AUDIENCE OUTLOOK MONITOR

Los Angeles County Arts & Culture

Thematic Findings from In-depth Interviews with Grantee Participants

WolfBrown
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Background

The LA County Department of Arts and Culture (LACDAC) contracted with WolfBrown to provide their grantees with an opportunity to participate in the Audience Outlook Monitor (AOM), a national study to measure and track audience readiness and attitudes towards returning to live arts and cultural events.

LACDAC grantees are primarily small to mid-sized organizations, many of whom serve LA's diverse communities who have traditionally lacked access to the arts. All LACDAC grantees were invited to participate in the survey distribution. A total of 33 grantees participated. The survey was deployed three times, in August 2020, October 2020 and January 2021.

In order to deepen understanding of LA County residents' needs and experiences of arts and culture during the pandemic, a qualitative study component was introduced into the project. Ten grantee representatives were selected to participate in a qualitative study where they conducted in-depth interviews with audience members, students, artists and staff.

In the interviews, they asked about current arts and culture experiences and activities, pre-pandemic experiences and activities, online engagement, perceptions and feelings about the lack of in-person engagement, and recommendations and requests for local arts and culture organizations in general.

Participants attended a debrief session in February 2021 to share what they learned. A graphic notetaker visually captured grantee reflections.

This high level summary reports on overarching themes that emerged from the interviews.

Graphic Notes from Interview Debriefing Session

Arts as Second Responders:
Solving for Social Isolation and Lack of Supplies

- The majority of interviews, especially those conducted with audiences, workshop or class participants, and staff, pointed to their role as a support for individual needs.

- These include social and community support, as well as Internet access and even in some cases school supplies and civic engagement outlets (e.g., gathering and supporting around civic and racial justice actions during summer 2020).

- In particular, providing participants with an avenue for social engagement and connection made a significant impact on some interviewees. While multiple interviewees described feeling isolated and alone due to the pandemic, a few spoke about how organizations providing online programming have helped fill a void and provide an outlet of connectivity that participants wouldn't otherwise have.

  - One interviewee shared that normally she wouldn't have been able to attend classes due to drive time, but now is able to, and can count on the routine of attending and connecting with 20 other women two times a week.

- For organizations led by and serving communities of color, community need is more acute, given the greater impacts of COVID-19. One grantee shared how even prior to the pandemic, they and other organizations like them are often called upon to partner with social service organizations or even provide services themselves for their communities. This is especially true for organizations with a dedicated venue.

  - One grantee described how their parking lot is full of cars with students and families seeking to get online because it is free. They are also planning on distributing Google Chromebooks because some of their students are unable to participate in music classes without devices.

  - This is reflective of the broader digital divide that bars access to resources, education and arts and culture programming for many communities.

- All grantees see the opportunity for arts and culture organizations to be "second responders" – supporting institutions to help navigate re-opening by bringing people together, providing opportunities for engagement as well as alternative spaces for resource distribution and other supports.

Navigating the Evolution:
Online Programming and Engagement

- Many grantees have embarked on an odyssey of online programming. These have taken the form of classes, primarily, partly because bringing performances to life in a way that represents the the quality and nature of these grantees' work requires equipment and technical know-how that is beyond their current capability.
  - This is especially true for small theatre companies as well as music. In the case of theatre, the logistics and set up required a whole new staffing and stage management model. In the case of music, additional technical ability and equipment is needed to seamlessly integrate musicians' across a Zoom platform.
- Many interviewees described being "Zoomed" out, which has effected their willingness to engage with online programming at all. They are just too tired at the end of the day to do anything more than what is required of them online for work and helping their children's school, if applicable.
- However, others are engaging online and seeking out opportunities to connect, as mentioned on the previous page. Grantees are working to accommodate both a need to serve their constituents and the general community, but also to continue to activate their own creativity and productivity.
- These experiments with online activities have been an evolution of sorts. One grantee described her experience with developing online programming in three phases:
  - The first was about just getting something up and available for audiences and community.
  - The second phase was about enhancing quality and technical capacity.
  - Now, in what she has referred to as the third phase, is about a better understanding of how to exist in the digital space, not just for this moment, but also for post-pandemic period when live performing and classes return.

Navigating the Evolution (con't):
Online Programming and Engagement

- Understanding how to exist in the digital sphere has opened up new avenues of engagement for some grantees, while others are continuing to wait until re-opening, wanting and needing to have the live interaction with audiences in order to stay true to their artistic vision.

- Online engagement has opened access to arts experiences for many, reducing cost, distance and other barriers. The digital divide that impacts low-income communities more so than others, still dampens the promise of equitable access in the arts, even with lowered costs.

- However, the organizations themselves, especially small and mid-sized organizations with more restrictive budgets, have had to be more creative and invest funds for more equipment and technical expertise. For some, this investment has been worthwhile and helped them transition and evolve with online programming. For others, the added expense feels more like a burden, and so they have decided to hold off, and focus more on other work, planning for a later re-opening.

What Audiences Miss:
Community, Connection and Ritual

- When asked what interviewees miss about attending live programming, many reflected on the camaraderie of the audience, relationship to the artist, and the general sense of community that arts participation engenders.
  - This feeling was exemplified by an interviewee who spoke of missing out on comedy, especially in practicing her own comedy. Research has shown that laughing together can increase feelings of social bridging and bonding.
- In addition, there is the sense of ritual about going out to a performance that doesn't exist right now. To make up for the lack of ritual, in particularly dressing up to go out, one interviewee described how their family has been getting dressed up and having gatherings in their backyard.
- There is also a sense of cultural knowledge transfer that doesn't always come across online. How are online participants receiving and absorbing experiences that are meant to be felt in person, like African drumming?
- From the artist's point of view, the lack of an audience makes it difficult to stay connected to their purpose as performers and creators. The artists who were interviewed spoke about the difficulty in finding space to perform even for video recordings, but also about the sense of loss from not being able to connect with audiences. The purpose of their craft and career is to community through their art to others. Online does not feel the same to these artists, because there is no tangible reaction or physical feedback loop that inspires and drives them to continue creating.
- Some have found renewed sense in teaching, and have been able to adapt. However, they are very much looking forward to re-opening.

Opportunities for Arts and Cultural Organizations and the Ecosystem

These are core ideas that were discussed during each of the debriefs. It is not an exhaustive list of all the potential programs and strategies that might be leveraged for reopening and recovery, but can serve as a starting point for further conversation.

FOR AUDIENCES

- Intergenerational Programming

    Many people are currently living with parents, grandparents, aunts and extended family. Participating in creative activities in the home suggests an opportunity to produce targeted programming for intergenerational participants. This would support connectivity and social bonding, and could be part of a "second responder" strategy.

- Informal Social Bonding Moments

    Given the desire for more un-programmed and informal social interaction to combat the isolation many feel, organizations who are planning curated events and even online fundraising events or panels, might consider integrating a post-event social happy hour where attendees can stay on and a facilitator helps jumpstart conversation. This might be considered the online version of a post-performance informal artist Q&A, but with audience members focusing their attention on each other vs. the artist.

Opportunities for Arts and Cultural Organizations and the Ecosystem (con't)

FOR ARTS ORGANIZATIONS

- <u>Technical Assistance and Support Systems for Arts Organizations</u>

    It was clear that the process grantees experienced as part of the interview training and debrief was highly beneficial. They were able to meet new colleagues and connect with existing colleagues in an open exchange of ideas. They learned from each other, not only about what each organization was doing in regard to programming, but also what they were struggling with and how they were overcoming these struggles. Several of the grantees even suggested that this type of small facilitated gathering might be an event that would be ongoing. In addition, it provided the space to request technical assistance, primarily in creating digital content, but there are likely other technical assistance needs that will emerge as reopening expands this summer.

- <u>Neighborhood Arts & Health Hubs</u>

    Leveraging the "second responder" role, arts organizations and public institutions and agencies could establish a network of neighborhood based hubs utilizing existing arts and cultural spaces that are already embedded in and utilized by the community. Artists and organizations could serve as re-entry ambassadors, providing creative outlets and supports, programming, and public health resources. These hubs could collaborate with community clinics and other direct service organizations providing resources, such as vaccines and vaccine appointment assistance, school updates and education supplies, free WiFi, mental health support, and training. This ecosystem strategy was also highlighted as a viable method for supporting community in re-opening in LACDAC's review of policies and strategies to identify how the department and the arts and culture sector can be part of a larger solution to support communities through recovery and transition with a true racial equity lens.

More Information

For more insights into audiences and reopening, visit
audienceoutlookmonitor.com

Read the latest LA County Public Health Orders
and other guidance for reopening safely

APPENDIX

Methodology

- The LA County Department of Arts and Culture (LACDAC) contracted with WolfBrown to support a cohort of their grantees to participate in the Audience Outlook Monitor (AOM), a national study to measure and track audience readiness and attitudes towards returning to live arts and cultural events.

- LACDAC's grantee portfolio includes a significant number of small to mid-sized organizations, specifically those that serve LA's diverse communities who have traditionally lacked access to the arts.

- The core component of the AOM is a tracking survey, administered to a representative cross-section of an organization's email list. If an organization's list is less than 3,000 records, there is an option to canvas the entire list.

  - All LACDAC grantees were invited to participate in the survey distribution. A total of 33 grantees participated over the course of three deployments in August 2020, October 2020 and January 2021.

- In order to deepen understanding of LA residents' needs and experiences of arts and culture during the pandemic, a qualitative study component was introduced into the project. This involved building the capacity of up to 10 LACDAC grantees to conduct in-depth interviews with their audience members, students, artists and staff.

- For the interviews, 10 grantee representatives were specifically selected to participate in the interview training and facilitation, with eight completing the process. These grantees were selected to best represent different cultural and geographic communities of Los Angeles County and a diversity of disciplines (see Appendix for full list of participants)

- The interview guide was designed in partnership with LACDAC staff, and included questions about current experiences and activities, pre-pandemic experiences and activities, online engagement, perceptions and feelings about the lack of in-person engagement, and recommendations and requests for local arts and culture organizations in general. (See Appendix for interview guide)

- Grantees attended a training webinar to review best practices in conducting interviews, review the interview guide, and practice with each other. All were tasked with recruiting and interviewing five participants, and were given leeway on who and how to recruit in order to expedite and complete the project within a reasonable time frame.

- After completing one to two interviews, grantees were invited to debrief with WolfBrown and LACDAC staff to discuss the interview experience and share initial reflections and take-aways.

- A final debrief session was held in February 2021 after completion of between four and five interviews. A graphic notetaker attended the final debrief to visually capture grantee reflections.

- This high level summary reports on overarching themes stemming from these two debrief sessions. It is meant as a snapshot taken from a select small sample of interviews, and not representative of the totality of the audience, participant experience.

Interview Component: Participating Grantees

Name	Organization
Nao Magami	Japanese American National Museum
Essence Parker	EngAGE
Tamica Washington	Lula Washington Dance Theatre
Neelanjana Banerjee	Muae Publishing/Kaya Press
Liliana Espinoza	National Association of Latino Independent Producers
Tomas Benitez	Plaza de la Raza
Leilani Chan	TeAda Productions
Giavanni Washington	Viver Brasil

Key Interview Questions

Full interview protocol available at https://www.lacountyarts.org/article/aom-thematic-findings

1. There is no doubt that 2020 has been a difficult and rocky year for all of us. There is COVID-19, the racial justice movement, and the election. How have you and your family been doing this year?

2. Did you engage with any creative activities as part of or in response to these issues or events? *[Examples if needed: make masks, create posters for protests, or any creative activities with your children]*

3. What other creative activities have you been doing in the past year since COVID-19? *[Note: This could include journaling, crafts, gardening, preparing food, or even home decorating, so the conversation is not just about artistic activities]*

4. Before COVID-19, what kinds of creative activities did you and your family usually do outside of the ones we talked about just now?

5. In general, how has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your family's creative activities? For example, you have been doing more creative activities, fewer activities, or different activities?

6. Have you or a family member watched or participated in any online arts or cultural programs in the past few months that you really enjoyed? This might be an online class or a live event broadcast on the Internet. *[Note: this does not include television or movies you might have watched online before COVID]*

7. What are some of the places you used to go for cultural programs, before the COVID-19 pandemic hit? Try to think of as many places as possible where you've been for cultural programs in the past few years. *[If necessary: This might include community centers, art galleries, theaters, museums, or outdoor facilities.]*

8. When places like theatres and cultural centers are allowed to re-open, how will you feel about going out again?

9. Thinking about all the activities and places we've talked about today, what are your hopes and dreams for your family's creative life after the pandemic?

10. What can arts and cultural organizations like mine do to support your family's creative life over the next six months, while we wait for the COVID crisis to end?

11. Finally, is there anything else you'd like to share with us today before we close the conversation?