

tilda

Staidéar Fadaimseartha na hÉireann um Dhul in Aois

The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing



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Clár Éire Ildánach
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Creative activity in the ageing population

Key findings and conclusions

Introduction

In March 2020, Ireland implemented restrictions to curb the spread of COVID-19 but these also resulted in isolation and lost social links. Loneliness increased among older adults while quality of life decreased (2, 3). Through initiatives such as *Creativity in Older Age* (4), the Creative Ireland Programme sought to offset some of the impact of the COVID-19 measures on older adults hit hardest by the pandemic. Also as part of the Creative Ireland Programme, a research project with The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA) was undertaken to measure the effects of participation in creative activities on the health and wellbeing of the older population¹ (1).

Creative activity encompasses both active participation, involving making, doing, creating, playing, dancing and writing, and passive participation such as watching, looking at or listening. Creative activity in older age has been shown to be beneficial for both physical and mental health (5-11). Through research from the Growing Up in Ireland study, Smyth (2020) provided insights into arts and cultural participation among the younger population in Ireland, finding sociodemographic gradients in participation levels of reading and cultural activities (12). Participation in later life may be affected by early life experiences, but to date, little information is available on population levels of participation in creative activity among older, community-dwelling adults in Ireland.

Using data from TILDA, we investigated engagement in creative activity among the over-50s population in Ireland. We focused on three main research questions:

1. Identify driving factors of engagement in creative activity
2. Assess impact of participation on health and wellbeing
3. Explore the impact of participation in creative activity during the first COVID-19 lockdown period

What were the main findings?

- 1) Participation in creative activities was high among the older population. Just over half of the older population reported involvement at least weekly.
- 2) Older adults involved in creative activities reported better health behaviours, including higher physical activity and lower levels of current smoking.
- 3) Discrepancies in levels of participation were visible among those in lower educational and income groups and those with worse health, while participation appeared to decrease among adults living in rural areas during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 4) Physical health played a role in involvement in creative activities, with lower levels of participation among those reporting worse self-rated health, vision, and disability.
- 5) Time spent on creative activities increased during the first COVID-19 lockdown, with 26% of older adults reporting that they did them more often and just 10% reporting they did them less often.
- 6) Involvement in creative activities was associated with better reported psychological health, including higher quality of life and lower loneliness, worry, depression and stress both before and during the COVID-19 lockdown.



¹ This Research Brief summarises the TILDA Report 'Creative Activity in the Ageing Population' (See n. (1).) The methodology and data used are described in full in this report.



Creative Ireland Leitrim, Modern Day Mummies. Photographer Edwina Guckian

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What were the participation levels and driving factors for creative activity among older adults in Ireland?

Were participation levels maintained between 2009 and 2018?



Creative activity participation was high among older adults with over half spending time on creative activities or hobbies at least weekly. Time spent listening to music or radio, and on hobbies or creative activities was lower in older ages but we found higher weekly involvement in reading among this age group. At baseline, we saw higher participation in those with higher educational attainment and the highest income groups in all activities with the exception of going out to plays, films or concerts. The magnitude of involvement, as measured using a creative activity composite score, remained consistent from ages 50 to 74 years but declined more rapidly from age 75 years and older.

A number of sociodemographic characteristics were found to be driving factors in participation levels. Higher educational attainment was the strongest predictor of weekly involvement in all activities and positively associated with creative activity scores. Location of residence was not a strong predictor of participation with the exception of going out to films, plays or concerts, where those living in a rural area were less likely to engage than those in an urban area. Participation was also affected by household income. We found that those in the highest household income groups had positive associations with reading, listening to music/radio and spending time on creative activities and hobbies. Furthermore, a positive trend between higher household incomes and creative activity scores was also apparent even while accounting for other sociodemographic characteristics.

Over five waves of TILDA, we collected repeated information on involvement in creative activity capturing trends during a nine-year period. Involvement remained high during this period compared with participation levels in 2009-2011 (53.5%), with 52.2% of older adults reporting that they spent time on creative activities or hobbies at least weekly in 2018. There was little change in overall creative activity scores between 2009 and 2018, dropping from an average of 19.1 to 18.5. We created activity level groups representing low/moderate and high creative activity from the creative activity score and used these to identify shifts in creative activity levels. We found that overall, 65.7% of older adults had a low/moderate creative activity score in both Wave 1 (2009-2011) and Wave 5 (2018), while 14.5% percent had a high score at both time points. Of those reporting low/moderate scores in Wave 1, 9.5% reported high creative activity by Wave 5. 10.4% who reported high activity in 2009-2011 however were reporting low/moderate activity by Wave 5.

Sociodemographic characteristics played a role in activity levels between timepoints. The biggest increases in participation were among women aged 58-59 years and women with third level or higher education attainment. Women aged 60-79 years reported the most consistently high involvement. Almost 80% of men aged 80+ years reported low/moderate activity in both Wave 1 and Wave 5, while 88.8% of men with primary or no educational attainment reported low/moderate activity at both timepoints.

What were the associations between creative activity and physical, psychological and behavioural health in older adults?



Mobile Music Machine - Creative Ireland, Mobile Music Machine. Photo credit Gerald Peregrine

We found higher creative activity scores on average in those reporting excellent, very good or good self-rated health compared to those rating their health as either fair or poor. The largest differences in creative activity scores between those who rated their health as excellent, very good or good and those who rated it as fair or poor were among women aged 60-69 and 70-79 years. There were similar trends in self-rated vision and presence of a disability, with differences larger among women than men in both instances. Creative activity scores were not associated with self-rated hearing, but presence of one or more chronic conditions actually had a positive relationship with creative activity; prevalence of chronic conditions was however high in the sample. Future work should consider assessing these on an individual basis, as this may identify particular conditions which are risk factors for lower participation.

While we saw an overall decrease in adults reporting fair/poor physical health between Wave 1 and Wave 5, the largest decreases were among adults with consistently high creative activity and those increasing from low/moderate to high creative activity. Furthermore, while overall reported disability increased between timepoints, we saw the largest increases in proportion among women in consistently low/moderate creative activity and those decreasing from high to low/moderate creative activity.

Creative activity was positively associated with psychological health. In Wave 1, adults with either moderate or high creative activity scores had significantly higher quality of life, lower loneliness, depression, worry and perceived stress than adults with low creative activity.

In women, those reporting high levels of creative activity reported the highest quality of life scores, and depression was lower in those reporting high creative activity compared to low creative activity in all age groups. Across all age groups, average worry scores were consistently lower across all age groups with higher levels of creative activity, while average stress was also lowest in high creative activity groups. Comparing scores across waves with creative activity further revealed that the largest declines in quality of life were among women who decreased from high to low/moderate creative activity, while this same group had the largest increase in depression, worry and perceived stress.

We asked participants how often they spent time walking and doing either moderate or vigorous physical activity. Using this information, we found that higher average levels of creative activity were associated with an increased likelihood of participating in moderate or high levels of physical activity. Between Wave 1 and Wave 5, average levels of physical activity declined among older adults. Our analyses, however, showed that adults who either had low/moderate creative activity in Wave 1 and high creative activity in Wave 5, or had high creative activity at both time points, reported the highest levels of physical activity in Wave 5.

Older adults who reported high average creative activity were also least likely to be current smokers. Between Wave 1 and Wave 5, we also found that the largest declines in proportions of current smokers were among those with low/moderate to high creative activity and consistently high creative activity between timepoints.

What impact did the COVID-19 restrictions have on creative engagement?

During the first COVID-19 lockdown, we found increased levels of participation in creative activities among the older population. Just over a quarter of TILDA participants reported doing hobbies, crafts or puzzles more often, while 37.8% reported reading more often. Demographic factors played a role in whether older adults maintained or increased participation in creative activities. The groups most likely to increase their participation were women, those with higher educational attainment and those in better financial situations. A higher proportion of women reported spending time doing hobbies, crafts or puzzles more often (32.3%) compared with men (18.4%). Among educational attainment groups, those with third level/higher had the highest proportion of adults reporting they spent time more often (30.8%), while 36.0% of those with primary/none stated they did not spend any time. Furthermore, those in rural locations were less likely to report increased participation than those in urban locations. This highlighted a potential accessibility issue which was exacerbated by the lockdown restrictions where travel was limited.

Participation in creative activities had an association with psychological wellbeing during this period. For older adults reporting that they spent time partaking in these activities either less often or not at all, quality of life was lower and loneliness, depression and perceived stress were higher when we compared this with older adults who maintained their participation or increased it. We also found that time spent watching TV, streaming movies or shows was associated with lower quality of life, and higher depression, loneliness and perceived stress. Digital culture is an important aspect of creative activity, but these findings may highlight the impact of increased time in sedentary behaviour and mentally passive participation during the restrictions period.

What should be explored in future?

The granular level of detail required to better understand these associations have not been captured in TILDA yet, but a more detailed creative activity module has been incorporated into the Wave 6 self-completion questionnaire. Participants will be asked about previous participation in arts, creative or cultural activities, barriers to participation or reasons for stopping, current participation in a more extensive list of active and passive forms of participation, frequency, locations of participation, online activities, motivations for participation and the periods in their life they have been involved. Data collection due for this wave is due for completion near the end of 2021 and will help to create a more complete picture of creative and cultural activity among the older population. The extension of this information and further analyses will help to inform policymakers of barriers to participation, activities with low and high levels of participation, and key motivators for participation in this group.



Creative activity was positively associated with psychological health

What do these findings mean?

These findings have highlighted the potential importance of creative activity on the health and wellbeing of older adults. While these analyses do not confirm the direction of this association, consistent patterns suggesting a relationship between creative activity and mental health have been shown, which underpins the importance of better understanding the link between engagement and outcomes in the older population. Potential drivers and motivations for low participation were identified during this research, many of which have been previously highlighted in adolescence (12). Interventions to increase accessibility and address discrepancies in engagement among sociodemographic groups may assist in balancing levels of participation and targeting groups at risk of low levels of involvement.

Physical health also played a role in participation, with adults who reported worse physical health, vision and presence of a disability having lower levels of participation at baseline and reduced levels at 9-year follow up. Integration of health and art in healthcare settings has been demonstrated previously and physical health should not act as a barrier to engagement in creative activities (13). Policies addressing lower participation levels in these at-risk groups and increasing access to creative activities in the community could be developed as a potential means of improving health and wellbeing.



A detailed breakdown and analysis of the research data can be found [here](#)



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