

**OVERCONSUMPTION**

# **GETTING CREATIVE BEATS CONSUMERISM**

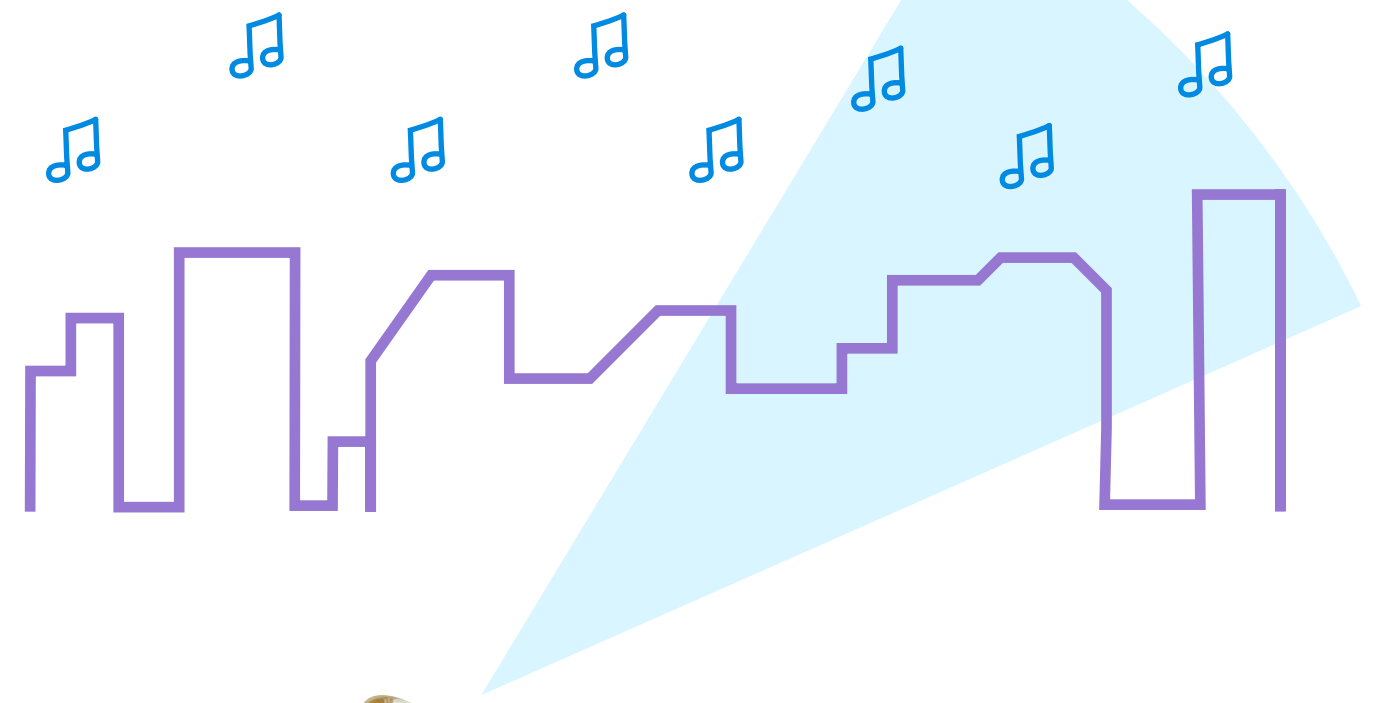


**Re**  **set**  
lessons from  
lockdown

# GETTING CREATIVE BEATS CONSUMERISM



How the pandemic unlocked  
our abilities to entertain each  
other, and brought people  
together over jigsaws,  
song, chess and learning  
the ukulele



Finding pleasure in play, culture and experience rather than the false promise of shopping for more 'stuff', is a potentially big, positive step for raising our well being and lowering ecological impact. It makes us feel better for longer and, done well, uses fewer resources and produces less waste. When shops closed during the pandemic it turned out that behind all that passive consumption, many people were in fact frustrated producers of their own entertainment and jumped, or in some cases danced, at the chance.

The Italians showed us the way. In March 2020 when the word "lockdown" was still strange, the world watched enthralled as communities across Italy, who were confined to often very small apartments, began to use what outside space they had – often just a balcony – to come together in music, dance and song. With all the usual forms of public face-to-face entertainment shut, a **huge national concert**<sup>1</sup> was held, in which everyone played at home with their doors and windows open to whoever wanted to listen. One dancer used the only time he was allowed into the street – **to put out his household waste**<sup>2</sup> – to perform to rapturous applause from his neighbours.





As the pandemic spread and other countries and populations found themselves similarly trapped inside for much of the day with friends or family, there was an outpouring of human creativity. Families played old games, inventors made up new ones, people did art and craft in groups, and millions of others took advantage of a huge range of ready-made entertainment activities in the virtual world via online communities. Many of these revealed our need for connection and showed how well we functioned without the travel and razamatazz of elaborate, expensive activities.

**“Time together as laughing, singing, dancing people is vital to counter the way the economy so often boxes us into spending, competing, me-first people: the arts help us bring a more humane economy into being”**

Dr Katherine Trebeck, Wellbeing Economy Alliance

The most immediately available form of home entertainment – the television or games console – was a big winner. With cinemas, theatres and music venues closed, millions forced to stay home for their video entertainment and already fed up with regular daytime TV, turned en masse to streaming video services. Industry analysts had commented that this trend was already happening, but **the pandemic sped-up the pace of adoption.**<sup>3</sup> Providers jostled for market share, subscriptions rose across the board and pay-per-views became increasingly mainstream. Netflix became a household name and “binge-watching” a common experience for all but the extremely self-controlled. Overall spending on digital entertainment in the UK soared by **17% year-on-year in 2020**<sup>4</sup> – the fastest annual rate in the 25 years the Entertainment Retailers Association (ERA) has been compiling figures. This experience mirrors other historical experiences, **such as in during the Second World War,**<sup>5</sup> when spending shifted from resource-intensive material goods to entertainment and cultural activities.

Some also dusted off their turntables and took time to listen together to music they already owned and remembered how much they liked it. Lockdowns proved to be a boon for the vinyl market, which enjoyed its **best year in decades**<sup>6</sup> in the UK as fans deprived of live gigs spent their spare cash on their record collections. **Sales of vinyl rose 13% to £110m,**<sup>7</sup> and now accounts for a surprisingly high 40% of the total £271m physical music market. Overall, the physical and digital music market rose **6.8% to £1.5bn.**<sup>8</sup>

An incredible **one in six Americans**<sup>9</sup> sing in a choir, so not being able to sing together had a big impact on a huge number of people. Many community choirs turned to virtual meeting technologies in a mass, spontaneous experiment in **collaborating online.**<sup>10</sup> Since video platforms experience a 300-millisecond to one-second lag between computers over the internet, directing and singing music simultaneously is difficult. So people found ways of working to enable people to get as much joy out of singing as possible by listening and singing on mute or pre-recording parts. An ensemble in Canada **sang from their cars,**<sup>11</sup> streaming the music over the slightly-faster radio waves using microphones, a mixer and an FM transmitter to prevent the lag time experienced online.

**The Association of British Choral Directors**<sup>12</sup> even published information on how to lead choirs in lockdown. An online survey of **nearly 4000 choir members**<sup>13</sup> in the UK identified that continuing the choirs online – even in a limited way – improved people’s sense of wellbeing, was important for their community and social identity, and encouraged creative co-creation. It is also an activity that is about using what you have – your voice – rather than buying a new toy.

**“Dark clouds can have silver linings – personal tragedy and communal grief were the dark clouds of the pandemic but the stimulation of the arts and entertainment through enforced staying at home added flashes of silver. And not just works ‘on your own like painting and writing but the online world buzzed with communal singing, dancing and drama. It often requires a shock to a system to open up possibilities and they then stay open to reveal what is possible to increase our wellbeing.”**

Ian Roderick, The Schumacher Institute



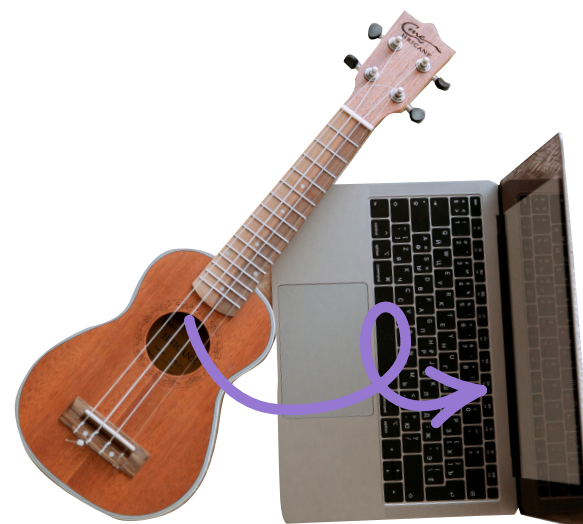


Many musicians and other artists took to sharing their teaching skills online for the first time, aimed at new learners taking advantage of more spare time to take up an instrument. The recent **popularity of the ukelele**<sup>14</sup> continued, with **virtual learning communities**<sup>15</sup> teaching, learning together and supporting each other. Many of these online options also enabled musicians to earn a living of some kind, when all other sources had disappeared overnight. And geography is no barrier, with **one British man**<sup>16</sup> taking advantage of Australia's time difference to find a teacher in the early hours of the morning before his young family wakes up and others finding tuition for unusual instruments easier to source overseas.

Dancing was an activity that demanded some of the highest ingenuity during the pandemic, with online classes proving popular, **living room dancefloors**<sup>17</sup> booming, and students keeping up their physical fitness and skills by **dancing at home**<sup>18</sup> in gardens and bedrooms. The Dutch National Ballet made an **at home ballet**<sup>19</sup> to connect people and keep the love of dance alive. General keep-fit at home also flourished online, with the UK's fitness guru **Joe Wicks**<sup>20</sup> getting millions of people off the couch for his 30 min morning workouts. Yoga aimed at beginners also drew huge new audiences, with **Adrienne**<sup>21</sup> seeing up to 35m viewers on some videos.



Many writers and artists are used to working alone, but lockdown encouraged people to use those activities **in a more communal way**,<sup>22</sup> to ease the sense of isolation and be part of something bigger. In the UK, ceramicist and TV documentary maker, Grayson Perry, hosted an **Art Club**<sup>23</sup> with his wife, in which people sent in their art and he chose a selection to be part of an eventual real world exhibition. The Art of Rapid Transition held an **online exhibition**<sup>24</sup> on Instagram to provide a platform for art students. **Local art groups sprang up**<sup>25</sup> to provide an outlet for creativity and a social gathering for more **vulnerable or isolated people**<sup>26</sup> to have fun while painting or drawing. The Getty Museum in Los Angeles challenged people to recreate some of **their favourite works at home**<sup>27</sup> with minimal props and then share their artistic interpretations on social media, with hilarious results and a huge viral phenomenon. This inspirational idea illustrated beautifully how much fun can be had with very little; huge numbers of people raided their wardrobes, sheds, tool cupboards for props that brought joy and laughter to so many others.



But it was not all about screens – in fact, many people were fed up with online activities and Zoom meetings and classes, and families enjoyed a surprising return to basics with a huge upswing in the popularity of board games and puzzles. The **runaway success**<sup>28</sup> of Netflix's stylish series focusing on a young woman chess prodigy, "The Queen's Gambit", also created **a real world explosion**<sup>29</sup> in the popularity of chess. Over 12 million new members flocked to **chess.com**<sup>30</sup> for games, lessons and puzzles in 2020, 3.2 million of whom joined after the Netflix show's debut in late October. More time for chess means less for shopping, which is good news if we are to rein in our current overconsumption.

According to the online resource **BoardGameGeek**,<sup>31</sup> more than 5,000 new board games or expansions are released every year, sales have **increased**<sup>32</sup> because of the pandemic, and board game **cafes**<sup>33</sup> have popped too, encouraging communities formed during the pandemic to continue. Digital connectivity has allowed the hybridisation of **board games**<sup>34</sup> using sites like **Board Game Arena**,<sup>35</sup> **Tabletopia**<sup>36</sup> or **Tabletop Simulator**,<sup>37</sup> which only needs a Zoom call and a digital board game to get going. Many people found new games and had more time to learn complicated rules and some even made up **their own games**<sup>38</sup> just for the pandemic. Jigsaw puzzles also moved from being a desperate activity for rainy days before TV to being an ongoing activity for all ages that can displace more wasteful activities. Puzzle maker Ravensburger saw its sales explode, and US puzzle sales were up **370% year on year in March 2020**,<sup>39</sup> and secondhand puzzle sales are also strong.

For parents with young children, simply getting through the lockdown-extended time at home – often working while also trying to teach or care for children or other relatives – was difficult. Putting formal education aside, many people rose spectacularly to the challenge of entertaining without the usual holiday plans, summer camps or playdates that had become the norm. Even those without a garden or outside space could have a go at **shaving foam marbling**,<sup>40</sup> **body tracing**<sup>41</sup> or perhaps an **ecology "snack"**<sup>42</sup> – snippets for young ones at home. Perhaps the days of back-to-back pricey activities for children are numbered, as we remember that social interaction and being occasionally bored are also important.

The pandemic tested aspects of our societies to the extreme but it also brought out moments of stunning creativity, shared humour – and the realisation that we also need the time to enjoy each other's company without hang-gliding, bungee jumping or training to be a toastmaster (nothing wrong with any of these activities per se). For a more sustainable future, where we might be thrown more often on our own resources to have fun, perhaps we have relearned some important skills.



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# Re→set

## lessons from lockdown

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