), 4% spent on average *more than HK$100* for each performance, and 3% *paid annual fee for subscription* (Figure15).

During the pandemic, the percentage of respondents who *only watched free online programs* decreased to 59%, although this was still over half of respondents. However, the percentage of respondents who were willing to pay had increased for all ticket prices; the most significant increase was seen in *HK$51-100* (from 5% to 13%), with this price range being the most popular. 10% of respondents paid *more than HK$100* for online performances during the pandemic (Figure 15).

Figure 14

Categories of online program watched by respondents during the pandemic

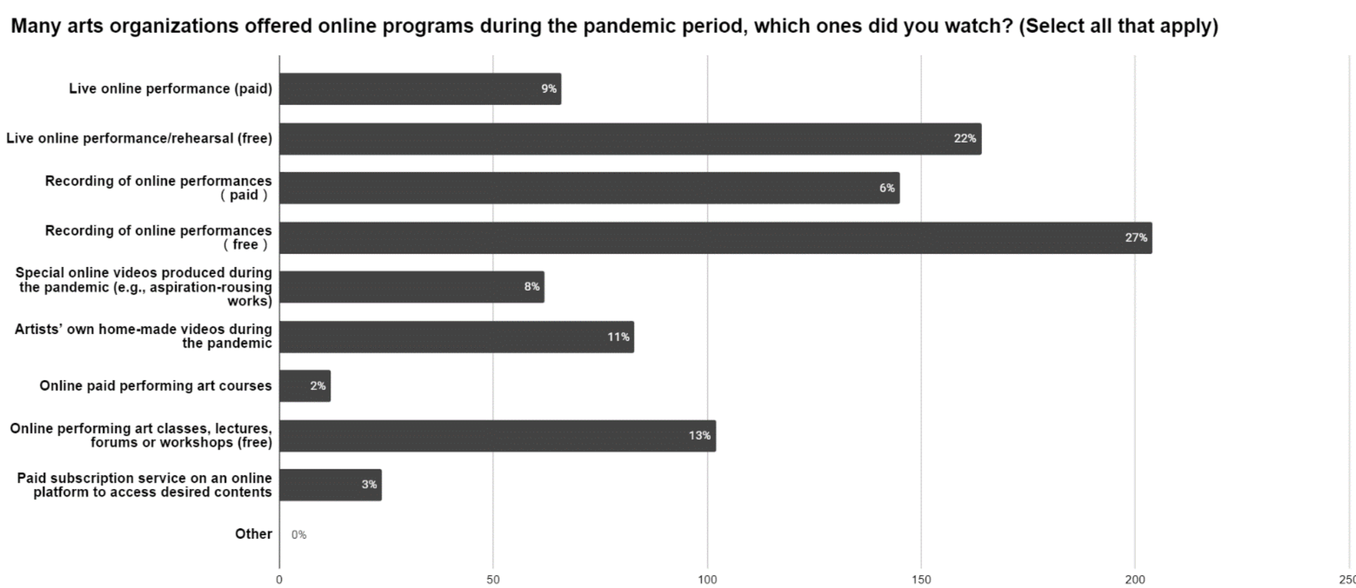
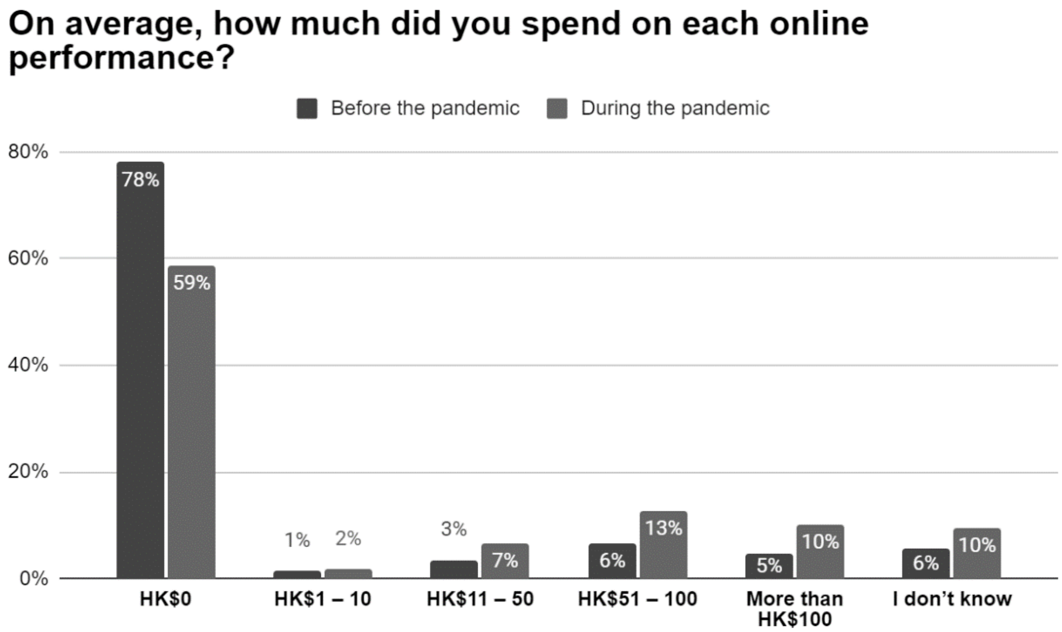


Figure 15

Respondents' expenditure on live performance



Comparison between Online and Onsite Participation for Different Art Forms

For on-site performances before the pandemic, *drama* was the best attended art form (179 responses amongst total of 1099 responses), followed by *performing arts-related lecture, talk, workshops* (144 responses), and *classical music concerts (Western and Chinese music)* (132 responses). *Opera* was the least attended art form with only 38 respondents, while other art forms varied from 51 to 119 responses (Figure 16).

As mentioned previously (Figure 11), 16% of respondents stated they had not watched online programs during the pandemic; the number (and percentage) of respondents who watched online programs in each art form during the pandemic was therefore lower than the number who attended onsite performances in 2019. Online programs of *drama* were the most watched art form (133 responses), followed by *jazz, pop, indie music concerts* (107 responses) and *musicals* (100 responses) (Figure 16).

Table 1 below shows, for each art form, the difference between on-site attendance before the pandemic and online watching during the pandemic. *Children's or family shows* and *xiqu* were the least watched art forms (30 and 32 responses respectively) during the pandemic. The latter might be due to the unfamiliarity of xiqu audiences, comprising many elderly citizens, with online engagement. The gap between on-site attendance and online watching was also biggest for these two art forms. Perceptions relating to the irreplaceable acoustic features of concert halls might have affected online engagement for Western and Chinese classical music concerts (-35%). By contrast, on-site attendance and online watching for opera and musicals were rather similar.

Figure 16

Art forms watched by survey respondents

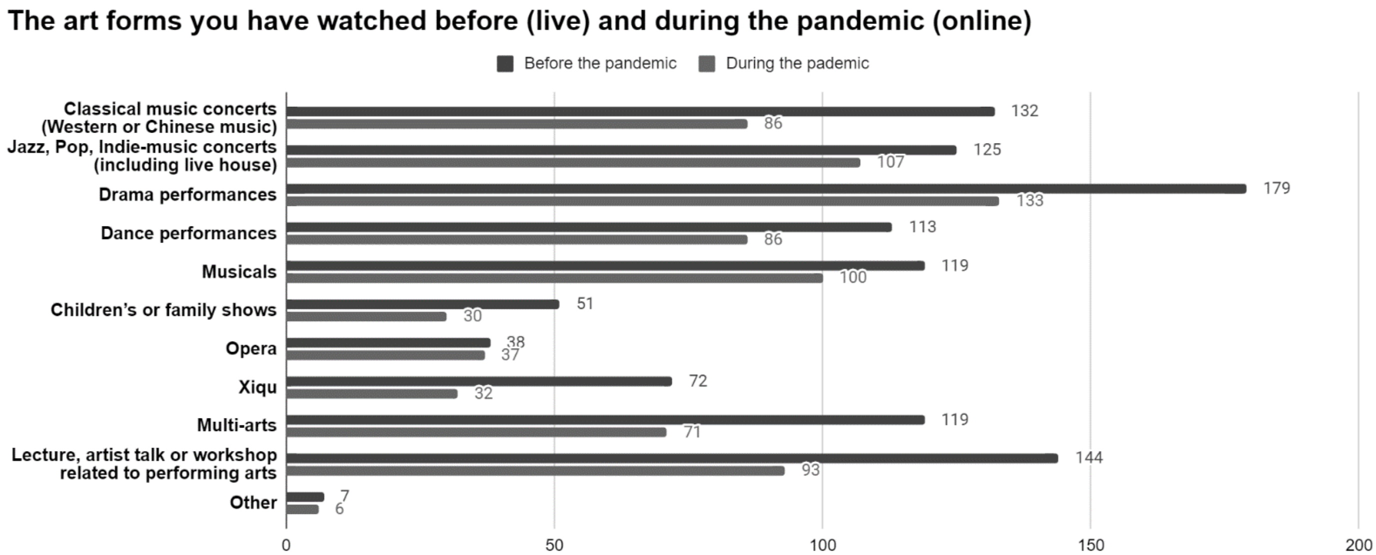


Table 1

Percentage change in art forms watched by respondents

Art Forms	Percentage change
Classical music concert (Western and Chinese music)	-35%
Jazz, Pop, indie music concert	-14%
Drama	-26%
Dance	-24%
Musical	-16%
Children's or family	-41%
Opera	-3%
Xiqu	-56%
Multi-arts	-40%
Performing arts-related lectures, talks, workshops	-35%
Other	-14%

Attitudes Which Influence Consumption

Our behavior is influenced by our attitudes. It is therefore important to understand consumers' attitudes towards onsite performances and online offerings, as well as the factors they consider before committing to these modes of consumption. Our survey and focus group interviews yielded rich findings on these aspects of the research.

Views about Online Programs

Survey respondents shared their reasons for watching or not watching online programs. The top three reasons for watching online programs were: *watching programs that the respondents wanted to watch live* (27%), *watching programs that the respondents normally could not watch* (22%), and *supporting the artists or organization that the respondents thought was important* (17%). Meanwhile, *enhancing one's knowledge of an art form* was the least important reason for respondents watching online programs (7%) (Figure 17).

For those respondents who *did not watch any online programs* during the pandemic (16%), the majority gave the *lack of atmosphere* as their reason for not watching (42%). The other two significant reasons were *lack of appeal in content* (21%), and *lack of time to watch* (20%). Only 7% of respondents did not watch online programs because of *technical problem* (Figure 18).

Figure 17

Respondents' reasons for participating in online programs

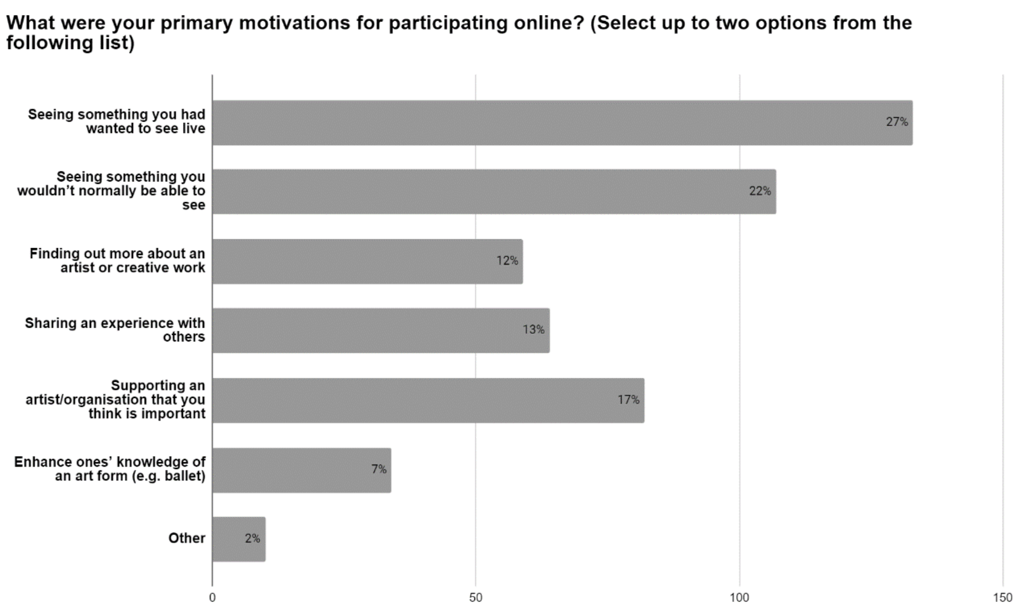
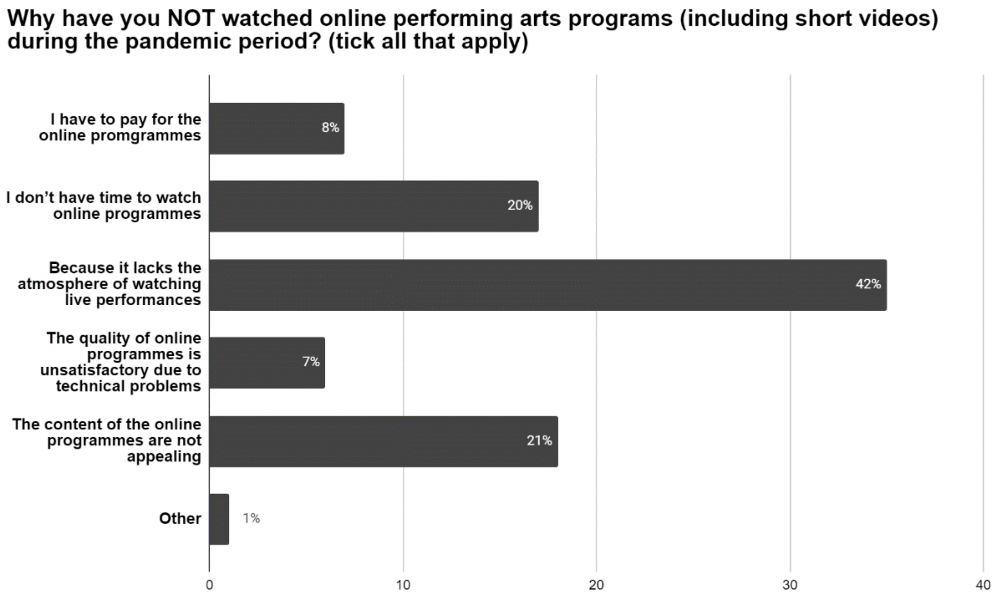


Figure 18

Respondents' reasons for not participating online



Participants in the focus group interviews commented on the positive and negative aspects of online programs, as well as other insights.

Positive dimensions	• *"I feel that I am very close to the artists"* • *"The sound quality of online programs is occasionally better than onsite performance"* • *"There were some programs I will not spend time to watch live, but I can watch it online to see whether I like it"* • *"Some added value such as VR and new performance format such as Zoom"*
Negative dimensions	• *"The feeling of watching online programs is so different, and there is no other audience to trigger the atmosphere"* • *"The atmosphere brought by the hardware, expectation of attending cultural events, blackout or even the smell of theatre is not replaceable by online programs"* • *"No chance for social connection"* • "*I don't prefer watching online music programs as the sound quality cannot be as good as onsite"* • *"Online programs are usually broadcast in stereo but not in 5.1 surround sound, so the sound will not be the same as a live performance even if you played it on a professional audio system"*

It is interesting that there were different views on sound quality of online programs. The presence of the "visual director" in streamed performances also attracted both positive and negative comments; one participant remarked, "the shots of recorded programs were selected by the director, the audience is not able to watch the whole stage or focus whatever they like", another said, "I somehow prefer a director because I can focus more on the performers."

Participants in the focus group interviews also voiced their preferences for live-streamed or pre-recorded programs.

Live-stream programs	• *"Interaction between audience and performers is very important in onsite performance, live stream performance can still keep some of it through comments"*
Pre-recorded programs	• *"I can watch it anytime, or repeatedly within a period"* • *"Low opportunity cost – can stop anytime"* • *"Impressed by the behind-the-scenes video or master class as they can get to know more about the artists and their artworks"*

Focus group interview participants also shared their considerations in choosing online programs.

Artist	• Many prefer famous overseas program because they do not have the opportunity to watch the live performance
Local artist/productions	• *"Many artists and crew find it hard to survive during the pandemic, so I want to support them"* • *"I can understand easily, although I think local programs are not very good"*
Program	• *"I like watching 'weird' programs and I want to know how they come up with these weird ideas"*

A significant portion of respondents only watched online programs if they were free of charge. Although the percentage willing to pay increased during the pandemic, it is important to understand the viewpoints of both sides.

Those willing to pay:

Support to artist/organization	• *"Some artists are talented and starting up, but they are not well-known"*
Cost	• The participants have already saved the cost of air ticket and accommodation when they watch an overseas online program
Marketing	• *"There are ticket packages including souvenirs and backstage visits, it increases my expectation of the performance"*

Those reluctant to pay:

Lower value	• *"The value of online programs is not as high as onsite programs, so I prefer free online programs, or I will not pay more than half-price of an onsite ticket"*
Uncertainty of performance quality	• *"I am not sure whether the show is good or not, I will not be too disappointed if the show is free"*

Focus groups also helped us understand the setting and context under which participants watch online programs.

Time	• At night (usual practice of performance) • Whenever there is a performance
Device	• Computer • Tablet • Screen mirroring to television
Accompaniment	• Mostly watch alone • Occasionally watch with family or friends • Watch with friends at the same time but in different places
Concentration	• Mostly multi-tasking • Depends on how much the participants like the artist/art form • Depends on whether it is paid or free • Depends on whether it is livestream or recorded

Preferences for Local or Overseas Artists

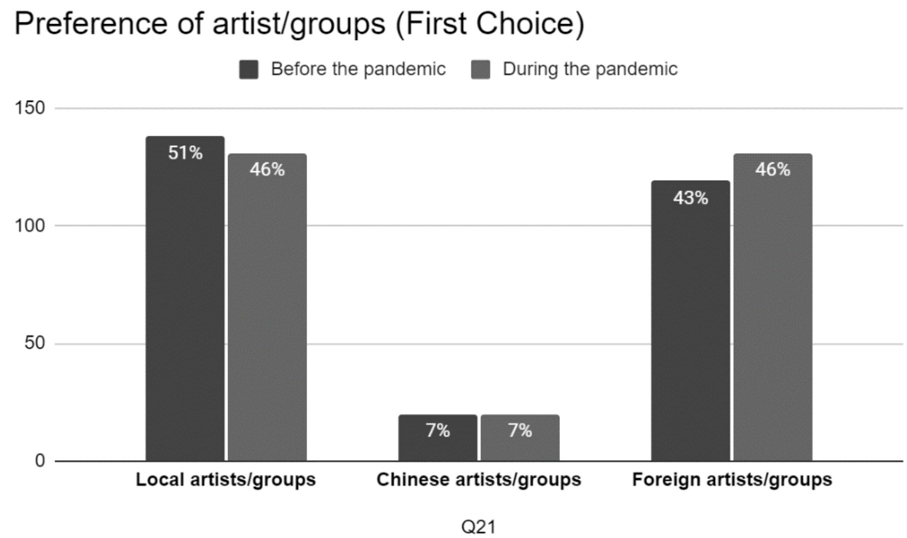
Noting travel restrictions and the difficulty in showcasing overseas artists through on-site performances, we asked respondents to rank local, Chinese, and foreign artists/groups from that which they most wanted to watch (1), to the one they were least interested in (3) (Figure 19).

In 2019 before the pandemic, local artists/groups were the top choice for over half of the respondents (51%), followed by foreign artists/groups (43%). Chinese artists/groups were the least popular choice of the respondents in 2019 (7%).

During the pandemic, preferences for local artists/groups and foreign artists/groups became equal (both 46%); the popularity of local artists/groups decreased but foreign artists/groups rose in this period. The percentage favoring Chinese artists/groups remained unchanged (7%) (figure 19). This seems to match one of the reasons mentioned by respondents for watching online programs; they can see overseas programs that they wanted to watch but were not able to attend.

Figure 19

Respondents' preferences for local or foreign of artists/groups (first choice)



Intentions about Future Consumption of Onsite Performances After Reopening

To learn about respondents' intentions (attitude) towards attending live on-site performances after venues reopen, we offered eight stances to choose from. Close to half said that they *will attend onsite performance as long as they can buy reasonably priced tickets* (44%), 20% indicated that they would be *willing to pay even higher ticket price as they desired to watch performances very much* (Figure 20).

At the same time, around 18% said they will not attend until there are further government disease control measures, such as generally recognized *health certification* (9%) and *vaccines* (6%), 8% wanted to cut down on spending, while 10% said they don't know yet (Figure 20).

Over half of respondents stated they will pay for local artists/groups as long as the performances are appealing to them (53%) and 12% said they will wait until the removal of travel restrictions for foreign artist/groups, and then purchase tickets for their performances. Meanwhile, 5% stated they will wait until the reopening of the Hong Kong-mainland border and buy tickets for mainland artists/groups performances (Figure 21).

Figure 20

Scenarios under which respondents will resume attending on-site performances when venues reopen

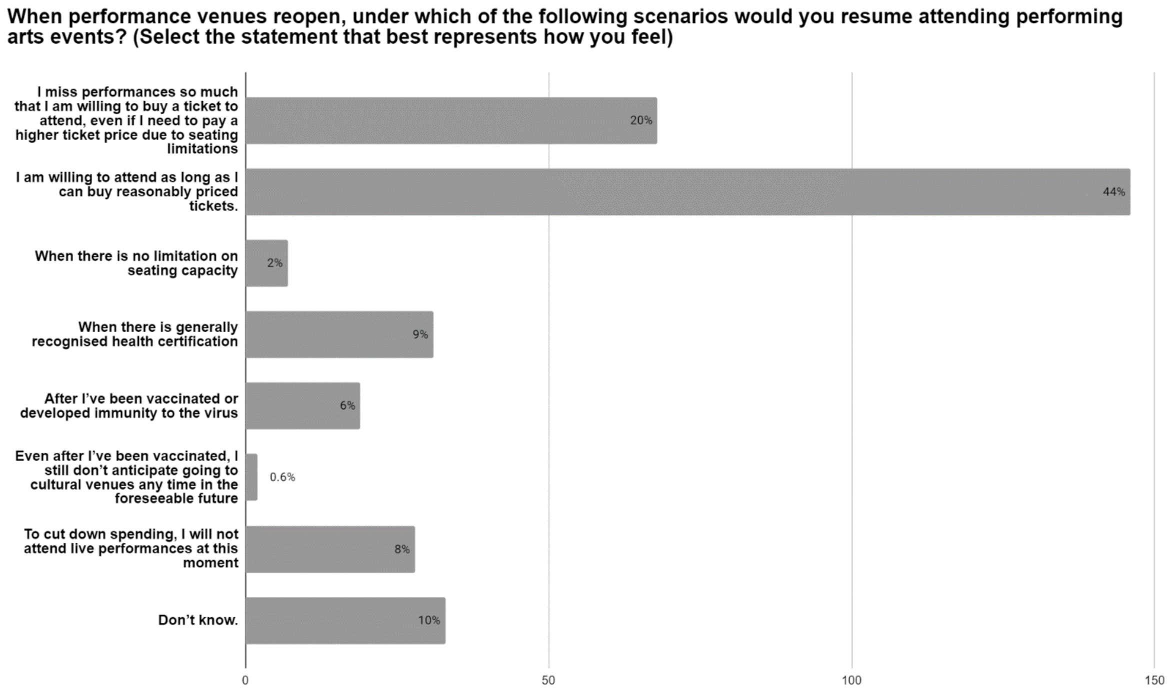
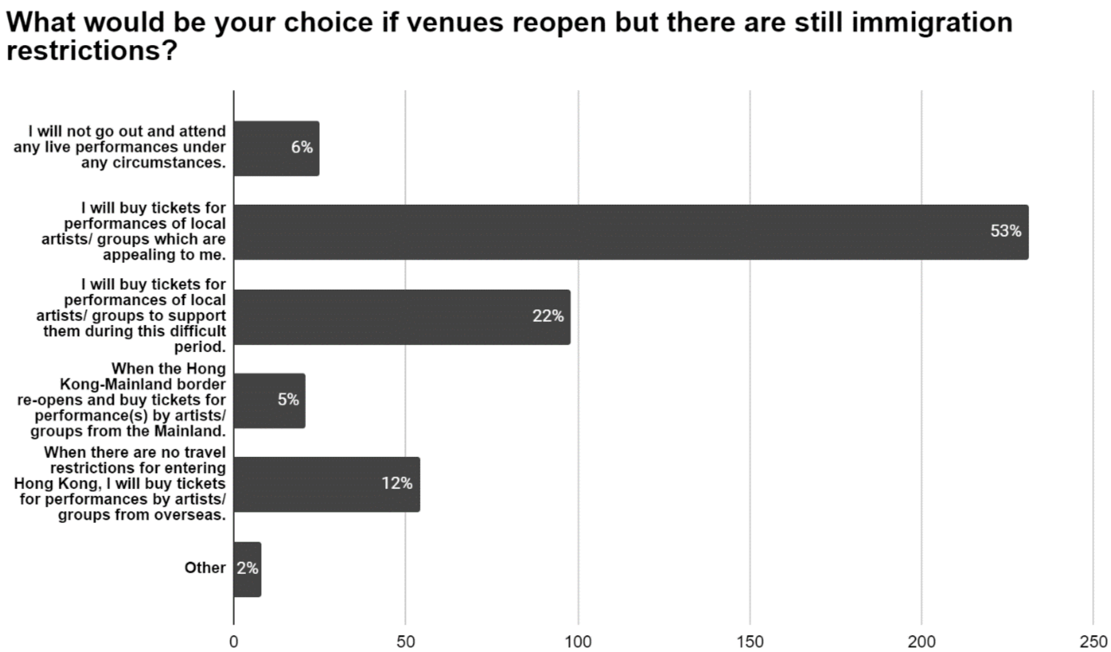


Figure 21

Respondents' preference where there are still immigration restrictions



Concerning likely spending when venues reopen, it is notable that the percentage of respondents who would only watch *free programs* decreased when compared to 2019(6%), whilst those willing to spend *below HK$100* (13%), *HK$101-300* (49%), and *HK$301-500* (25%) all increased slightly. However, respondents who were willing to *spend HK$501-700* (3%) and *above HK$700* (4%) decreased slightly (Figure 9).

Focus group interview participants gave supplementary comments about their attitudes towards attending live performances after the reopening of venues.

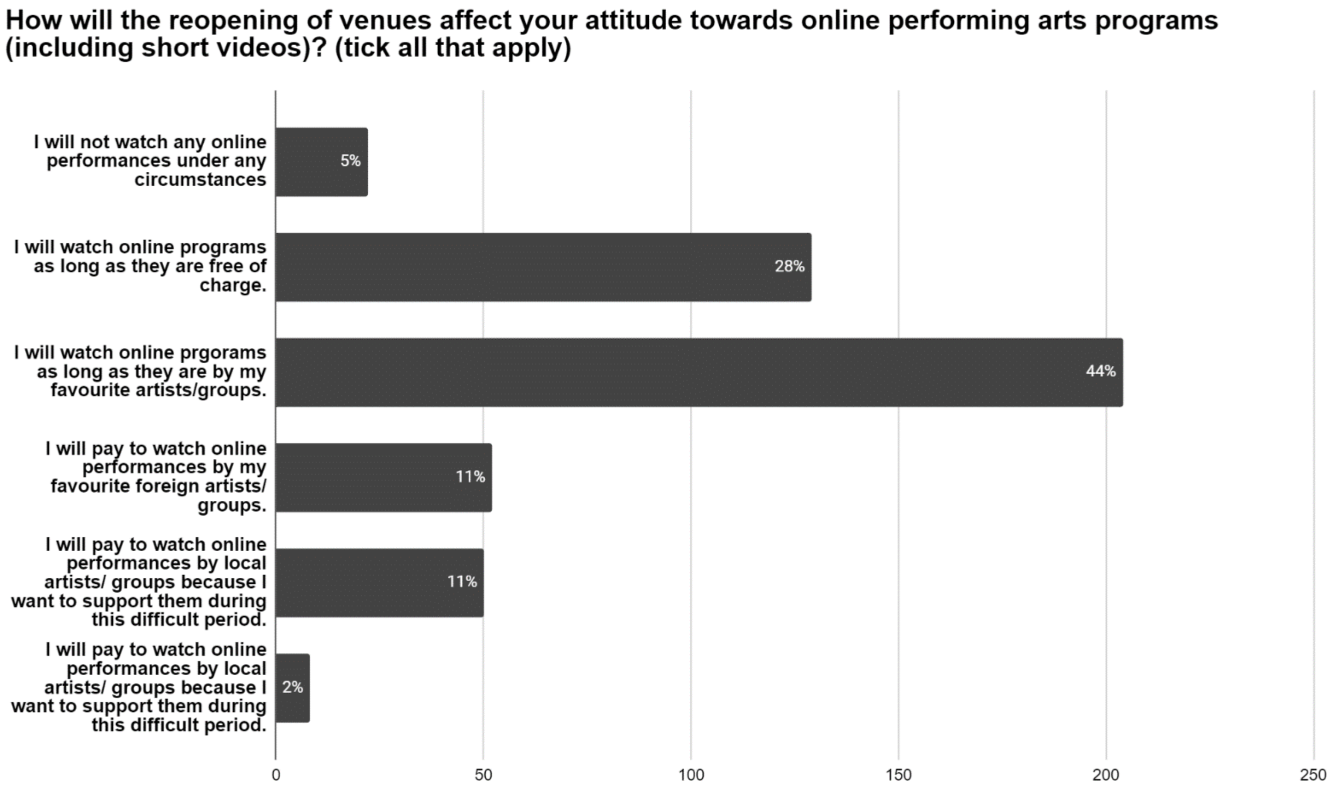
Prioritizing onsite performance	• *"I will definitely go and watch live first if there is live performance"*
Dislike of online watching setting	• *"I don't really like to watch performances on the computer"*
Live performances that had been shown online already	• Most participants stated that they are willing to pay, as long as the online performance is interesting, and the ticket price is reasonable

Intentions about Future Consumption of Online Programs After Reopening

44% of respondents stated that they will *watch online programs as long as performed by favorite artists/groups*. Whilst 28% of the respondents will *only watch free online programs*, 11% of them are *willing to pay for it*. Only very few respondents claimed they *will not watch any online performance under any circumstances* (5%) (Figure 22).

Figure 22

Respondents' attitude towards online programs after venues re-open



Focus group interview participants gave other reasons why they would keep watching online performances after venues reopen.

Reasonable price	• Most of the participants thought HK$100-150 is reasonable. Participants who were reluctant to pay thought tickets should not be higher than HK$100 with reference to movie tickets • The highest ticket price they had paid was HK$350, *"I can afford the ticket, and it is live-streaming, I will not be able to watch it if I don't pay"*
Pay-as-you-please	• *"I felt more comfortable in paying this way"*

Other insights:

Overseas artists	• *"If there is a live performance by overseas artists, I will definitely watch the live performance, but I will still watch online if they are not able to come to Hong Kong"*
Unexplored new artists	• *"The opportunity cost of not knowing unexplored artists will be lower"*
Alternative mode of attendance	• If there are too many live performances in the same week, they will select some to watch online
Habit	• One participant claimed that watching online performances has become a habit, and he will keep watching them
Multiple cast	• One participant pointed that he would watch another cast online if there are multiple casts performing the same program

Focus Group Suggestions

Several participants noted the educational and audience development potential of online programs; one proposed the establishment of an integrated online platform which would provide information on cultural programs from different art forms and facilitate attendance at multiple performances. Another participant suggested the presentation of live stream performances on a regular basis, raising the profile of the performing arts amongst potential audiences.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the survey and focus group interviews we conducted clearly reflect changes in the behavior and the attitudes of arts consumers since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Behavior changes in performing arts consumption may be obvious, turning from onsite attendance to watching online programs; this study and many others verify that consumer attitudes have been changing due to the pandemic, and are likely to continue to evolve. This attitude change will undoubtedly affect future consumption behavior in the post-pandemic period. It is important to note that the consumption pattern and attitudes observed in this study only reflect the situation at the specific time and place when the survey and focus groups were conducted - from November 2020 to January 2021 in Hong Kong.

After the outbreak of COVID-19 and the closure of performance venues, audiences generally watched more online performances. The situation also affected watching behavior for some art forms and age groups. Whilst the attitude towards online programs was still mixed, most of the participants and respondents showed their intention to continue watching online programs after the pandemic. Even though most of the focus group participants agreed that the experience of live onsite programs could not be replaced by online programs, they recognized some unique values of online performances, such as low opportunity cost and close-up shots.

As audiences became more familiar with online performances, the amount they spent on tickets for them also increased compared to 2019. Although a significant portion still only watch free online programs, the numbers of those willing to pay increased, as well as the price they were willing to pay.

Both our survey and focus group interviews revealed that audiences were very supportive of local programs; the online programs and platforms produced by many local arts groups since the pandemic received favorable support. Online educational programs were quite popular as well as streamed performances. We believe that the online programs produced by local groups have tremendous potential for audience-building, as the participation barrier is lower than for onsite performances.

In spite of this rising acceptance of online programs, the unique value of live onsite performances was generally recognized by survey respondents and focus group participants. Most intended to return as soon as venues are reopened and some were even willing to pay higher prices, while only a small percentage said they would still stay away due to health concerns.

At the same time, most respondents predicted that they would attend both onsite and online performances when performance venues reopen. The value of online programs is also recognized by artists and arts groups. Since online programs can lower the constraints of ticket price and increase accessibility, online arts programs could be an attractive option to new audiences. This potential is reflected in the complementary relationship between online and live culture consumption (De la Vega et al, 2019; Kolhede & Gomez-Arias, 2016). Ford and Mandviwalla (2020) suggested that the total engagement of audiences with arts organizations would be increased by digital engagement, since it could offer follow-up experiences to sustain audience interaction following cultural events. These online programs could also serve as promotional trailers to attract new audiences to onsite programs when the venues reopen.

In the era of information technology, the shift of performing arts programs to online or other formats during the pandemic lockdown is not surprising. For example, virtual performances transformed the audience-actor relationship and the sense of audience empowerment during the pandemic, attracting consumers to engage (Xu, 2021). The rise of digital performing arts programs also changed audience behavior and attitudes, lowering the participation barrier through economic and cultural incentives (De la Vega et al, 2019).

It is fair to say that the COVID pandemic has brought about quick, major, and fundamental changes to the ecology of the performing arts. Key stakeholders in the industry are striving not only to cope with the crisis, but also to ride the possibilities created both by new technology and changes in consumer attitudes. We believe that making online programs sustainable and integrating online and onsite programs should be on their priority list.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect the world in 2021, the performing arts remain one of the industries most vulnerable to ongoing uncertainty (Radermecker, 2021). We suggest that studies of audience behavior and attitudes should be conducted regularly. Well-managed arts groups should have no difficulty in recognizing the value of keeping abreast of the behavior and attitudes of their audiences as they devise new projects and strategies. However, smaller arts groups may not have the resources to pursue such studies or to develop a clear understanding of audience trends. For the benefit of the whole sector, responsible government departments or public agencies should conduct regular studies; through understanding the evolving mindset of audiences, appropriate strategies and audience development schemes can then be planned.

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