
From hearth to hard drive: well-being benefits of online Irish traditional singing sessions during COVID-19

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Summary

This article explores the impact of online Irish traditional singing sessions on health and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. Singing sessions are unique facets of Ireland's music tradition that saw dramatic closure, interruption and digital transition in response to COVID-19 social distancing measures. This study highlights a gap in health promotion literature with regard to traditional singing sessions as a group singing activity and examines the potential for online group singing activities to have positive impacts on the health and well-being of participants. While traditional singing sessions foreground solo performances, they are quintessentially group activities, and include community engagement and active participation from singers and listeners alike. Through an online survey ($n=108$), and ethnographic interviews ($n=3$), this study explores potential health and well-being implications of online traditional singing sessions, and reveals four main areas of impact: social connection, enjoyment, cognitive motivation and timekeeping. The study suggests that online traditional singing sessions can promote health and well-being in participants, particularly during times of isolation.

Lay Summary

This article explores the impact of online Irish traditional singing sessions on health and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. Singing sessions are unique facets of Ireland's music tradition which were forced to move online due to COVID-19 restrictions. This study used an online survey ($n=108$), and interviews ($n=3$), to explore the impact of these online sessions on the well-being of their participants. Findings showed the impacts to be overwhelmingly positive, particularly in four main areas: social connection, enjoyment, cognitive motivation, and timekeeping. This study highlights the value of traditional singing sessions as group singing activities for the purposes of health and well-being promotion, and suggests that online group singing activities can be beneficial, particularly during times of isolation.

Key words: group singing, well-being, Irish traditional singing sessions, COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

Overview of study

This paper presents the findings of a mixed-methods pilot study exploring the impact of online singing sessions on the health and well-being of participants during the COVID-19 pandemic. There has been significant research conducted recently in the fields of health promotion, community music and music therapy indicating the significant benefits of solo and group singing for physical (Kreutz *et al.*, 2004; Clift *et al.*, 2010; Fancourt *et al.*, 2016; Gick and Nicol, 2016; Stone *et al.*, 2018), psycho-emotional (Unwin *et al.*, 2002; Gick, 2010; Dingle *et al.*, 2012, 2019; Coulton *et al.*, 2015; Williams *et al.*, 2018; Allen *et al.*, 2019) and social health and well-being (Murray and Lamont, 2012; Hays and Minichiello, 2005; Daykin *et al.*, 2013; Dike, 2017; Moss *et al.*, 2018; Cohen, 2019; Daffern *et al.*, 2019; Batt-Rawden and Andersen, 2020; Camlin *et al.*, 2020; Moss and O'Donoghue, 2020; Paldam Folker *et al.*, 2021), and the interactions between these facets (Clift *et al.*, 2008; Clift, 2013; Theorell, 2019). However, previous studies have largely focussed on choir singing, leaving other forms of group singing relatively neglected to date. Indeed, choral singing dominates current perceptions of group singing to the extent that the *Oxford Handbook of Singing* uses 'group singing' and 'choral singing' synonymously (Davidson and Faulkner, 2019; Theorell, 2019). In line with Boyce-Tillman's point that 're-valuing orate singing traditions has freed up many therapeutic possibilities and unchained the innate singing power of numerous people' (Boyce-Tillman, 2019, p. 958), this article seeks to expand the definition of group singing to include any event where people gather to share songs as a community.

Irish traditional singing sessions differ from choral group singing experiences in that most of the singing is solo, with the group joining in only occasionally on choruses or to encourage the singer. Also, most of the participants function as both listeners and singers throughout the event (Vallely, 1999; Dike, 2017), thus differing from most performance contexts. The original intent of this research was to focus specifically on the impact of online sessions. However, as no research seems to have been conducted on well-being in the context of traditional singing sessions, the present paper will serve as a starting point for this field of inquiry. This study was conducted in two phases: an online survey and three semi-structured interviews with selected survey participants. The insights of this study are further informed by the researchers' reflexive positioning as Irish traditional singers and singing session hosts.

Irish traditional singing sessions

Irish traditional singing sessions are a sister-tradition to their better-known instrumental counterparts. Although traditional singing sessions differ in structure and performance style from the typical choral experience of group singing, they are very much group activities centred around song and social interaction, and thus offer an interesting alternative setting for the study of health and well-being in group singing settings.

Contemporary singing sessions most often meet in pubs, but can also be found in kitchens, libraries and other community gathering places. They typically start in the late evening last between 3 and 5 h, although during 'big nights' or festivals the singing may continue all night. While each session is somewhat unique, the general pattern of a singing session is for all participants (singers and listeners alike) to sit comfortably around the room and sing from wherever they are sitting, often looking down or with eyes closed. Although some people attend sessions only as listeners, most participants will both sing and listen during the session, so there is little division between performers and audience. The atmosphere is informal, and generally there is no strict structure. Some sessions have no facilitator, and singers simply start a song when they feel like it, relying on the room to fall silent when they begin. Other sessions have a 'Bean an Tí' or 'Fear an Tí' (a woman or man 'of the house') who acts as MC and 'calls' the singers (Dike 2017). Talk and banter is encouraged between songs, but full attention must be given to any singer during their song. Thus, the room transitions easily between an informal atmosphere and a performance space. Strict silence is not required, however, and many people join in on refrains, or call out encouragement to the singers during the songs (Dike, 2017; Vallely, 1999). Songs are sung from memory, and are nearly always unaccompanied. The experience of singing together is generally limited to choruses or refrains, but the sense of community achievement and appreciation is very much present, and listening is expected to be an active role.

Singing sessions were an early casualty of the COVID-19 pandemic, but swiftly adapted to the new reality. Unlike choirs and most communal performance contexts, which were hampered by the inability to perform simultaneously, the solo, unaccompanied singing style traditional to Ireland transferred to online platforms like Zoom relatively well. Online sessions became a major feature of the pandemic for many traditional singers, and their accessibility allowed singers to join many sessions they would not normally attend.

Contextualizing the pandemic

This study has been undertaken within the parameters of the COVID-19 global health crisis. As a result of the novel Coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, COVID-19 spread rapidly in late 2019, reaching pandemic levels in early 2020. By March of 2020, Ireland—along with a significant percentage of the global population—declared an emergency status and proceeded to lock down. In accordance with recommendations from the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2020), Ireland's Health Service Executive department established a suite of safety protocols, which entailed avoidance of physical contact, sheltering in place and social distancing (HSE, 2021; Lincaru, 2021; Lipovsky, 2021). These protective responses to COVID-19 had serious ramifications, including the mass closure of social environments, as people were urged to stay in their homes. Subsequently, a significant digital transition occurred.

Vibrant digital communities existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Daffern *et al.*, 2019; Lutkenhaus *et al.*, 2020; Dadich and Khan, 2021; Darker *et al.*, 2021), most notably through social media and gaming platforms. However, with the constraint of pandemic conditions, the internet quickly became one of the safest methods for maintaining and promoting connection and social well-being. This had its advantages and disadvantages. While some found the digital medium to open doors and provide a blended experience (Cronje, 2021; Engelberg, 2021; Vega, 2021), other instances were not as conducive to online environments. As a result of these fractures to our societal makeup, feelings of loneliness and isolation, stress and anxiety, depression, and cynicism have markedly increased in global populations (McGrath *et al.*, 2020; Atehortua and Patino, 2021). It was in this context that many session hosts, including the researchers of this study, took advantage of online platforms such as Zoom to continue Irish traditional singing sessions. Rather than cancelling the sessions, traditional singers around the world came together during the pandemic to celebrate and promote their traditions, and support one another during a time of intense uncertainty and isolation.

Positioning of the researchers

The researchers come to this study from the position of traditional song-scholars and ethnomusicologists. Our previous work is mainly grounded in areas of meaning, history and practice of Irish traditional songs and singing. As traditional singers and song-scholars, we have taken part in many traditional sessions around Ireland (before and during the COVID-19 pandemic), and we

also co-host the Limerick Singing Session, which successfully transitioned online in early March 2020, and continues as a weekly online session at the time of writing. Through this experience we became aware of the potentially salubrious and beneficial role that our session was providing for its participants, and we were curious to explore this phenomenon on a wider scale. Our intent was to engage not only an audience of traditional song-scholars and ethnomusicologists, but also a wide range of scholars and workers within fields of health promotion.

The researchers were also conscious of their etemic placement within the field throughout this study. The etemic model utilizes the attributes of both the etic and the emic facets of one's identity in order to arrive at a well-rounded, comprehensive and more critically engaged perspective (Spiers, 2000; Heaslip *et al.*, 2016). This model resonates with the researchers, as they are cognisant of both their etic and emic positions within the Irish music tradition and cultural context. The researchers come into an Irish cultural context from American backgrounds, but engage in traditional sessions as singers and hosts, and thus as members of the community, as well as academic researchers.

METHODOLOGY

Design

This research was conducted in two phases: an online survey including both quantitative and qualitative questions, and three semi-structured, ethnographic interviews with selected participants. Ethics clearance was sought for and obtained from our affiliated institution, and the survey was conducted over 4 weeks from 31 May to 28 June 2021, with the interviews conducted during the last week as themes began to emerge from the survey findings. Participants engaged voluntarily in the survey, which was disseminated on social media and in online sessions. Participants were given the option of being contacted for further interviews, and the interviewees were chosen from participants who chose this option. A consent form was placed at the start of the survey, and a further consent form was signed by each interviewee. As this was intended as a pilot study, the main focus was on ascertaining if benefits were reported, and if so, to identify particular themes which future research might explore. At the time the study was conducted, Ireland was beginning to emerge from a lockdown which had begun the previous autumn, and traditional sessions had been entirely online for a full year; thus, the responses gathered here capture the

attitudes of traditional singers at a crucial point in the history of Ireland and of traditional singing sessions.

Participants

The participants for this study were recruited from the Irish traditional singing session community, particularly those who were active in online sessions during the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey was distributed mainly through social media, particularly Facebook groups frequented by the Irish traditional singing community. The researchers also approached various session hosts asking them to share the survey with their participants in order to get as broad a spectrum of responses as possible. The total responses garnered from the survey were ($n=108$). This included participants from several main locations including the Republic of Ireland ($n=70$), the UK ($n=22$), the USA ($n=10$), Continental Europe ($n=4$) and Canada ($n=2$).

Data analysis

Once collected, the qualitative data were interpreted using grounded theory formulated by Glaser and Strauss, and further developed by such scholars as Kathy Charmaz (Glaser, 1992; Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Charmaz, 2014; Costello, 2015; Chung Tie *et al.*, 2019; Thompson, 2020). Charmaz describes grounded theory methods as 'systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analysing qualitative data to construct theories from the data themselves. Thus researchers construct a theory "grounded" in their data' (Charmaz, 2014). Coding techniques (Suddaby, 2006; Hennink *et al.*, 2011; van den Tol, 2012; Allen *et al.*, 2019) were then employed as a means of materializing and interpreting thematic categories within the qualitative survey responses. After determining the four main themes emerging through the qualitative data, percentages were determined to derive quantitative metrics regarding the prominence of certain themes over others in the survey findings.

METHODS

Survey

Following the example of previous work in health and singing (Clift *et al.*, 2008; Bryce *et al.*, 2016; Moss *et al.*, 2018; Dingle *et al.*, 2019; Moss and O'Donoghue, 2020; Darker *et al.*, 2021), the researchers began this study with a survey consisting of three quantitative and two qualitative questions. This survey was kept short in the hopes of attracting as large a participant base as possible. The quantitative survey questions were aimed at

discovering whether and how often participants had taken part in online traditional singing sessions and whether they felt the sessions had impacted their well-being at all. The qualitative questions invited participants to reflect on the nature of the impact of the sessions. The qualitative survey questions were broad in scope and allowed the participants to express their experiences in their own words. The intent was to focus on participant experience, and attempt to explore the significance 'which individuals attach to their experience of group singing' (Camlin *et al.*, 2020). In accordance with best-practice recommendations for research on group singing, health and well-being, the survey was anonymized (Dingle *et al.*, 2019) and was created using Qualtrics software. Participants did have the option to include a name and email address if they wished to be contacted for an interview, but these were removed before coding took place. Also, after initial analysis, it was decided to only use the responses from the first qualitative question (Q4—see Appendix 2) in this study, because many of the responses to the second qualitative question (Q5) focussed on technical issues around the sessions, and fewer people responded to this question.

The grounded theory approach to this material began with carefully reading through all of the survey responses and searching for key or common words, phrases and/or perspectives. The responses to each qualitative question were then colour-coded and reorganized to reveal thematic categories. Due to the nature of the survey responses, it was decided to allow coding of multiple themes in a single comment, where appropriate. Coding was undertaken by both researchers separately, then collaboratively, and before comparison of findings with previous studies.

Interviews

The second phase of the research consisted of three semi-structured interviews conducted in an ethnographic framework (Spradley, 1979; Jackson, 1987; Minichiello *et al.*, 1995) with purposefully sampled survey participants. All three interviewees had elected to be contacted for further discussion during the survey process, and were informed during the survey and before the interview that they were under no obligation to participate. Of the total survey participants ($n=108$), more than half ($n=55$) offered to be contacted for an interview, but due to time and space restraints interviews were limited to three. We chose the interviewees on three criteria, which were gleaned from survey responses: (i) reflections of main themes in their survey responses; (ii) unique experiences which could add depth to the

study; (iii) geographic range. The final interviewees are as follows:

J is a prominent singer and song-scholar living in Donegal. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, J launched the first Facebook page dedicated to online singing sessions. This page became a community hub, and the main place where news of online sessions was shared and discussed. As a fierce proponent of the communal aspect of singing sessions, J was particularly well suited to discuss the challenges and potential of online sessions.

M is a committee member and co-host of a large Dublin-based singing session. Due to its high profile, this singing session experienced a huge surge in attendance when it moved online, which led to particular challenges. As both a traditional singer and session host, M was well placed to discuss the process and results of moving a large weekly session online.

L is a co-host (along with the researchers) of the Limerick Singing Session. L is a California native who was living in Ireland when Limerick Singing Session was founded. She was a constant presence at the ‘in-person’ Limerick Sessions, and helped with the transition of the session to Zoom before relocating to Boston in Summer 2020. L gave insight into the connection afforded by online sessions during lockdowns in multiple countries.

FINDINGS

The findings from this study overwhelmingly show that participants found the online sessions beneficial to their well-being during the pandemic. Analysis of the qualitative data revealed four main themes related to well-being: social connection, enjoyment, cognitive motivation and timekeeping. In addition, although many participants felt that ‘in person’ sessions were preferable to online ones, there was also a broad consensus that the online sessions are valuable additions to the living tradition, particularly because of their accessibility for people abroad and those who cannot travel due personal circumstances. It would be beneficial for further research and comparative studies to be conducted when ‘in-person’ sessions resume. Although it is likely that online sessions will continue in some form after the pandemic, their nature will no-doubt change with the lifting of lockdowns, making the timing of this study crucial.

Quantitative

Quantitative findings were calculated from surveys where at least two of the four questions were answered (=108). At total of 146 ($n=146$) surveys were

begun, but many ($n=38$) were never completed or had only one question answered. Responses were gathered between 31 May to 28 June 2021. Thirty-seven per cent ($n=40$) of the participants attended online sessions more than once a week, while 35% ($n=38$) attended weekly. Twenty-four per cent ($n=25$) attended only monthly, and <5% ($n=5$) attended ‘rarely’. Eighty-six per cent ($n=93$) of participants reported that session participation impacted their well-being during the pandemic (see [Figure A1](#)).

Participants who reported attending sessions more than once a week reported impacts to their well-being more consistently than any other group. Of the 40 participants who attended more than once a week, 95% ($n=38$) stated that the sessions impacted their well-being. Of the two remaining, one responded ‘maybe’ and the other skipped the question. This is in sharp contrast to the participants who attended sessions only once a week ($n=38$), of which only 75% ($n=29$) reported in the affirmative. This may suggest that increased attendance compounds the impact to well-being, or it could mean that those who enjoyed the sessions most, generally attended more often. The latter is, perhaps, more likely, since participants who only attended monthly sessions reported slightly better than those who attended weekly. Of monthly participants, 80% ($n=20$) of the 25 respondents reported impacts on their well-being, while four said ‘maybe’ and only one reported ‘no’. This may reflect the fact that many singers who only attended one session per month were continuing to attend their ‘local’ session online, but not engaging in the many others accessible over Zoom, and were therefore continuing in relatively familiar groups of friends (see [Figure A2](#)).

The first qualitative question asked the participants to explain the impact of the sessions on their well-being. Out of the total responses to this question ($n=95$), only two comments ($n=2$) expressed a negative impact on well-being, while the rest ($n=93$) overwhelmingly reported positively. While some mostly positive comments did express negative aspects of the sessions, the concerns were mainly due to limitations of the technology, particularly the inability of participants to give encouragement or join in with the singer. Thematic analysis of the qualitative survey data revealed four main themes pertaining to the well-being of participants, as stated above.

Social connection was by far the most central theme of the survey responses, with 81% ($n=77$) of comments listing social connection as part of the importance of the sessions’ impact on their well-being. Enjoyment came second in importance with 67% ($n=64$) of the total

responses mentioning 'enjoyment', 'positivity' or 'feeling uplifted' as a result of the sessions. This thematic trend was slightly more complex to interpret, as participants' enjoyment could be elicited from a range of factors, including engagement with the session, connecting with old and new friends, learning and singing songs, and more. Cognitive motivation was the third most common theme. Twenty-five per cent ($n=24$) of the responses mentioned some form of cognitive motivation. Many participants stated that session participation had encouraged them to learn new songs or practice more. Some responses mentioned that the sessions gave them focus during the pandemic, and increased their confidence as singers. Finally, the theme of timekeeping occurred in 21% ($n=20$) of responses. This theme was somewhat broad, but it is clear from responses that online sessions provided important time markers during the lockdowns. Respondents stated that the sessions gave them 'something to look forward to', helped to remind people what day it was, or simply helped to pass the time (see [Figure A3](#)).

Qualitative

Social connection

The responses to the qualitative survey question (Q4—see [Appendix 2](#)) highlighted the importance of the social aspect of sessions on the participant's well-being. Some participants even said they had become more socially active than normal due to the accessibility of online sessions, and many noted that the sessions allowed them to keep in touch with friends and meet new people. One respondent said that the sessions, '[o]pened up a world of opportunities through traditional Irish song, connections made worldwide with singers, researchers and listeners alike. With freedom currently curtailed by the "pandemic" these gatherings have been a valuable social outlet and beneficial to mental health wellbeing'. Participants frequently reported that the sessions fostered a 'sense of comradeship', and feelings of 'friendship', 'connection', 'belonging' and 'inclusivity'. One participant said '[i]t allowed me to connect with my friends in the singing community and lessened feelings of isolation', while another reported that they were '[n]ot enthusiastic about Zoom initially but got used to it and made a lot of new friends'.

These findings were supported in the interviews. M said that '[...]it enabled me to maintain my singing habit and to stay in regular touch with my [song session] friends too, which was really important for my mental health' (Personal Interview, 2021). L similarly noted 'I ended up relocating to Boston [...] and that has been [a]

really nice way to keep the connections to my friends in Ireland, and to the people that I met in the singing sessions [...] it's just wonderful to be able to still connect with the same people every week, and I can still do it even though I live in Boston' (Personal Interview, 2021). J considers the social aspect to be one of the most important functions moving the sessions online during the pandemic: '[...] it had its function in maintaining morale, it had its function in keeping people seeing one another, [...] so that it was as much about sort of sustaining the ghost of the community as it was about singing songs at one another' (Personal Interview, 2021).

J's notion of the sessions maintaining only the 'ghost of the community' was certainly felt by some survey participants. Many of the changes required to adapt the sessions to an online setting were certainly detrimental to their social aspects. Several survey responses lamented the lack of social discourse and encouragement during songs. One participant said 'It was good to see everyone, but the online character of it made it feel quite strange. I missed the encouragement you get from the normal sessions, through facial expressions, encouraging comments, laughter, people joining in the chorus, etc. I was singing alone, into a screen, and yet I wasn't quite alone...'

Session hosts balanced conversation and singing differently, but the inability to have small side-discussions generally meant that any non-musical activity had to be limited. M said that one of the main changes she saw was the '[l]ack of banter necessitated by the numbers attending and the need to control mics [...] Some of the banter has moved to the chat and there are mixed views on this. I have had people tell me it is intrusive and others say it was the only social contact they may have had that week' (Personal Interview, 2021).

Enjoyment

This theme was commonly expressed by participants in terms of 'positivity', 'enjoyment', 'feeling uplifted', etc. Some respondents stated simply that the sessions had impacted their well-being 'positively', while others went into more detail. One participant stated: 'I felt happy and relaxed. The TV & radio talked about nothing else only covid'. Other comments included 'It lifted my spirits each session', 'You leave a session with a smile' and 'Passed the night and made me feel good'. Several participants stated that attending sessions improved their overall mood and helped them relax. Frequently, comments combined the sense of enjoyment with the sense of community, as expressed by one respondent who said

the impact on their well-being was ‘100% positive’ because they were ‘[a]ble to engage with others, learn new songs, make new friends, hear songs and stories from people from all over the world with the same interest in traditional singing as me’. Another respondent said that they were ‘[a]lways feeling upbeat when leaving the on-line session’.

Some participants also mentioned that they were able to sing more often due to the sessions moving online: ‘I am singing in public far more often now via zoom than ever I was before the pandemic and I spend more time researching and practising songs[...] The on-line experience is different from the in-person experience, but I am enjoying it’. L also remarked on the impact of the sessions on emotional well-being: ‘I feel much more connected to my own voice and to the other session singers at the end of each session. Having a weekly space just for singing brings me joy and relaxation. But it’s so much more than a space for singing—we sing together, but we also laugh together and chat throughout the session. I leave each session feeling like I have filled my bucket for the week’ (Personal Interview, 2021).

Cognitive motivation

Many participants reported that the sessions had challenged them to practice more and step out of their comfort zone. One respondent remarked that ‘[h]aving to learn and memorise songs kept my brain agile’, while others stated that the sessions, ‘[m]ade me practice’ or ‘made me learn new songs’. An interesting sub-theme which emerged here was improved confidence, mentioned by several respondents. [O]ne respondent listed ‘Listening to others and finding my own voice to express myself despite restrictions of pandemic’, in the sessions’ impacts. Another comment was ‘[d]evelopment of repertoire, learning and experience has benefited greatly through online participation’. Increased technical skills were also mentioned, particularly for people who helped to host sessions. This point was echoed by M, who listed getting used to the technology as one of the biggest challenges in the online transition, and noted that hosting online sessions was much more stressful than hosting ‘in-person’ sessions at first. ‘Once everyone on the committee got up to speed on the workings of Zoom it was much easier ...’ she said, but also noted that they had made several changes to the session in order to better work within the restraints of the online platform (Personal Interview, 2021).

Timekeeping

The theme of sessions as ‘events’ or time-markers during the pandemic came across strongly in many survey responses, and was often linked with mental health or well-being by the respondents. As mentioned earlier, many of the respondents stated that the sessions gave them ‘something to look forward to’. One respondent stated: ‘I looked forward to every week. It made me learn new songs. Although it was virtual it was very sociable and I feel I have made new friends. To be frank it has kept me sane’, while another said ‘I think I might not have known the day of the week without the Monday session’. L, whose mother also began joining the sessions from her home in California, said: ‘I know for me, and actually for my mom, they gave us both a routine. [...] A weekly session that’s at the same time—it’s an activity that I know I can show up to, I know what’s going to happen, I know the people who are going to be there, more or less, and it’s reliable, it’s dependable [...] and having that sense of routine is also great for mental health, and for emotional well-being’ (Personal Interview, 2021).

Access

A final theme that was not as prominent as the others but is worth noting is that of access. This theme had two different sub-sections: access from a distance and access for people whose personal circumstances would not have allowed them to join otherwise. The survey responses confirmed the researchers’ experience that many people were joining in sessions from outside Ireland. Just over 35% ($n = 38$) of the session responses were from outside of Ireland, the majority of which were from the USA and the UK. M also noted that the singing session that she participated in ‘... had people zooming in from all over Ireland, but also regularly participating from England, Scotland, Wales, France, Germany, the USA, Canada and Australia’ (Personal Interview, 2021). Many of the survey responses were enthusiastic about the influx of participants from around the world, commenting on the diversity of songs and the joy of meeting new singers. Indeed, for some respondents, this was the only upside of the online sessions: ‘I miss the words of encouragement from others during a song and being able to give encouragement. There is a plus side in that people from far away can participate and that the session is opened up to others and isn’t so exclusive to a certain area’.

Furthermore, online sessions were accessible to many people who could not normally attend due to personal circumstances. One respondent stated: ‘I rarely attended

in person, with a young family I struggled to get to real physical sessions or festivals. I had lost confidence in my own singing and I missed it very much'. J particularly commented on getting to see singers who rarely travel to 'in-person' sessions. He considered this one reason to continue some online sessions after the pandemic (Personal Interview, 2021). Some survey feedback resonated with this: 'I think that some online singing and workshops could continue after lockdown? It allowed people to join and sing from all parts of the world. It also meant that people who may have difficulty travelling could participate'.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that online Irish traditional singing sessions contributed positively to the health and well-being of their participants during the COVID-19 outbreak, particularly in areas of social connection, enjoyment, cognitive motivation and timekeeping. If anything, the response was more positive than expected, particularly given the stage of the pandemic during the Spring and Summer of 2021, when people were starting to hope for a return to 'in person' sessions.

The survey findings supported the researchers' expectations that a major factor in the impact of online singing sessions was social connection. The researchers' experience as session hosts and attendees during the pandemic had suggested that singing sessions were a major social outlet for many people during the pandemic, particularly those living on their own.

Three of the main themes are similar to previous findings in studies of health benefits of singing in a choir (Bailey and Davidson, 2005; Moss *et al.*, 2018; Williams *et al.*, 2018; Batt-Rawden and Andersen, 2020), suggesting that there are some commonalities between the experiences of singing in a choir, and taking part in a traditional song session. The Moss *et al.* study listed social connection, cognitive stimulation and enjoyment amongst key themes in a study of the health benefits perceived by choral singers (Moss *et al.*, 2018). Although there are clearly differences between the experiences, the language used by participants in both studies—'helps me be connected', 'makes you smile', 'keeps my mind alert', etc. (Moss *et al.*, 2018)—suggest considerable overlap in the benefits perceived by the participants of both studies. Similar findings have been reported in other studies, including positive impacts of group singing on emotional, social and cognitive health, as well as boosted self-confidence and a sense of belonging (Bailey and Davidson, 2005; Williams *et al.*, 2018; Batt-Rawden and Andersen, 2020). The current survey findings also

hinted at mental health benefits. As with the Moss *et al.* study, the mental health category overlapped with that of 'enjoyment' in the survey responses (Moss *et al.*, 2018). Because the current survey only received a few responses which directly mentioned mental health, we did not list this as a separate category, but included these in the broader theme of 'enjoyment'.

Unlike many studies on choir singing (Kreutz *et al.*, 2004; Clift *et al.*, 2010; Gick and Nicol, 2016; Moss *et al.*, 2018; Theorell, 2019), this study revealed no mention of physical or physiological health benefits. It is unclear from these findings whether this is a result of the differences in singing and performance style between choirs and traditional sessions, or if this reflects conditions during the pandemic in which many people were confined indoors and were singing to screens, rather than to a room of people. It is also possible that this merely reflects a flaw in the wording of the surveys and interviews.

One unexpected finding was the emphasis which many participants placed on increased focus and inspiration to practice songs. From experience in sessions, the researchers had expected to see much more discussion about learning new technologies while adapting to the online platforms. Although this was reflected in some responses, it was much less than expected, and the emphasis was on the participants' increased motivation to learn songs and build confidence as singers.

A particularly interesting point of this study was its insight into the impact of lockdowns on the perception of time. One of the main side-effects of the abrupt halt to daily activity brought around by lockdowns was the sudden loss of routine. The establishment of routine is known to be good for mental health and general well-being (Gärbling *et al.*, 2016; Schneider *et al.*, 2019). The sudden loss of this caused a tremendous amount of uncertainty and disorientation, particularly in the early days of the pandemic (Aymerich-Franch, 2020; Vatte *et al.*, 2021), and the emphasis on the sessions as 'events' or time markers suggests that such events helped to establish a sense of routine. Strikingly, several different responses ($n=7$) used the exact same wording, stating that the sessions provided 'something to look forward to'.

Although traditional singing sessions have always been 'events' to some extent and many are remembered as 'big nights' (Ó Laoire, 2005) the survey responses revealed a very different type of temporal experience. The term 'big night' is used in the traditional music community to denote a particular memorable session (Ó Laoire, 2005), and it is interesting that the term (or anything similar) did not appear in the responses a single time. This could be because the survey respondents were mainly commenting on their experiences with online

sessions as a whole, rather than as particular events, but it may also say something about the perception of online sessions as sub-par to ‘in person’ ones.

It is a known downside to online sessions that many singers who frequented ‘in-person’ sessions were excluded during the pandemic due to lack of access to technology or ability to run it. A survey distributed online is not the ideal way to reach this section of the traditional song community, but we did receive a few comments that hinted at the distaste some singers had for the new format, including one respondent who stated: ‘At 71, I just don’t get the value of on-line for entertainment’, and another who ‘Didn’t warm to it at all’. M noted that ‘Some of our usual participants had a hard time switching over to Zoom and some of them just opted out, unfortunately. With lockdown and people unable to visit others in their home we were reliant on younger family members in many cases to set up whatever technology was available for people to participate. We got great help from family members but they’re not always available, and sometimes people just don’t want to have to get used to a new way of doing things’ (Personal Interview, 2021). For the most part, however, the resilience of the traditional song community during the pandemic was remarkable, and many singers made huge leaps in their technological skills in order to participate. Perhaps the best summary of the typical attitude to the new situation came from one respondent, who commented wryly: ‘It seems you *can* teach old dogs new tricks & needs must when the divil [*sic*] drives!!’

The tension between the benefits and drawbacks of the online platform was a continuous theme throughout the survey responses, and will undoubtedly be a feature in future discussions of online sessions. M noted that not everyone warmed to the new platform, even when they could access it, ‘Some of the very people we moved online to facilitate opted out—the session doesn’t feel the same on Zoom, for sure—but some have continued to attend and participate’ (Personal Interview, 2021). One survey respondent stated: ‘Whereas there is no substitute for in-person gatherings and being able to join in the group chorus of a song (joining in with a few bars in Zoom at home wasn’t close to fulfilling the pleasure), nevertheless, it was great to keep in contact with the group. Some stalwarts could not join in due to age/tech limitations so looking forward to seeing those (and all) participants in the flesh again’.

Limitations

This study had a number of limitations. The total number of responses to the survey ($n = 108$) is quite small

considering the number of people who have taken part in online sessions during the pandemic (some sessions had nearly 100 participants a week). The findings, therefore, can only be applied to the broader community speculatively. The survey was distributed entirely online, and thus likely missed members of the traditional song community not active on the internet. This may have skewed the findings in favour of online sessions, but would not have impacted the actual statements made by the respondents. Due to the pandemic, online distribution was the only method available. The researchers also acknowledge the potential for research bias within this study, due to their prior experience and involvement in the traditional singing session community. Care was taken to mitigate this as much as possible within an etemic framework.

The lack of research on well-being in Irish traditional singing sessions prior to the pandemic makes comparative analysis of the findings difficult. For example, the physical benefits of group singing, strongly accounted for in previous research (Clift *et al.*, 2008; Theorell, 2019) did not fall into the scope of this study due to its online and distanced nature and because there was little to no feedback regarding physicality within the survey findings or interviews to corroborate previous studies’ findings. The survey was intentionally kept short, as it was felt that a longer survey would attract fewer participants. This theory was justified by the findings (and a large number of participants = 38) who started, but did not complete, the survey, but it precluded demographic questions and led to the qualitative questions being, perhaps, too broad in scope. Although the data received proved very rich and surprisingly consistent, a longer survey with more specific questions would undoubtedly have revealed more information on specific aspects of health and well-being. For these reasons, we strongly feel that further exploration is warranted.

Recommendations

The current study is only a starting point for research into potential health benefits of Irish traditional singing sessions, and further research is required. Two main avenues were suggested in the course of this research. Firstly, it would be appropriate to follow this study up with a larger project that accesses contextualizing demographics (e.g. age, gender, nationality, urbanization etc.), in order to gain a more detailed vantage point of Irish traditional singing session participants in connection with health and well-being factors. We suspect that there are important correlations to be made regarding

such demographics that could further promote health and well-being within this context.

Secondly, a comparative investigation of the health and well-being benefits of 'in-person' sessions, would be valuable, once they are able to resume. An 'in-person' study would provide a stable foundation for health promotion research surrounding singing sessions, as this would be the typical construct of this musical practice up until very recent times. It would also provide the opportunity to measure the potential effects of traditional singing sessions on physiological health and well-being factors.

In closing, this study suggests that Irish traditional singing sessions offer considerable benefits for health and well-being of participants, even when conducted in an online setting. It has also highlighted the importance of diverse cultural contexts being represented in the field of singing for health research. This is an exploratory study, and further research is required to support and expand on the present findings, but the researchers believe that such research has potential to expand and deepen the current research into the health and well-being benefits of group singing.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

Permission to conduct this study was granted by the University of Limerick Ethics Committee Reference number 2021-05-13-AHSS.

FUNDING

This work did not receive subsidies from any specific grant or funding agency.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The researchers would like to thank the participants of the Limerick Singing Session, Máire Ní Chróinín, Dr John Moulden and Lizzy Hewitt, The Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, and all those who participated in, and helped to promote, the survey.

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APPENDIX 1

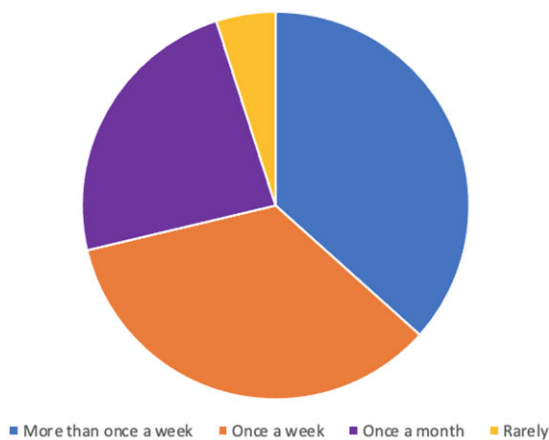


Fig. A1: Frequency of participation in online singing sessions.

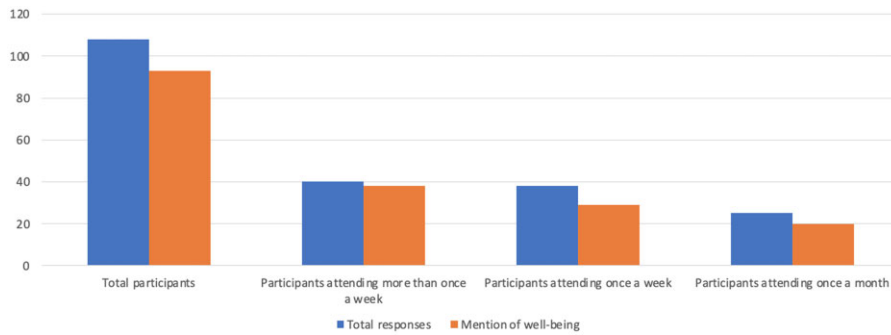


Fig. A2: Frequency of attendance in correlation with mention of well-being.

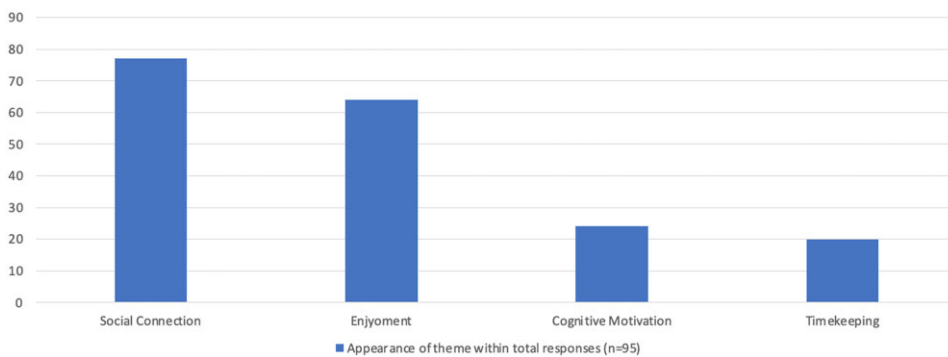


Fig. A3: Thematic analysis of responses to qualitative Q4.

APPENDIX 2

Hearth to HardDrive: Insights into Virtual Social Singing and Well-Being throughout COVID-19

Hi!

Thank you for taking the time to respond to our survey.

This research is being conducted by Kara O’Brien and Ciara Thompson. We are conducting a study that explores the impact of virtual social singing contexts on health and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic, and we plan to publish our findings in a paper for an upcoming special edition of Health Promotion International.

This is a very short survey, and all responses will remain entirely anonymous. All questions are entirely optional, and you may leave any of them blank or quit the survey at any time.

The formal details are on the next page, but if you have any questions, don’t hesitate to get in touch with either of us.

[...]

We hope you have a lovely day, and thanks again for your help with the survey!

Sincerely,
Ciara and Kara

Hello,

We hope you are keeping well in these strange times. Thank you for your interest in this research. This study, entitled “From Hearth to Hard Drive: Insights into Virtual Social Singing and Well-being throughout COVID-19”, explores online traditional singing sessions during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on how traditional singing sessions adapted to online platforms, and the impact of these sessions on the health and well-being of their participants during the pandemic. In this survey, you will be asked a few questions surrounding your experiences with, and perspective of virtual social singing contexts during and prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is preferred that you have had significant experiences with virtual and/or

in-person social singing contexts, such as through a traditional singing session. We want to assure you that this research has been ethically cleared [...]. All information provided will remain anonymous and confidential. Furthermore, the collected responses from this survey will only be used for the purposes of this research project, with the possibility of being included in future publications by the authors. Of course, if you would rather not participate in such interviews, for any reason, that is absolutely no problem, and you should not feel any pressure to do so. If you have any concerns about this study, and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact:

[...]

If you do not have any issues with anything that has been stated, please continue to the next page.

Q1 Have you attended online singing sessions during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- Yes (1)
 - No (2)
-

Q2 If yes, how often?

- Rarely (1)
- Once a month (2)

- One a week (3)
 - More than once a week (4)
-

Q3 Did attendance at the sessions impact your well-being during the pandemic?

- Yes (1)
 - Maybe (2)
 - No (3)
-

Q4 Could you tell us a how it impacted you?

Q5 Is there anything else you'd like to add regarding your participation in online and/or in-person social singing contexts during or prior to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Q6 If you would like to tell us more about your experiences with online singing sessions, please provide your name and email address, and we may contact you for an interview. There is absolutely no pressure for this, and you are free to leave this section blank.