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Singing group leaders' experiences of online singing sessions during the COVID-19 pandemic: a rapid survey

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Abstract

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A significant consequence of the COVID-19 lockdown measures introduced by the United Kingdom government has been the abrupt halting of face-to-face singing sessions for both amateur and professional singing groups. The detrimental effect of the lack of face-to-face singing is perhaps particularly experienced by those engaging in singing for wellbeing, many of whom use regular group singing to help manage specific long-term health conditions. During the early weeks of national lockdown in the United Kingdom, reports of singing groups meeting online were noted, particularly through use of online platforms such as Zoom and Facebook. An online survey with 291 responses investigated singing group leaders' experiences of online singing sessions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Group leaders reported significant impact on personal finances, role change and development, time, energy and wellbeing, and a detrimental effect on their musical satisfaction. The value of online singing sessions to their group members was recognized, along with a perception of responsibility for members' wellbeing. Findings suggest that, despite significant personal challenges, singing group leaders' efforts have not only encouraged a sense of identity, social contact and wellbeing for members but also highlighted the potential for an enhanced, inclusive and accessible addition to future face-to-face singing sessions.

Keywords:

singing; wellbeing; online sessions; COVID-19 pandemic

Ethical approval:

The survey used in this study complied with the requirements of Canterbury Christ Church University's Ethical Research Committee, with permission granted on 12th May 2020.

1. Introduction

In early December 2019, a cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China, led to identification of the novel coronavirus commonly referred to internationally as COVID-19. By mid-January, the first recorded case outside of China occurred in Thailand and the World Health Organization assessed the global risk of COVID-19 as being high (World Health Organization, 2020). By mid-March, the World Health Organization formally declared a pandemic, and the United Kingdom government response included the banning of mass gatherings of people and the announcement of strict social distancing rules (United Kingdom Government, 2020). Reports of citizens in Italy taking to their balconies to engage in uplifting song (Thorpe, 2020) coincided with lockdown measures in the United Kingdom (UK), while unprecedented efforts to comply with the practice of social distancing incorporated the ceasing of all UK face-to-face arts activities, including choirs and group singing sessions.

In the ensuing weeks, a flurry of professional and non-professional singing groups posted online films of lockdown collaborations – for example, the men and boys of Canterbury Cathedral Choir (Flood, 2020), and The Isolation Choir (2020) – suggesting that while meeting face-to-face was not possible, the skilful use of technology enabled a creative online presence for some. While studies have explored the rapid transference to online teaching for education facilities during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lowenthal, Borup, West and Archambault, 2020: 383-391), there is as yet little data capturing the response by singing groups and – specifically – singing group leaders, to the challenges posed by a move to online singing sessions.

Despite positive media claims that societies were uniting together (Fletcher, 2020), the enforced withdrawal of individuals from usual, face-to-face activities generated concern as to the adverse effects on wellbeing, prompting rapid and time-sensitive investigation by researchers both nationally and internationally. In March 2020, a survey by University College London explored the effects of the COVID-19 virus and general social distancing measures on reported loneliness among adults in the United Kingdom, concluding that while perceived levels of loneliness were stable, such levels were high and showed no sign of reducing (Bu, Steptoe and Fancourt, 2020). The Royal College of Music, in collaboration with Imperial College London, developed an international survey examining the impact on participants' mental health and wellbeing from social and economic perspectives (Mak, Coulter and Fancourt, 2020: 56-210), while a report by Nobles, Martin, Dawson, Moran and Savovic (2020: 1-26) highlighted the historical short-term increase in the prevalence of mental health conditions among general populations during quarantine periods – warning of a similar impact from the COVID-19 lockdown.

1.1 *Singing for wellbeing*

In 2018, an international systematic review concluded that engaging in group singing yields a range of benefits for healthy adults, including a reduction in loneliness, anxiety and social isolation (Daykin, Mansfield, Meads, Julier, Tomlinson, Payne, Duffy, Lane, D'Innocenzo, Burnett, Kay, Dolan, Testoni

and Victor, 2018: 39-46). In the United Kingdom, enthusiasm for community singing is reflected in the countless community groups meeting regularly. A glance at the website of the National Association of Choirs (National Association of Choirs, 2020) identifies a wide variety of singing groups, and the powerful impact of singing together with others is reflected in the popularity of enterprises such as Rock Choir (Rock Choir, 2020), with a national membership of over 30,000 singers, and the Military Wives Choirs (Military Wives Choirs, 2020), with 75 groups and over 2000 members.

The use of singing as a therapeutic intervention for people living with long term health conditions has been the focus of specific research. While there is, as yet, limited evidence that singing provides statistically significant improvement to disease processes, common qualitative findings suggest that regular group singing holds value for people living with long term conditions. Singing for wellbeing groups in the United Kingdom include the Mustard Seed Singers in Kent (Mustard Seed Singers, 2020) and the Mind and Soul Community Choir in Camberwell, London (Mind and Soul Community Choir, 2020), which focus on singing for mental wellbeing. In Northampton, the Singing4Breathing group (Singing4Breathing, 2020) supports people living with respiratory conditions, while social challenges are the principal focus for the Choir With No Name, which runs singing groups for homeless or marginalized people (Choir With No Name, 2020).

A systematic review in 2016 of evidence for singing for lung health, concluded that while quantitative data identifies the potential of singing to improve health-related quality of life for people living with chronic respiratory disease, qualitative data reflects the consistent reports by participants that singing assists as a coping mechanism for their condition (Lewis, Cave, Stern, Welch, Taylor, Russell, Doyle, Russell, McKee, Clift, Bott and Hopkinson, 2016: 16080). This notion was additionally noted in the evaluation of a programme of weekly singing sessions for people living with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) in Lambeth and Southwark, in which participants reported improvements not only to respiratory symptoms but also to mental and social wellbeing (Skingley, Clift, Hurley, Price and Stephens, 2018: 66-75).

The multiple benefits of music for people living with dementia are cited by researchers investigating the value of singing in enabling people to accept and cope with this challenging illness. Group singing sessions have been found to support social inclusiveness, reduce anxiety and have a positive impact on memory (Osman, Tischler and Schneider, 2016: 1326-1339), as well as promote friendship development and improve relationship quality with family and carers (Clark, Tamplin and Baker, 2018: 1332). Additionally, singing-based therapy may have the potential to increase vocal volume and respiratory function for people living with Parkinson's, as well as improve quality of life (Tamplin, Morris, Marigliani, Baker and Vogel, 2019: 453-463). In 2020, an international study of people living with Parkinson's who took part in a six-month programme of weekly singing sessions, reported a small but significant reduction in stigma, anxiety and stress, with enhanced social support experienced by some participants (Irons, Hancox, Vella-Burrows, Han, Chong, Sheffield and Stewart, 2020: 594-600).

A positive impact on quality of life, anxiety and depression is also recorded by Coulton, Clift, Skingley and Rodriguez (2015; 250-255), in their randomised control trial of 258 participants aged 60 years and over engaged in community group singing – findings supported by Irons, Sheffield, Ballington and Stewart (2019; 71-90) who concluded that people living with persistent pain associated with long term conditions enjoyed social, physiological and physical benefits through regular group singing.

In response to the impact of lockdown on singing groups, the Sidney De Haan Research Centre for Arts and Health conducted a rapid, online, national survey of singing group leaders, inviting participation from those leading singing for wellbeing groups and those leading groups with no specific wellbeing focus. The survey sought to capture the changing pattern of singing group delivery, including factors that enabled or hindered delivery of online sessions, financial costs, feedback from group members, and the impact on group leaders' wellbeing.

2. Methodology

Data were collected via the Sidney De Haan Research Centre's online survey: Singing group leaders' experiences of online singing sessions during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK. A non-experimental approach was adopted, utilizing direct open and closed questions. The survey complied with the requirements of Canterbury Christ Church University's Ethical Research Committee and launched on the Online Surveys platform (Online Surveys, 2020), opening on 22nd May 2020 and running until 15th June 2020. A self-selecting population accessed the survey through an online link advertised via social media networks, press releases and through partner organizations including Canterbury Cantata Trust, Natural Voice Network and Live Music Now. The invitation clarified the term 'singing group leader' to include musical directors, choir directors, choir conductors, vocal practitioners and any other role descriptors for someone leading a singing group. The term 'singing group' was clarified to include choirs of any kind, while 'singing session' included the term 'rehearsal'.

Participants' anonymity was assured, with no identifying data requested about themselves or their singing group. Open questions were constructed to elicit group leaders' experiences of running online singing sessions, including challenges, advantages and disadvantages, deterrents, and opinions as to sustainability. Closed questions captured quantitative data regarding the singing groups' social characteristics, including usual repertoire, frequency and focus, as well as group leaders' musical experience before the pandemic. Thematic and coded analysis of data using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step model from respondents resulted in a sample ($N = 291$) of singing group leaders. Quantitative data were subjected to statistical analysis executed through Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 24 software (IBM Corp., 2016).

3. Results

Quantifiable results are presented below, with additional qualitative responses considered within the discussion section of this paper.

3.1 Singing group leaders pre COVID-19 lockdown

The majority of respondents received payment for provision of services before the COVID-19 lockdown (Table 1). Of the 291 respondents, 229 (78.7%) reported membership of a national network or organization, with Natural Voice Network proving the most popular (70.7%). Before the pandemic, only 8 group leaders (2.7%) reported use of any form of online sessions with their singing group in addition to their usual face-to-face sessions.

Table 1. Group leader characteristics prior to the COVID-19 pandemic

Variable	Total (<i>N</i> = 291)
Length of time leading singing group	
< 1 year	16 (5.4%)
1 - 5 years	121 (41.6%)
6 - 10 years	85 (29.2%)
11 - 20 years	49 (16.8)
21+ years	20 (6.9%)
Usually receives payment for leading singing group	267 (91.8%)
Member of national network or organization	229 (78.7%)
Online sessions used prior to lockdown (listed below)	8 (2.5%)
<i>YouTube</i>	3
<i>Zoom</i>	2
<i>WhatsApp</i>	1
<i>Google Drive</i>	1
<i>Personal website</i>	1

3.2 Singing groups pre COVID-19 lockdown

The data represented a diverse sample of singing groups. Of the respondents, 143 group leaders (49.1%) reported that their usual, face-to-face group used singing to support a range of health and social conditions, either as condition-specific groups or generic singing for wellbeing groups (Table 2). The majority of singing groups met once weekly (233; 80.1%) with no requirement to read music (276; 94.8%) or audition (284; 97.6%). 207 groups had been running for less than ten years (71.1%), with 15 having formed within the 12 months leading up to the study.

Table 2. Health and social conditions for which members attend face to face sessions

Variable (respondents able to select all that apply)	Total
Mental health problems	181
Breathing conditions (e.g. asthma / COPD)	131
Alzheimer's or dementia	72
Parkinson's	57
Cancer	55
Learning Disability	43
Recovery from a stroke	31
Other (listed below)	43
<i>Social isolation or loneliness</i>	10
<i>Bereavement</i>	6
<i>ME/MS</i>	5
<i>Stress reduction</i>	4
<i>Neurological conditions</i>	3
<i>Pain management</i>	3
<i>Visual Impairment</i>	3
<i>Homelessness</i>	2
<i>Addiction</i>	2
<i>Autoimmune conditions</i>	2
<i>Autism</i>	1
<i>Cardiac conditions</i>	1
<i>Musculoskeletal</i>	1

Respondents reported that their usual, face-to-face groups represented a mixed-age membership, with 80.4% of group members over the age of 65 and 6.9% under 16. Group association with a specified, national network or organisation was common (133; 45.7%), with Making Music, Natural Voice Network and the British Lung Foundation particularly represented. Face-to-face sessions varied in style from completely unaccompanied (41.2%) to a mix of accompanied and unaccompanied songs (44.3%). Piano or guitar accompaniment was commonly reported (38.8%), while 16.8% identified the use of backing tracks during pre-lockdown singing sessions.

3.3 Singing groups during the COVID-19 lockdown: online sessions

A total of 236 respondents reported leading online singing sessions during the lockdown period, utilizing a variety of platforms (Table 3). The number of members attending individual online sessions ranged from 2-700 attendees, while 61 group leaders (25.8%) noted that attendance levels remained fairly constant.

Table 3. Platforms used for online singing sessions

Variable (respondents able to select all that apply)	Total
Zoom	223
YouTube	37
Other (unspecified)	31
Facebook (include Facebook Live in these figures)	26
WhatsApp	4
Skype	4
SoundCloud	2
Microsoft Teams	2

Costs incurred by singing group leaders beyond those normally anticipated in the course of running their singing group are listed in Table 4. Purchased items range from a recurring fee for a Zoom licence (£14.39 per month inc. tax) to outlay for hardware such as a laptop or lighting ring for video production. There were 193 respondents (66.3%) who reported receiving financial support during the lockdown from their singing group, national or local government, or via Arts Council or other arts-specific funders. Of those who did not receive financial support, reasons given included not being eligible or being in a financial position where support was not required.

Table 4. Hardware and/or software purchase

Variable	Total
Zoom license	160
Other software or licence	108
Hardware	87
Backing tracks/audio recordings	9
Stationery	2
Examples of hardware and software purchases	
<i>Light ring for video production</i>	
<i>New condenser microphone</i>	
<i>Acapella software programme</i>	
<i>Blank CDs; postage & packing materials</i>	
<i>Internet upgrade</i>	
<i>New laptop</i>	
<i>Songbooks; sheet music</i>	
<i>Karaoke backing tracks</i>	
<i>Liability insurance; PRS/PPL licence</i>	

3.4 Challenges to running online sessions

All 236 respondents who reported leading online singing sessions during the lockdown period, identified practical challenges and disadvantages (Table 5). Of these, 60 group leaders (25.4%) noted their usual repertoire to be unsuitable for online singing specifically because the delivery platform precluded a normal singing interaction or experience. Advantages were additionally noted and are summarised in Table 6. Confidence regarding sustainability – specifically the likelihood of continuing to run online sessions until face-to-face sessions are permitted – was high, with 124 (52.5%) group leaders identifying as very confident, 100 (42.4%) as fairly confident, and 12 (5.1%) identifying as not at all confident.

Table 5. Online singing sessions: summary of practical challenges and disadvantages

Theme	Issue
Audio	Variable sound quality Audio lag Lack of surround sound Lack of usual aural feedback Singers unmuting during a song
Visual	Can't see participants Lack of eye contact Delay in visual cues Eyestrain
Technical difficulties	Digital poverty Unreliable internet connection Fear of technology (members) Resilience to learning (members) Lack of internet (members)
Preparation	Usual fee does not cover necessary hours Planning is more comprehensive

Table 6. Online singing sessions: summary of advantages

Theme	Issue
Wellbeing	Able to check on members' wellbeing Outlet for emotion
Social contact	Reaching out to vulnerable members Housebound members able to join in Promotes connection
Musicality	Singers able to sing more freely when muted Videos assist those with dementia Singers trying new things Singers exploring own voice Recruitment tool for nervous singers
Travel	No need to travel

3.5 Barriers to online singing sessions

55 respondents reported that they had not run online singing sessions during the COVID-19 lockdown period (18.9%). Technical challenges, personal experience and circumstances were cited as factors deterring delivery of this form of group session (Table 7). Further analysis of qualitative responses regarding the barriers is included in the discussion section of this paper.

Table 7. Factors deterring delivery of online sessions

Theme	Selected quotation
Technology	Too much work involved with the technology. I don't know how. I'm daunted by the steep learning curve. I don't understand how to run Zoom and Facebook. I don't have the right equipment.
Inclusion	Older members don't have internet access. Most members are not computer literate. It will exclude some members. Many members don't even have mobile phones let alone the internet. Many members can't access the internet independently.
Personal factors	I have young children and am unable to juggle childcare and regular singing. I've been too ill with COVID. It felt too demoralizing. I lost heart with singing due to the pandemic. Still working and don't have time. Online choirs feel like karaoke. Feel overwhelmed at the prospect of having to learn a completely new way of working. I lack the confidence.
Group engagement	Participants said they don't want to sing on their own as it makes them feel more lonely. It doesn't work.

4. Discussion

This study was designed to capture the thoughts, feelings and experiences of singing group leaders during a uniquely challenging time in their musical careers. The depth of qualitative data received from group leaders reflects their desire to report on their experience – whether they were able to deliver online sessions or not – and to encourage others to listen to and appreciate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on this particular aspect of community music-making.

4.1 Online singing sessions: responsibility and expectation

A prominent, palpable theme was the sense of responsibility felt by many group leaders toward their members, and the guilt and anxiety some felt at not being able to provide – in their opinion – a more normal experience in the online singing session. This sense of responsibility was mirrored by perceived changes to the group leader role, moving beyond that of singing leader to expectations of technical

expertise (Table 7). This change in identity was reflected in expressions of frustration, particularly concerning to the inability to provide a truly interactive experience that reflected the purpose of the singing group – poignantly expressed by one group leader as being ‘like going to the seaside and not being allowed to swim in the sea’. The desire to replicate the usual singing experience was accompanied by an acknowledged sense of loss of emotional response commonly experienced in face-to-face meetings.

Table 7. Singing group leader identity; responsibility; expectations

Theme	Selected quotation
Identity	Sometimes I feel like a fake because it’s a made-up version of what we do. A colleague summed it up perfectly by saying that she feels like a performing monkey.
Responsibility	Feeling like it’s very much more all on me to deliver rather than the shared creation we usually have. I feel like I need to work extra hard to persuade others that it’s fun The biggest challenge comes from not really feeling that I can provide what they want.
Anxiety	You feel anxious that it’s not the same for people and worry if they are getting enough out of the session.
Meeting expectations	People tend to expect it’s going to be really smooth and wonderful like the pre-prepared videos they have seen of online choirs. They are invariably disappointed when it’s not.
Technical	Learning to be a DJ after learning to read a room and be an interactive voice leader. Multi-tasking: usual music leader’s job of juggling words, tune, programme timing, instruments PLUS clicking/pressing right buttons and managing environment e.g., muting phones, screening background, chucking cat out etc.

4.2 An altered paradigm

A commonly reported structure for the online singing sessions included a vocal and physical warm-up element, followed by a blend of improvisation, rounds and unison or two-part harmony singing. Some groups attempted to run a full-length online session, reflecting the time usually spent in one another’s company. However, a shortened online presence was characterized as being popular, due, in part, to the level of intensity required of the group leader and resilience demanded of participants. This, in some cases, produced a focused, upbeat session, although, according to some accounts, at the expense of a deeper and more meaningful experience.

Driven by a reported desire to keep the online session buoyant, for some groups, time spent together online included games, quizzes and a focus on checking in with one another. However, the move towards a functional online presence proved both inclusive and divisive, enabling participation for housebound or geographically distant members, yet excluding those for whom the technology was either

absent or beyond capabilities: ‘This situation has set in stark relief the disparity between those who can, and those who cannot, access the technologies which can connect us when we cannot meet in person.’

The infamous online audio lag prompted a realisation that a group’s normal repertoire was not necessarily suitable for the online singing paradigm. In many cases, and particularly where new material was being taught, song choices were simplified to accommodate the lack of aural feedback usually required to promote effective learning. This enforced change in aural singing experience was expressed with an overwhelming sense of sadness by singing group leaders, who mourned not only their lack of satisfaction in perceived musical achievement but also their members’ compromised singing reality. While group leaders strived to promote responsive participation, audio latency necessitated muting of the masses, resulting in a lonely, solo existence for many participants. This change in group dynamic was, consequentially, reflected in the delivery and reception of material. Where face-to-face singing sessions previously incorporated a blend of familiar and new songs, with a deliberate endeavour on the part of the group leader to challenge and stretch musically, some online sessions morphed into more of a ‘singalong’ – due, in part, to the perceived need to keep things upbeat and avoid boredom while individual vocal parts were necessarily muted.

Table 8. Connection; musical experience

Theme	Selected quotation
Connection	The singers that struggle with pitching but are helped by their section will be left at home purely with their voice, and for some it's not satisfying at all. It has become an individual activity.
Musical experience	It's a sing-along experience, not singing together. They are finding the learning so much harder. Many members are disappointed with not being able to hold a harmony on their own. Members are frustrated at not progressing as they want to. They feel inadequate compared to other online choirs.

The deceptively simple notion of a ‘typical’ online session belies the amount of preparation required of group leaders – far and above that usually expected for face-to-face sessions. Examples of creative responses to the challenge included production of multi-part learning tracks and use of a loop pedal during the online session to layer harmonies in real-time. Development of pre-recorded videos featured for many, and the complexity of preparation was further compounded by a sense of isolation. The aforementioned sense of responsibility suffused personal preparation for many group leaders, with a strong sense of burden for members unable to access or be included in sessions causing significant disquiet.

4.3 *Singing experience and vocal production*

The altered session format posed a particular challenge for group leaders used to functioning as responsive, reflexive practitioners. The muting of participants in the ensemble removed the vital clues and cues by which group leaders usually adjusted and shaped their session. In particular, the absence of true eye contact increased the difficulty in reading participants' faces, resulting in a lack of cohesive communication: 'For me, I find the sessions very intense and demanding and I am doing all the work. I miss that feedback... and the immediacy of us all singing at the same time, knowing very quickly if something is working or not; something I sorely miss.'

The loss of feedback in the moment promoted a reported sense of insecurity among some group participants, and anxiety about personal singing performance. The absence of aural feedback, and specifically the surround sound, appeared to either encourage singers to grow in confidence and sing on their own, or – as more commonly reported to their group leader – succumb to the fear of not having other members nearby on whom they usually relied. For some, the newly revealed solo voice became intimidating and was thus restrained (Table 9).

Timidity in personal vocal production was also reported by some group leaders as a consequence of running sessions from home – at times a constrictive environment when competing with wider family demands on space, and the awareness that they could be heard not only by their family but, in some cases, by neighbours: 'In a domestic setting I notice leaders singing more quietly, more timidly, pitch difficulty, wobbling more [for example], not supporting voice with deep breathing, as if singing to oneself while washing dishes.' However, others noticed improvement to their singing voice, due in part to the need to ensure precise pitching and to practise safe, protective vocal technique: 'I have been working on my voice, my pitching is having to be perfect due to the loop pedal (if I have slipped by the end of the loop then it is obvious!). It has been really good practice.'

Physical and emotional exhaustion were also a common consequence, frequently linked to a perceived need to lead the singing for each song as well as maintain the session dialogue:

'This has been exhausting and a very stressful experience. I've maintained it primarily because I know some of the group need it. It doesn't pay me well enough, but I have felt a responsibility to the group.'

For a significant number of group leaders, pressure to deliver online sessions resulted in heightened levels of anxiety and feelings of inadequacy, fuelled in part by group members' apparent lack of awareness of the complexity of the undertaking and unrealistic expectations. For some group leaders, there was little pleasure or gain from delivering online sessions:

'I hate it! I only do it because of loyalty to my singers who rely on it. I would rather earn money being a postman or something completely different tbh [to be honest].'

Table 9. Feedback to group leaders from online group members

Theme	Feedback from online group members
Network	<p>It's their continued connection to community.</p> <p>It's their only contact with the outside world.</p> <p>It's encouraged them to start a WhatsApp support group.</p> <p>They're so happy to stay in touch.</p> <p>They are feeling less isolated.</p> <p>Singing with others gives a semblance of normality.</p>
Mental health	<p>It's the only time they laugh.</p> <p>Breathing exercises help with the increased anxiety of living with a serious respiratory condition during the virus.</p> <p>It gives them a meaningful and familiar activity in their week.</p> <p>It's their reason to get up.</p> <p>So happy to produce something positive.</p>
Disappointment	<p>They don't get as much from the singing.</p> <p>It doesn't feel right.</p> <p>They hate singing without other voices.</p> <p>Some are uncomfortable hearing themselves sing.</p> <p>Sad to be reminded of what they're missing.</p>
Barriers	<p>They don't have the technology.</p> <p>Concern over internet security.</p> <p>They hate looking at themselves.</p> <p>Lack of necessary tech skills.</p> <p>Cannot cope with more screen time (Zoomed out).</p> <p>Conscious of others in house hearing them sing.</p>

4.4 Professional and personal development

The majority of singing group leaders who delivered online sessions reported positively on the impact on personal and professional development. For some, the enforced, rapid acquisition of new skills in both hardware and software competence involved overcoming a fear of technology and preconceptions of personal inability. Alongside developing familiarity with web-based platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, the required level of multitasking during sessions proved both challenging and rewarding. Newly acquired skills included increased computer literacy, music sequencing, use of recording software such as GarageBand, Logic Pro and Audacity, video editing and live broadcasting: 'I have found it a surprisingly rewarding experience, having worked hard to master the technology and subsequently succeeded to a reasonable degree.' For many, this encouraged greater personal organization and self-management – for example, enhanced resilience – and a recognition that leading online sessions developed personal teaching, leadership and group management skills including flexibility, adaptability and presentation.

'My skills in technology and computers [are] growing with every session. My ability to remain calm in adverse situations is also growing. Inventiveness with singing games and movement too is growing.'

Musicianship skills were also further developed, including accompanying, leading singing while playing a musical instrument, live transposition and general instrumental ability. However, while increased confidence was reported regarding the practical delivery of sessions online, there was acknowledgement that the ethereal experience was unrewarding for many. Significantly, the lack of affirmative, real-time confirmation from singers was an influential factor prompting consideration as to whether the online format was personally sustainable: ‘I miss feeling people’s energy and enjoyment in face-to-face sessions and knowing I have made a positive impact. I don’t get that personal reward or sense of satisfaction from online choir.’

4.5 Barriers to online singing sessions

Despite the testing experience of delivering online singing sessions, the majority (81.1%) of group leaders reported being able to do so. However, responses from those unable, or who preferred not to, reflected the overwhelming personal and practical challenges faced. A desire to avoid exclusion was clearly expressed by those who have not run online sessions, alongside a perception that having no session was preferable to one that highlighted the digital inequality among members. Lack of confidence in personal capabilities was cited as a particular barrier, with the notion of having to learn new skills and grapple with additional equipment proving the deciding factor for some (Table 10).

The perception that other choirs were delivering a better experience than could be managed was also reported as a significant deterring factor, combined with opinion that an online presence could not replicate the desired choral experience and would therefore prove pointless. For some group leaders, the circumstance of their usual, face-to-face sessions precluded translation to an online format due to safeguarding and data access concerns, and closure of venues. However, some expressed a willingness to undertake online sessions had the relevant managing organization provided support – specifically, governance of communication with group members.

Table 10. Reported barriers to online singing sessions

Theme	Example
Inclusion	Many of my members struggle to access emails and certainly would not wish to attempt 'technology' Others don't even use mobile phones. A combination of age and social deprivation causes this. Many blind members can't access internet independently.
Technology	I personally do not have the skills to run sessions online. I am daunted by the steep learning curve that I know would be stressful. I didn't want to manage the time-lapse on Zoom. Too much work involved for me re[garding] the technology side of working online.
Satisfaction	Lack of technical expertise on my part, and [being] unwilling to climb a steep learning mountain in that regard as the resulting experience would still not be satisfactory enough. Online choirs feel more like sing-along karaoke.
Practical	Live online singing sessions [are] not accessible for staff at children's hospital. Life seems to be online, spend too much time in Zoom meetings, haven't found it possible to group sing on any platform. Too busy organizing other work.

4.6 Connection through challenge

Singing group leaders were mindful of the value of online sessions to promote engagement and participation for their members. They also recognized the positive impact of usual, face-to-face sessions on their wellbeing, and those that have undertaken online sessions have missed this aspect of the online experience. Those group participants able to engage with online sessions had largely recognized the importance of this replicated social interaction, providing positive feedback and appreciation of their group leader regarding their efforts. Their feedback suggested that, for a significant number, online sessions provided their only interaction with the outside world – reflecting the fact that many will have been experiencing social isolation during the lockdown period. For some carers, the online session provided respite from otherwise continuous responsibility. However, the limitations of the online platform were keenly felt, including a sense of disappointment that the face-to-face environment could not be adequately replicated, and the significant barriers that deter satisfactory engagement (Table 10): ‘We are very aware that running virtual sessions is discriminating against people who either can't afford the necessary equipment or who haven't the support required to get themselves set up. And they may be exactly the people who usually benefit enormously from meeting people and singing together.’

5. Conclusion

Despite significant and, in some cases, overwhelming challenges, many singing group leaders translated their usual face-to-face sessions to an online presence during the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown. While the prevalence of singing for wellbeing is reflected in the health and social conditions with which many participants' singing groups are aligned, the fact that the majority of respondents (50.9%) did not affiliate specifically with singing for wellbeing reflects the value of singing to all types of singing group.

New skills, both practical and personal, were acquired, and the online experience proved a significant therapeutic environment for maintaining the sense of community and identity that group leaders and members cherish. From a purely musical perspective, it is evident that sadness and frustration clouded some group leaders' impressions of the value of their contribution. At the time of publication, the paucity of data regarding the safety of singing during the COVID-19 pandemic continues to foster uncertainty about when and how singing groups might meet together safely. However, a growing awareness that the online experience has not only maintained but might positively influence future delivery of face-to-face singing sessions, promoting access and inclusion to wider group membership, should serve to encourage and affirm the efforts of singing group leaders during this incredible and unprecedented time - notwithstanding the acknowledged challenges faced by some members in the use of online technology.

6. Study limitations

The recruitment strategy included self-selection by participants based on their subjective interpretation of the study information, with no corroborative confirmation of participants' roles. Additionally, the recruitment strategy, while appropriate to the rapid nature of the study, may have excluded participation by singing group leaders who do not use social media, or who are not associated with one of the advertising networks.

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