

The State of Creativity during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic caused a huge displacement for people globally. This displacement resulted in a shift in notions of personal reality and affective relationships. Creativity is a sensitive process that is impacted by one's physical, social, and cultural reality. In this paper, I understand creativity to encompass the process, experience, and feelings associated with the creation of new products and ideas, that are both novel and appropriate to a given situation or time-period (Amabile et al. 2005). This ethnography explores the impact of the pandemic on the creative processes of six Toronto-based artists. I explore the effects of decreased collaboration, decreased social interaction, and greater isolation, on the motivation for art creation, the content of art created and the overall affectual states of the artists. I consider how these changes were linked to the different layers of Hennessey and Amabile (2010)'s structural model of creativity and I posit why artists had different creative outcomes. Preference for alone time when creating art versus creating through collaboration impacted people's motivation for creativity during COVID-19 and the subsequent amount of art created. Preference for alone time was also linked to the affective results of different artists during the COVID-19 pandemic—those who previously collaborated during their artistic process suffered more than those who mostly created in solitude. The mediums different artists engaged with also impacted motivation and their ability to continue creating.

Keywords: creativity, COVID-19 pandemic, affect and art, ethnography, Toronto

in relation to innovation and new ideas, as an antecedent for creativity, or if this disruption only caused further distress and halted their processes. To keep my analysis as objective as possible given I had preexisting relationships with the subjects, I relied upon methods of reflexivity and autoethnography

Context, Questions, and My Story

The first two weeks of the pandemic were especially scary for me as I happened to be living in a different city than the rest of my family. Like many, I was uncertain about the state of the world, and the stress of the pandemic caused me to feel on edge about almost every aspect of my life. The summer that followed was one of the most self-expanding ones of my entire life. I went through a period of personal development, which I believe was partially due to social isolation. This included my change daily routine – I was enrolled in an intense university program and prior to the lockdowns I spent every moment either completing an assignment, in a meeting, studying, or rushing to a class. With the emergence of COVID-19 my entire world was compressed into one household, where I lived with three other students. As such, my life went from involving many different physical and social spaces to one physical space and few social spaces. I should not discount the fact that many of these social spaces turned into cyber social spaces with the rise in Zoom meetings; however, in total, I found myself with an ease that I had not encountered for a long time. I had been living outside of myself, and now with much more time and space, I instinctively started to turn inwards. I created new routines and spaces of lonely walks and bedroom workouts and spent more time lingering on big and small questions and topics.

I gained a lot of mental clarity on issues I was facing in my personal life during this time due to the increased time I spent alone. Additionally, I found myself much more curious creatively and explored many new creative outlets I never had been interested in previously, including sculpting, singing, and water colour painting, to name a few. In hindsight, I do not think that it was just the pandemic that caused this growth, but,

"I am enough of an artist to draw freely upon my imagination. Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination encircles the world."

Albert Einstein

My ethnography explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on six Toronto-based artists' creative processes. The impacts of social isolation, particularly loneliness on these artists' creative processes, is explored in this paper. Specifically, I analyze the effects of the pandemic through an engagement with the layers of Hennessey and Amabile's (2010) system of creativity. Specifically, creativity was impacted by the changes in affect of artists following the pandemic, personality differences between artists, the impact of and lack of access to social groups, the change in their daily routine, and the artists' experiences of the pandemic in relation to the rest of Toronto. The overall change in the number of creative activities is explored. That is, did the artists find themselves to have an increase or decrease in their motivation to create, ultimately leading to a change in the amount of art pieces produced? The effect of isolation from one's social group is explored in relation to how limited opportunities for collaboration impacted the artists' creative thoughts.

For this ethnography, I focused in on the impact of this shift on creative individuals who lived in Toronto, Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic. I was curious to see how the state of the world during COVID-19 impacted the affect of artists and if that carried over to their artwork; I also observed how this new way of life impacted creativity. I was keenly interested to see if creatives felt the urge to fill those gaps

anecdotally, I have come to hear many people tell me of similar experiences.

Art has always been a pillar in my life. My family is made up entirely of artists, both in the classical and non-classical sense. When I think about the word “art,” it is nostalgic for me, bringing forward memories of clay workshops I went to as a child at the local pottery museum and the “art night” my elementary school would hold once a year to display students’ artistic products. I went through long periods of looking for an art medium to master such that I could identify myself as a type of artist, a painter or a musician, for example. Though, at this point in my life I view art as functionally different for me. I use creativity in simple problem solving and, when I put solutions to work, I am normally attuning to the aesthetics of art. In fact, writing and putting together this research has been one of my favourite ways to be creative.

Given my experience of both personal and creative growth during — or perhaps due to — the pandemic, I was interested in exploring the impact of such isolation on creatives. I wanted to understand if this isolation would cause creatives to have deeper, internal creative experiences than they would experience outside of the pandemic, indicating the pandemic was a positive antecedent for creativity; or, if the forced isolation was so uncomfortable for the artists due to the lack of social connections, if it would cause a decrease in creative behaviours and, perhaps, a subjectively worse creative experience. I was curious to see if the pandemic — specifically the physical and social realities of it and the affective outcomes — impacted the art created and the creative processes of artists, given my personal experience and interest in creativity. And, if so, in what ways?

The Affective State of COVID-19

To explore the impacts of social isolation on the individual, literature surrounding affective theory and creativity were consulted. As cited in White (2017), Brian Massumi defines affect as “[an] epistemological gap between how bodies feel and how subjects make sense of how they feel” (177). Affect is comprised of the interaction of external context — events, places, and

people as examples — and how we perceive of those contexts in the ways of thoughts and feelings. As affect is something that we are both experiencing and perceiving, it overlaps with one’s creative process and products. The creative process is sometimes used by artists to understand their affect and experiences further. It is important to know the affect context of artists to understand their products; thus, discussing affect was an integral part of conversations that took place in this study as to understand the impact of the pandemic on artists and their products.

Lawrence-Zuniga (2017) defines places and spaces stating, “space is often defined by an abstract scientific, mathematical or measurable conception while place refers to the elaborated cultural meanings people invest in or attach to a specific site or locale.” Our perception of passing life is made up of different physical places, flowing from one to the next, overlaid by both internal (affective) and external (social) spaces. Thus, affective reality can be described as a build up of different subjective and intersubjective spaces that make up daily life such as the intersubjective space of many workplace environments or social environments like having coffee with the same people every day (Skoggard and Waterston 2015). A subjective space is enclosed to the mind of one person, and encompasses one’s thoughts, emotions, and sensations. Intersubjective spaces are ones that are created and shared between people under specific contexts. While characterizing intersubjective spaces of communal religious rituals, Emile Durkheim (1965) described these spaces as encompassing the inner worlds as well as “the subjective power of the collective moment” (52).

These different spaces impact our bodies to make up our overall affective state in each period and place in our lives. Social spaces are important intersubjective spaces and encompass relationships and their respective purposes (Coleman and Collins 2020). The intersections of individual worlds in different socio-cultural and political contexts create intersubjective spaces that carry a shared affective reality. In contrast, the experience and emotions associated with loneliness are part of an individual’s current affective reality. As social isolation imposes a new physical and social

reality, affect is altered due to this shift (Navaro-Yashin 2009).

Loneliness is distinct from social isolation. Loneliness is an “affective and subjective reality” whereas social isolation is a “physical and social reality” (Ozawa-de Silva and Parsons 2020, 615). The experience of loneliness does not always cause the individual emotional pain, but it is a subjectively negative experience (de Jong-Gierveld, van Tilburg, and Dykstra 2006). A high level of self-reported loneliness is correlated with debilitating mental health issues, such as depression, and consists of a multitude of negative emotions, two examples being emptiness and abandonment (Ozawa-de Silva and Parsons 2020). Emptiness, as it relates to loneliness, is a perceived lack of social connection and purpose; abandonment is a feeling of loss and longing for previously present social connections (de Jong-Gierveld, van Tilburg and Dykstra 2006). De Jong-Gierveld and van Tilburg and Dykstra (2006) outline two major types of loneliness, including *emotional loneliness*, which refers to the absence of intimate relationships (i.e., a best friend or spouse), and *social loneliness*, the absence of a wider social group such as a group of friends or family. Though most people have a great fear of loneliness, many desire freedom of the mind which is often unachievable when one is tied to others for stability (Kociatkiewicz and Kostera 1999).

However, loneliness has arguably constructive facets to it as well. Kociatkiewicz and Kostera (1999) argue that when one encounters physical or mental empty spaces of reality, one seeks to fill that space. Filling a space consists of creating newfound subjective and intersubjective spaces; for example, when a university student finishes a semester of school, many intersubjective and subjective spaces are removed from that reality, and one common “filler” to these spaces is a summer job. These empty spaces are also often the catalyst for creative thought. It is posited that, “[e]mpty spaces can be a kind of meditative freedom” allowing the freedom of creation and wander of the mind (Kociatkiewicz and Kostera 1999, 7). In the contexts of imposed physical and social isolation, as was seen during the 2019–2023 COVID-19 pandemic, many individuals reported feeling very depressed and lonely, indicating an

overall shift in affect due to this displacement of daily life.

Academic Studies of Creativity

Creativity has been studied in many academic contexts, ranging from analyses of neuropsychological states to the socio-cultural contexts that invite creative experiences. Creativity, as broad and abstract a concept as it is, has been widely studied in anthropology and related disciplines (Amabile et al. 2005; Byron, Shalini, and Nazarian 2010; d’Azevedo 1958; May 1959; Puryear, Kettler, and Parsons 2019). The definition of creativity employed here encompasses the creation of new products and ideas that are both novel and appropriate within a particular context (Amabile et al. 2005). Though creativity is seen as a core operative procedure for artists, it is an important process undertaken by people in all areas of life; it is an integral aspect of humanity that is the backbone of innovation and development.

In 2010, Beth Hennessey and Teresa Amabile attempted a comprehensive review of the literature surrounding the theory, investigations and findings surrounding creativity in anthropology. They called for researchers to move forward with taking a systems approach to studies of creativity (Figure 1).

The structural model illustrated here posits

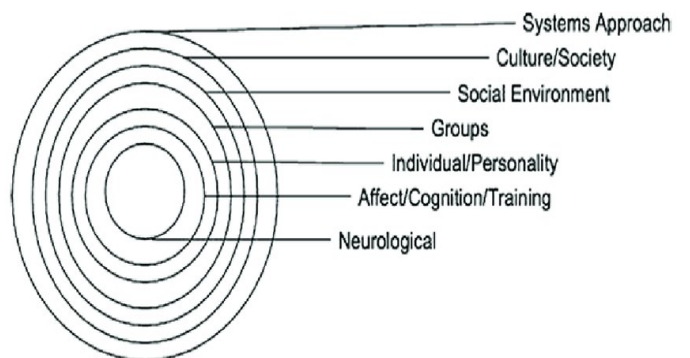


Figure 1: Integrative approach to creativity (Hennessey and Amabile 2010 , 571).

that creativity within a social context should be assessed at different levels and in an interdisciplinary fashion (Hennessey and Amabile 2010). Creative moments are separated between “big C” and “little c” moments; “big C” creativity being large, uncommon displays of creativity and “little c” being small everyday moments of creativity and

problem solving (Amabile et al. 2005). You can probably recall a recent “aha” moment of “little c” — perhaps where you figured out how to reformat a document to optimize space or a new way to make a sandwich. Conversely, there are many famous moments of “big C” which have resulted in massive contributions to humankind; Darwin’s observations of animals in the Galapagos leading to his theories of natural selection being one example.

The debate surrounding the relationship between affect and creativity is highly nuanced; however, much of the literature suggests that positive affectual states result in more creative moments than negative affectual states (Amabile et al. 2005). Positive affect has been linked to intrinsic motivation, problem-solving, positive relationships, and safety all of which contribute positively to creativity. Negative affect has been linked to a decrease in creativity due to its association with a lack of safety and acceleration of mental health problems; it has also been linked with extrinsic motivation which is detrimental to creativity (Hennessey and Amabile 2010). Extrinsic motivation is incentivized by external rewards such as money and approval (Bénabou and Tirole 2003). External motivation encourages products based on outside interests, thus what is produced is not born of the artist’s genuine creative interests and motivations, so is less authentic to true creativity. According to Maslow (1970), creativity should be present in scenarios where it does not impact early survivalist needs; however, negative affect has also been shown to increase creativity. George and Zhou (2007) found negative affect was associated with “clarity of feelings” which allow artists to express themselves clearly and some authors believe that attention to problems allows better problem-solving skills (Stickgold and Walker 2004).

A U-shaped relationship has also been postulated between creativity and affect, where high levels of positive and negative affect lead to high levels of creativity, and less intense affect states lead to less creativity (Amabile et al. 2005; Eisenberg and James 2005; Zhou 2007). Perhaps the relationship one artist has to creativity is dependent on their response to their affective states. Some individuals may be more prone to productive responses (such as

creation), when faced with negative emotions, whereas others may be more likely to halt their daily activities.

As the creative process holds affective dimensions, it has both subjective and intersubjective spaces for the creator. Curiosity, excitation, exhilaration, and satisfaction are some of the many emotions associated with the creative state; the actions and bodily sensations further encompassed in creative states further complete it as a full physical and mental affective reality (White 2017). The amount to which one experiences creativity with others in an intersubjective collaborative space versus an individual subjective one varies by person. While some artists work alone, with their creative space existing solely in their heads, other artists flourish and grow their creativity with other creatives in artistic collectives. There appears to be benefits to working within a group creatively and working alone; when individuals who prefer working in groups can, they perform better than groups with individuals who prefer working alone (Hennessey and Amabile 2010). This preference for group work may be linked to individual personality differences such as those seen in studies indicating slight correlations between introversion and extroversion and preference for learning styles; extroverts have been shown to have a slight preference for group work and introverts have a slight preference for individual work (Murphy et al. 2017).

A widely accepted model of personality first developed by Paul Costa and Robert McCrae (1992), which has since been widely substantiated and expanded upon, states that all human personalities are composed of five, or sometimes six, personality factors. This is known as the HEXACO model of personality. The personality factors include extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, openness to experience, as well as the newly postulated humility factor (Lee and Ashton 2013). In relating personality factors to creativity, under the scope of the HEXACO model, it has been shown in the literature that individuals who score high on the “openness to experience” factor display higher levels of creativity versus those on the opposite end of the same factor (Puryear, Kettler and Rinn 2019). Both introverts and extroverts have been

shown to display high levels of creativity, albeit in different forms. However, as creativity is a deeply internal cognitive process, it is argued that most creative individuals possess some level of introversion (Roth, Conradt and Bogner 2022).

Psychological, cultural, and evolutionary origins of creativity

Art reflects the artist's social, cultural, and temporal context within which a piece is made (d'Azevedo 1958). According to d'Azevedo (1958, 702), art is "composed in a social setting and has a cultural context" that is only fully understood within this context, as illustrated in Figure 2.



Figure 2: Pablo Picasso's "The Tragedy." National Gallery of Art. Image courtesy of Creative Commons Zero (CCO).

Picasso's famous "The Tragedy" depicts the sex workers and homeless peoples he encountered in a destitute area of Barcelona. Though the painting is a scene Picasso may have actually come across, the colours and mood of the piece also reflect the pain Picasso felt during the time he created the piece due to the suicide of one of his best friends (Morse 2022).

The process of expression is to reflect one's inner world out towards the external world, which, here, is accomplished through artwork. Hospers (1971) posits that the need to create is born out of a need to express something internal to the world, sometimes a feeling that needs to be understood. When art is put out to the world it opens intersubjective spaces of interaction, discussion, and collaboration which are bridges of connection between people making up our social reality. This "need" Hospers (1971) refers to can be related to the highly supported psychological theory of human behaviour and motivation: that humans have an intrinsic motivation to express the self as one possesses it alike other survivalist motivations (Kovac 2016). This theory posts that we want to share our innermost selves with the world as a social reality as a total reality inclusive of both the physical manifestations of this expression (art), and self understanding and personal actualization (Kovac 2016).

Kovac (2016) argues that humans are often shown to act in ways that go against what would prove most beneficial towards their survivalist needs; for example, when people speak out against political regimes, and openly express sexuality in conservative cultures. Maslow's (1954) ground-breaking work "Personality and Motivation" introduced the theory of hierarchy of needs, which in summary, states that humans must fulfill basic survivalist needs before pursuing and achieving further psychological needs. The order in which these needs must be fulfilled is listed in the pyramid shown in Figure 3; hence, for a human to embark upon fulfilling higher-up needs of esteem and self-actualization, one must full-fill lower needs, such as physiological and safety needs first.

Kovac (2016) argues that because self-expression can undermine basic survivalist needs this indicates it is a motivational

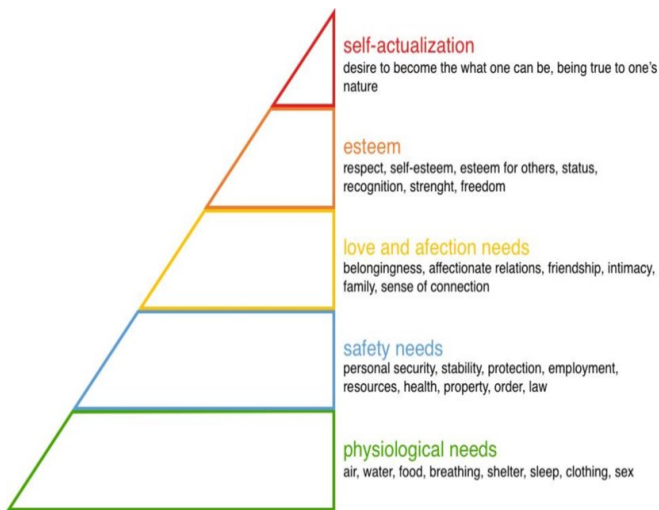


Figure 3: Maslow's hierarchy of needs adapted from Motivation and Personality (1970) (Regaldo 2021, 35).

necessity, otherwise, why would so many people take survivalist risks. The plethora of creativity in modern societies is reflective of changing survivalist needs; foraging for food today requires less energy and often less time compared to hunter-gatherer societies, so preserved energy and excess time can be partitioned to creative and more self-expanding activities. Maslow himself was quoted on the topic of self-expression in a way that further enforces that creativity is a process akin to breathing and eating stating, “a musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately at peace with himself. What a man can be, he must be. He must be true to his own nature. This need we may call self-actualization” (Maslow 1970, 46).

Fundamentally, when one is in a creative state, they may be closer to connecting with unconscious affect states, which may not be as accessible to the self otherwise (Byron, Khazanchi, and Nazarian 2010). When one is connected to their unconscious states, which is elicited through creative processes, they achieve a fuller understanding of the self, particularly those hidden parts, and contributes towards achieving self-actualization.

Setting the Context

Ethnographic Methodology

On March 11, 2020 the coronavirus outbreak was officially labeled a pandemic by the World Health Organization, ushering in a period of isolation and fear for many (Ducharme 2020). The pandemic necessitated extended

lockdowns, confining individuals to smaller living spaces, and prohibiting social interaction beyond households in many countries like Canada. The lockdowns imposed drastic lifestyle changes and resulted in the loss of social and intersubjective spaces for many people.

The first method of data collection I relied upon for this ethnography was virtual semi-structured interviews of approximately one hour in length (Whitehead 2005). The nature of the coronavirus lockdowns in Canada necessitated a shift in methods from in-person interviews to virtual interviews facilitated through Zoom. As my interviews were all virtual, I attempted to keep the conversations fluid as to allow my subjects to attempt and create a friendly atmosphere that can be easier to facilitate when in person. I began by obtaining informed consent from participants and asking demographic questions. Broadly, I asked guiding questions about the participants' creative processes before and during the pandemic and if they found any differences. I asked about the nature of their creativity including, “what is your internal creative process?” and “do you use art to express emotions, or work to evoke emotions in others?” I then asked about their individual experiences and affective states during the pandemic and if these circumstances impacted their artwork in any way. As my conversations were all virtual, I made sure to be extra observant to how subjects reacted with visual and physical expressions on my computer screen, which is much easier to observe during in-person interviews. I was flexible on the time lengths based on the conversation flow and how open or not open the participant was; at the end, my shortest interview was 45 minutes and the longest was over 4 hours. With informed consent, I made audio recordings of the interviews which I coded for my analysis and referenced in this paper.

The second ethnographic method I relied upon was a process similar to photo-elicitation (Harper 2002), except with the artwork of participants which I refer to here as object elicitation. I undertook the same procedures used for ethnographic photo-elicitation, however, for these interviews I asked participants to bring in or refer to two art

pieces: one piece created before the pandemic, and one created during it. During photo-elicitation, the anthropologist asks their informants to bring photographs into an interview which are used to create conversation by evoking memories around the images (Harper 2002; Richard and Lahman 2015). The photos can act as an “objective third (neutral) party” and a gateway to personal topics, they also allow informants to open up and lead the discussion (Harper 2002; Richard and Lahman 2015). Photographs can also help informants make connections between interview topics and their own lives as well as bridge socio-cultural differences between the anthropologist and themselves (Harper 2002; Richard and Lahman 2015). Photo-elicitation is seen as an effective method of framing a subject’s social world and subjective state (Clark-Ibáñez 2016). Art is a product of the creative space which is a reality distorted and influenced by the artists’ feelings and attitudes with care for aesthetics. I predicted using art to start conversations would elicit a more subjective recollection of memories compared to photographs which might elicit a more objective recollection. I did have reservations as I anticipated the memories accessed through an art piece would be more subjective and emotional than memories accessed through a photograph; I kept this in mind during my analysis and as this study is concerned with understanding the internal affective experience, which is subjective, I felt art would be a useful gateway to this experience (May 1959).

For my analysis, I used the method of coding to identify core themes related to the pandemic experience and creative process. I began with a broader process of open coding where I re-read and re-interpreted my notes with my core questions in mind (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Once I identified the themes, I felt were significant to my research questions, I went through the transcripts to identify words associated with those themes and compiled them into a list (Strauss and Corbin 1990). From the list, I created three broad umbrella themes which I further discussed in my analysis. I approached my interviews reflexively and relied upon the methods of autoethnography in my interviews and analysis; a method requiring the anthropologist to write in a self-reflexive

manner in relation to their narratives and informants. I felt this method was important for my ethnography as I had pre-existing relationships with my informants, and I wanted to avoid representing my participants without acknowledging my emotional state and personal bias during the interview and analysis (Butz and Besio 2009).

Participant demographics

The participants in this ethnography all self-identify as artists and create art in the city of Toronto. Most artists chose to go by an alias name; however, one artist chose to go by their real name. The first participant, June, is a fashion student in her mid-20s at Toronto Metropolitan University who also paints in her spare time. Then we have James, a middle-aged sculptor and professional art teacher who lives in Toronto with his family. Leslie is a painter from Kelowna, British Columbia in her mid-60s who has been living in Toronto for the past few years. Daniella, originally from Italy, is a potter and graphic designer and has been living in Toronto for over 25 years. Angus, a friend of mine, is an engineer by trade who produces graphic artwork and music. The final participant, Benoit, is a professional opera singer who works around the world and lives with his wife and children in Toronto.

All participants posed different challenges for me when interviewing them as I recruited family members, friends, and family friends. I spent a lot of time at my desk drinking tea thinking about how to represent my subjects accurately and with a consistent lens. I was nervous embarking on writing the analysis portion of this paper, as I was aware I would be biased to represent certain artists very positively because of my personal relationships with them. I did not want to represent family members in a way that was reflective of my personal relationships. My approach to analysis was self-reflexive in my writing, through acknowledging the feelings and thoughts that came to me during the conversations. If my reaction to a subject was unique due to the pre-existing connection, I acknowledged it as such in my analysis.

Analysis

The Volume of and Motivation for Creative Work

The first measure I considered when distinguishing the effects of the pandemic on the artists' creativity was the amount of art created during the pandemic compared to the amount the artists created before. For this section, I also considered motivation for creativity; motivation is a key indicator of how much art can be made from creative thought and is an indicator of how the pandemic directly impacted artists' willingness to engage in creativity.

James and June both stressed that isolation had already been an important aspect of their creative processes before the pandemic, so the increase in alone time had a neutral-to-positive effect on their production. June emphasized in her interview a "need" to be alone to do her creative work; the isolation she experienced during the pandemic allowed her more time and space she could dedicate to creative activities and thinking and in total she found more opportunities to be creative. James indicated that he already prioritized blocking out alone time in his schedule and did not especially revel in the increased alone time during the pandemic. However, James was the only artist who described the effect of COVID-19 on his art production as having "accelerated" certain projects he had on the back burner before the pandemic.

Though Angus never mentioned isolation specifically in conjunction with creativity, he did stress the importance of the hours around midnight for sparking his creativity. "Covid let me be at home and for it to be acceptable for me to be me," he reflected speaking to the more indoor lifestyle many people took up during the pandemic. In the years leading up to the pandemic, Angus had dedicated his time to keeping up in a highly intense engineering program, with little time for other thought. Unlike James and June, external critique never impacted Angus's creative work and, apart from work meant for his online audience, the art he made during his spare time was completely for himself. He challenges himself to recreate effects he sees and hears in films and other art and then alters the result to reflect his personal

preferences for both his professional and personal projects.

Angus enjoys producing videos which he disseminates to an audience on YouTube, Soundcloud, and Twitch using many software programs to make music, pictures, and video. For him, there were several reasons why he was able to produce more during the pandemic. He cited that people finding meaning in his artwork was a strong motivator for him creatively, especially when he would receive messages from people thanking him for putting out his work and explaining how it had impacted them. He was also able to channel difficult emotions he experienced during the pandemic, such as loneliness, through his art. "I feel like that feeling of being able to feel. it really hooks a lot of musicians onto the process," he reflected when speaking to the creative experience of saturating his music with his emotions. Angus felt satisfied being able to create authentic art through his experience in lockdown; with more time to do so, he had a large creative output.

Leslie, who is involved in the Women's Art Association of Canada, continued to access the collective's studio for her own personal use during the pandemic albeit with limited access and stringent measures in place to reduce Coronavirus transmission. Because her access was more limited, she was not able to access her creative space as liberally as she had before. She did not, however, experience a lack of creative ideas due to the circumstances.

Daniella initially thought that the pandemic would bring about a "renaissance of creativity" as artists would have all the time and space in the world to create. She remembered attending a conference of artists and discussing with other creatives how excited they all were for this period they were to embark on stating, "the first six months, we were planning. We were going to do this and that. And after six months in which we were more creative... after six months everyone was dead inside. Nobody could make anything anymore because every day was the same." As her income depends on her ability to create, not all artistic activities stopped for Daniella, though she encountered a period of fewer ideas. To reconcile this non-inspiration, she started dividing her day up

creatively by pursuing pottery in the morning and graphic design work in the afternoon.

The artist who noted the most dramatic decrease in creative activities during the pandemic was Benoit. He heaved a sigh, "I lost momentum" and he began with, "for a good six months there wasn't anything going on because no one knew what was going on." Benoit stressed how attached his creativity was to his medium, opera, throughout his interview. He continued to describe the significant difference in the niche of opera to just singing and acting, stating, "with opera, you have to be grand and exaggerated. So, you have to learn both aspects. You gotta learn how to act for the camera and you have to learn how to act for the stage." Benoit's opera is integrative; he takes time to fully understand and incorporate the conductor's orchestral score and the storyline into his acting and singing. His performance is also strongly impacted by the audience and his energy varies with theirs. With no orchestra, stage, or audience Benoit was lost creatively.

The motivation to continue creative work was dependent on multiple factors for these artists. The artists seemed to split into two groups, those who worked with others in creative spaces and those who pursued creative activities solo. This split was medium-dependent, the accessibility of their chosen medium during the pandemic, and personality/preference dependent. For Benoit, it was impossible for him to perform opera during the pandemic as, for a long time, lockdowns banned gatherings of more than five people and he was unable to find a replacement for his artistic medium. When the pandemic started, he was unable to shift his creative activities as easily as June, Angus, James, and Leslie, who already had mediums that they pursued independently.

The motivation to create also appeared to correlate with the artists who had more positive experiences during the pandemic which caused a generally more positive affect. James, June, and Angus felt that the circumstances of the pandemic were productive toward their creative habits and indicated positive and neutral feelings about their new routines. They positively saw opportunities to excel

independently in their own creativity and were motivated to explore new and unique ideas — the excitement around this novelty and opportunity for them seemed to simultaneously result in an increased intrinsic motivation to create.

The Removal of Social Spaces

While none of my participants lived completely alone during the pandemic, they all appeared to experience de Jong-Gierveld's (2006) concept of *social loneliness* due to the lockdown measures. James and June specifically noted the absence of other creative people in their lives. James spoke about the loss of what he called a "vibrant" social life where he would connect with other artists and friends for social gatherings. At this moment in our conversation, he spoke slower and looked off from the camera, stating "our social life is often full of art-related relationships and activities, and all of those were postponed or disappeared with the pandemic. And then just continued to deteriorate with the overall duration of the pandemic." June spoke in a similar way about losing the collaborative element to her artistic process and noted that it was integral to her practice. June discussed the impact of less creative contact during the pandemic matter-of-factly stating, "without collaboration, we're really unable to move forward because everyone has their own perspective and you're just enhancing the work more as you collaborate and learn new things and try new things."

However, both James and June spoke fondly about receiving less external critique from others about their artwork. Less critique was beneficial for them in pursuing completely individual projects devoid of external impact. For James he was able to expand and go forth with ideas he had conceived of before the pandemic stating, "a lot of distractions and exterior noise fell to the wayside and gave me even more of an opportunity to focus on my studio work and push ideas forward that had been on the back burner or maybe I was hesitant or unsure or even insecure about."

June similarly indicated that the pandemic allowed her to pursue ideas she felt other artists would have been critical of and allowed her to create what she wanted for herself. June

was able to perceive of a new reality when it came to her art critique; one where she would only receive critique from herself. This allowed her to pursue creative ideas she preferred over ones that would have gained more positive external approval. The experiences of James and June are reminiscent of internal motivations to express ourselves genuinely to the world. Both artists spoke about their pandemic artwork excitedly and took pride in their abilities to overcome the judgments of others to pursue work that mattered to them most. Both stories also appeared to shed light on the number of critiques artists are subjected to and how over time this critique can cause one to be less genuinely expressive of the intrinsic self. This absence of external critique seemed to reaffirm Kociatkiewicz and Kostera (1999)'s notion of empty spaces being the breeding ground for new ideas. In this new space that was created without external critique for these two, it may have been the antecedent for creative thought.

As noted previously, Benoit's primary creative activities were halted during the pandemic due to quarantine measures as it is necessary for opera to be performed in-person. After those first six months of not performing, he was able to move forward by singing for old folks' homes at Christmas time and eventually began a teaching degree he had been holding off starting. However, he was never able to regain the creativity he normally felt through performing with the altered settings during the pandemic. Tired, Benoit described the lack of creativity he felt after not being able to perform reiterating, "I felt like I didn't have the momentum." Though he was able to relive some of the same satisfaction of having an audience while performing during Christmas, it was nothing nearly as energetic as the in-person audiences he had interacted with before the pandemic. Benoit's creative space completely overlaps with a social intersubjective one which could barely be replicated during the pandemic, in turn resulting in a decrease in creative activities.

Daniella emphasized the importance of her collaboration in helping move her ideas forward, an element that contributed to her lack of creativity during the pandemic. She spoke energetically about her circle of people

whom she thought of her most brilliant ideas with, all open-minded, from various backgrounds, and of different ages stating, "I tend to be a little controversial in my ideas and I have a group of people with which I can talk about anything without judgement — these people feed my creativity... ideas freely flow from one place to the other, and that is how I feed myself and my ideas."

Her description of collaboration is reminiscent of how Kathleen Stewart describes the intersubjective component to affect as "the 'we' incites participation and takes on a life of its own, even reflecting its own presence." (cited in Skoggard and Waterston 2015, 2; Stewart 2007). Collectives have affects and the loss of Daniella's creative collective impacted her personal creative affect greatly as she was only able to take her ideas so far. As she maintained, "you are cutting yourself off from a discussion." Once COVID-19 hit, she described the feelings of her and her other artists as being "dead inside," as opposed to the liveliness she felt in her artistic world before the pandemic. The absence of this social space took away her ability to enrich her ideas through collaboration and she lacked the inspiration her people brought to her, resulting in less of an interest in art and life.

Finally, Angus spoke about finding more of a community and audience because of the pandemic. Because the mechanism for creating and sharing digital art is online, his audience grew during COVID-19 as people spent more time online with him producing more music and videos on YouTube and Soundcloud. Angus stated, "if I really like a type of media, I will try my best to recreate it in my own sense." By having more time online, he was able to get exposure to a larger creative network and expand his own projects. He also developed a stronger online following during COVID-19, something Angus contemplated may not have happened otherwise saying, "it is pretty crazy when you think about all the communities and people who have those interests who would be willing to follow your journey as an artist." Though Angus stated that he normally just makes art for himself, bringing people happiness through creating videos gave him purpose and inspiration to continue creating during the pandemic.

The art medium pursued was also a variable involved with the impact of social isolation. Apart from the factors discussed in the previous section, the artists interacted with their community audiences differently during the pandemic due to differences in medium. Angus was not isolated from his fellow creatives and gained more exposure, so he was able to thrive and grow creatively whereas artists such as Benoit and Daniella, whose mediums were dependent on an in-person element, suffered in these circumstances. The artists' preferences for collaboration and group work impacted the amount of creativity they experienced in the pandemic. Daniella, Benoit, and Leslie all spoke of a loss when without their artistic collectives and only Leslie spoke of continued creativity despite the lack of the previous intersubjective creative space. Benoit and Daniella encountered significantly less passion and intrinsic motivation to continue creating when those intersubjective creative spaces were taken away due to social isolation.

Addressing personality differences, some artists seemed to prefer working alone whereas others preferred working with others. Though the topic of the extroversion/introversion personality factor was not directly discussed in the interviews, it may have been associated with how well the different artists fared in quarantine as introverts prefer time spent alone versus extroverts who thrive off social interaction. Future areas of study into personality and creativity could sample and assess differences and similarities between introverted and extroverted creatives; how much of the creatives' time is spent alone, what mediums the creatives are drawn to, and what is the subject matter of their artwork?

The Impact of COVID-19 on Affective States

The events of the pandemic appeared to cause certain affective states in the artists which further impacted the content of their work. Leslie came into her interview with a piece she had created during the pandemic which she calls "The Closing of The Doors" (Figure 4). The painting immediately evoked a sense of loss in me when I looked at it. A set of blue-black barn doors with rusty orange beams are depicted mostly closed with a small opening on the



Figure 4: Leslie's piece, "The Closing of The Doors." Image courtesy of Leslie Savage.

middle-left-hand side of the painting where a small sliver of the forest is visible beneath a colourless sky. To me, the painting felt like it depicted late fall, with a slight redness to the sky showing signs of an early sunset; however, in my interview with Leslie when she spoke about her moment of inspiration for this piece, I now know that the painting portrays early spring. The doors are worn down and appear to be closing slowly. Leslie spoke slow, but her voice stayed in the almost rhythmic cadence I had gotten accustomed to since first meeting her. She spoke of the closings she encountered in her life which occurred at the same time of and some due to the pandemic stating, "there were closings and a lot of the restaurants, you know, I live right by Yonge street and you would see the restaurants closing down or, the merchants who had signs [saying] "buy local" or say[ing] "goodbye"...[E]verything was closing, all the doors were closing, including for my husband, the doors of his life, because he was becoming more and more incapacitated."

She spoke more about moving from a spacious home in Revelstoke, British Columbia, with lots of outdoor space, to a small apartment in Toronto so that she and her husband could be close to a hospital. Due to her husband's degrading health, she was unable to access as much personal space as she had before the pandemic as she had taken on the role of his caretaker. For Leslie, the pandemic imposed new physical, social, and emotional realities which were very reflective in her most recent piece. Her piece is not only reflective of her own

experience, but of the broader pandemic experience, which makes it very relatable. I found myself overwhelmed with her story at this point in the interview, to which Leslie responded saying, “oh, don’t cry, I’m not crying.” Upon reflecting on this comment after our interview I wondered if part of Leslie’s ability to keep calm while recounting these heavy memories to me was due to the processing of emotions she had done through creating her artwork — and that “The Closing of The Doors” was as much an expression of herself as something she used to cope.

As Daniella experienced the severing of social ties, which were linked to her creativity, she experienced bleakness and boredom in everyday life voicing, “you were lonely even with the people you chose to share your life with. We all had absolutely nothing to say to each other.” She experienced a change in affect that coincided with that of her social groups; the more rigid the lockdown measures became, the more her pandemic life became a shell of her former one. Daniella created “Group Therapy” during the latter half of the pandemic, a title reflecting the bitter irony she spoke about from that period. A scrapbook-esque multimedia piece of tiles depicting the progression of human life throughout the pandemic. Victorian-era drawings of people, paying homage to the Spanish Flu, are strewn in a sickly journey throughout images of toilet paper, viruses, vaccines, socially distanced gatherings, and concerning news headlines. A brightly coloured world transforms over to a constricted one conveyed in a dull ill-green. The twisted and sparse journey the characters go through depicts our society’s journey of confusion, chaos, and resolution during 2020 and 2021. This piece is a real reflection of her understanding that “we all went through it together” (Figure 5).

Throughout his interview, Benoit described multiple positive affective benefits of opera. In recounting his career to me, he mentioned a formative experience performing the role of Alfredo in Giuseppe Verdi’s “La Traviata” where he used his performance to help channel difficult emotional experiences.

I was very immersed and mesmerized by that story—she ends up dying of



Figure 5: One of the 24 multimedia tiles from Daniella’s piece titled “Group Therapy” (Copyright Imaginis Design Studio).

tuberculosis, it’s the most gut-wrenching thing... I was in my early twenties, and able to relate because there was heartbreak, I had broken up with my first real serious girlfriend. I channelled that energy and those emotions into that role... I think that’s such a strong connection and now more so because I lost my brother. There’s always that longing of wanting that person back and you know that they’re not gonna come back.

Though Benoit was not isolated from his family, his creative state was strongly changed by not being around an audience and an orchestra. Because opera requires other performers, musicians, and an audience Benoit was stripped away completely creatively, “it was taxing on me. I was, I hate to use these words, depressed, but I was down.” He dove into working for his family construction company and caring for his family.

Throughout the interview, he described elements of his performance with excitement and with great depth using gestures to describe the movements on the stage between actors and where the conductor would be situated, stating that, “nothing is better than live feed or feeding off that energy that audience gives

you.” He noted this with enthusiasm, shaking his head. When we spoke about the past two years when he was unable to perform, he did not elaborate on the subject and, when describing that time, he was somber. His reality changed from performing opera, an activity that made him feel energized, passionate, and happy, to one where he described his affect using the words “depressed,” “lost,” and “empty.” Though Benoit kept busy, he was never able to fill the space left behind by opera during COVID-19; as the severity of the pandemic decreased, he immediately got in contact with his opera companies and is set to perform again.

Angus described feeling lonely and isolated as he completed his final year of an Engineering program in the fall of 2020. Instead of finding inspiration in the state of the world for his projects, he used art to distract himself from the worry he felt reading news headlines and the isolation he experienced while completing online school. When I asked if any of his artwork contained content that related to the pandemic, he shook his head, “I tried my hardest to avoid thinking about the pandemic right and that’s part of why it seems like the last few years went so fast.” Angus dedicated a lot of time to art during the pandemic, as it functioned to improve his affective state by

providing satisfaction from sharing with an audience, as a distraction, and as a way to channel difficult emotions. “You really have a lot of inspiration for music at points where your emotions are really powerful.” Angus takes pride in the music he made during the pandemic citing a large difference in the quality of work made when he was processing something emotionally through a song versus one he made for fun. Angus said that “the really funny contrast is the second track I have on SoundCloud is probably the shiniest and worst song I’ve ever made and releasing it- I just hated it. I just made it for fun and there was nothing happening in my life at the time when I did it.” For James, regardless of his experience during the lockdowns, hearing the stories of others during the pandemic elicited a “broad empathy” in him, which brought about an overall atmosphere of loneliness and isolation. This atmosphere was the result of empathizing with the stories of people he was close to and engaging with the global community. This experience was reflected in several of his pieces, one he calls “Lost and Found” which is a sculpture series made up of gloves found on the streets of Toronto in the shape of different phrases in sign language including “feel better soon” (Figure 6).



Figure 6: James’s piece titled “Lost and Found,” inspired by the COVID-19 pandemic (Image courtesy of the artist).

This piece to me emulates James's simultaneous feelings of connectedness and loneliness during the pandemic, as well as his desire to reach out to others because of this experience. James also found himself "stimulated by the fact that [he] was creating in new ways" in lockdown due to the opportunity to pursue more extraordinary ideas. He noted that the pandemic helped him further enrich apocalyptic themes in his work which he had already been exploring before. These enriched themes are seen in his series "Paradise Lost" which is a group of sculptures that depict intertwined flamingos which are suggestive of suburban America and the emptiness, yet idealism, that comes along with it (Figure 7). Perhaps it was due to this increased passion for creating that he was able to cultivate ideas to produce such inventive pieces.



Figure 7: James's piece titled "Paradise Lost." Image courtesy of the artist.

When I asked June if she had any experiences in the pandemic that came through in her artwork, she shook her head saying that the main change she felt was the increased confidence she had in pursuing the ideas she had been afraid to before. June was able to develop a deeper appreciation for her own inventive art style which is reflected in her

pieces as they are much more complicated and less subtle than her previous paintings and artwork. Her artwork has become a lot more surrealist recently. She held up an embroidered piece of fabric to the camera, where shiny black sequins and beads from different eras are strung together in spirals and columns. Some sequins are imported directly from the Couture house in Paris that makes clothing for Chanel, others are taken from a 1920s flapper dress she bought second-hand, and some are taken from a dress of her late grandmother's. She also recreates memories from her childhood of being in Northern Ontario during the summers where she played and explored alongside lakes and rivers. You can almost see June's childhood memories of waves — the thrashing and twisting knit ropes and the shining sequin crests reflecting the sun (Figure 8).



Figure 8: One section of June's surrealist bead project. Image courtesy of the artist.

The piece comes together to resemble a landscape photograph taken at her family's cottage that she abstracted through Photoshop to resemble her experience of retrieving a place through memory. As June's experience in the pandemic was her discovering her art style further as well as appreciating the historical

and environmental context of her materials, I would say this is completely reflected in the art she produced.

Conclusion

Overall, the relationship between affect and creativity seemed to corroborate with previous findings that positive affect is linked to creativity. Artists had different responses to the shift in place and space; some thriving during quarantine while others suffered, and the responses seemed to reflect in their creativity. Artists such as June felt more positive after being forced into having more social isolation—with increased confidence and satisfaction as she felt after being able to pursue her unique ideas without limit. James found himself stimulated in the moment when creating, indicating an in-the-moment relationship between his creativity and affect. Additionally, artists like Benoit and Angus related experiences that resemble the posited U-Shaped model for creativity both citing experiences of intense emotionality, some being very negative, resulting in moments of extreme creativity and expression. Leslie, found herself deeply immersed in intense emotions which can forward strongly in her artwork, indicating positive creativity.

The creative space is still a bit of a mystery, which is accessible for some and not others, and those times when it is accessible can seem random. For some, this space opens up in the presence of people, whereas for others it is when they are completely alone. This difference is still questioned and there is no clear answer as to why people have creativity under different social contexts. It is rare as to be able to test these contexts in such a scenario as a pandemic, where quarantines inherently mandated some social isolation, though even through this experience of exploration and interview this topic is still extremely nuanced.

Creativity transpires in people differently as it reflects one's uniqueness and experience and is impacted by the physical, social, and affect factors of one's reality. James described the process of creating as a need beyond his control, like sleeping or eating like Maslow. Similarly, June stated, "my creative process also involves me trying to figure out why create and

why I need to create." Creating art is an embellishment of the day-to-day experience and a life raft during times of confusion and chaos. Art, being deeply contextual and inherently dynamic, serves as a conduit for people to connect across diverse experiences, forever resonating within the ever-evolving tapestry of our world.

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