

Chapter 3: Culture and COVID-19

COVID-19 caused a cultural upheaval in Canada. In quick succession, cultural institutions such as museums, theatres, stadiums, concert halls, and libraries shut down, some permanently. Live events—concerts, plays, sports, including our beloved hockey!—were cancelled indefinitely. Thousands of arts and culture workers across the country lost their jobs. So did culture disappear? Quite the opposite. Stuck at home, more people than ever turned to online cultural experiences for entertainment, education, distraction, and relief.

While many local booksellers switched their operations online quickly and creatively, the majority of these online cultural experiences fell into the category of popular culture: streamed movies and TV shows, video games, and social media. Netflix picked up [16 million subscribers](#) worldwide (all of whom apparently watched *Tiger King*). “High cultural” institutions, while not competing with the popularity of

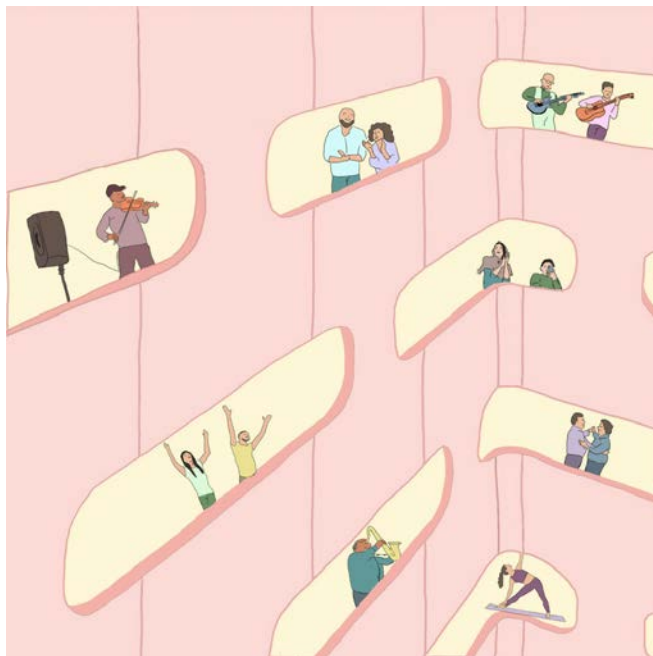


Illustration by Shua Baber on Unsplash

Netflix, did their best to pivot online. Using online services, you could visit [museums](#), watch [classic Radiohead concerts](#), experience [National Theatre](#) plays, and even tour the [Sistine Chapel](#) or the [Great Wall of China](#). In Canada, you could attend the [Hot Docs film festival](#) online, visit the [zoo](#), or watch a [concert](#). What type of content you consumed online perhaps said something about your social location and response to the pandemic. Some people turned to cultural experiences to de-stress as part of self-care during isolation; others viewed quarantine as an opportunity for personal growth and self-improvement (one popular tweet pointed out that Shakespeare wrote *King Lear* during quarantine). Still [others criticized](#) the capitalist logic that global pandemics should be a time of productivity.

As we discuss in this chapter, Canada has always, in part, defined its culture and identity

in opposition to the United States. For many Canadians, the disparate responses of our two countries to the pandemic appeared to illustrate our different cultural values. When cases in the United States increased in June and July as Canadian cases plummeted, it was hard not to notice that many Canadians felt a sense of superiority.

As you read the chapter, consider the following questions:

- Which cultural experiences and products did you access during the pandemic? Where did they come from and how did you access them? What type of culture were they—high culture or popular culture? Did they represent dominant culture, subcultures, or countercultures? Use your answers to create a hypothesis about how your social location influenced the cultural experiences and products you accessed.
- What effect do you think the pandemic has had on Canadian culture? Did it strengthen or weaken the dominant culture? Might the lack of local cultural events, in addition to the exposure to global culture online, affect our sense of identity as Canadians? Consider the effects of cultural globalization in your answers.
- Do you perceive cultural differences between Canada and America reflected in their responses to the pandemic? Is there tension between how we feel about American values and how much American culture we consume (which only increased as we “Netflix-ed” our way through the pandemic)?
- In March 2020, celebrities such Gal Gadot, Natalie Portman, and Mark Ruffalo took to Instagram to inspire us with [their version of John Lennon’s Imagine](#). The blowback was immediate and vicious. People mocked their singing, suggested they could do more useful things like donate some of their millions, called it an attention grab, and pointed out that they were out of touch with regular people’s struggles. Why do you think people reacted negatively to the video? What does this say about the power and limits of celebrity culture?



Additional online resources

This article connects the values and responses to the pandemic of other countries around the world.

- BBC Travel. (2020, March 28). [What coronavirus reveals about the world's culture.](#)

This video shows an artistic experiment that likely never would have occurred without the pandemic. Is there a chance that the limitations imposed by social-distancing orders were good for creativity?

- Global News. (2020, June 24). [String quartet performs for an audience of plants inside the Barcelona Opera House](#) [Video].

This writer of this article gives an American perspective on a long history of Canadians feeling superior to their neighbours to the south. Is our view of Americans ethnocentric? Is this possible given the dominance of American culture in Canada?

- McCullough, J. J. (2020, May 21). [Canadian anti-Americanism remains toxic — and Americans are helping.](#) The Washington Post.

Did the culture you consumed during isolation make you feel more free and mobile?

- Netter, L. (2020, April 1). [The importance of art in the time of coronavirus.](#) The Conversation.

This article describes some of the challenges faced by the arts and culture sector in Canada during the pandemic.

- Parris, A. (2020, April 17). [COVID-19's impact on Canadian theatre: 3 artistic directors weigh in.](#) CBC.

It's interesting to consider how this period of uncertainty, fear, and opportunity will be represented in art.

- Retro Report. (2020, April 17). [Coronavirus has a playlist. Songs about disease go way back. | Retro Report](#) [Video].

This article describes some problematic aspects of *Tiger King*, a popular show during the early days of quarantine. Why do you think viewers may have been drawn to a reality show that featured poor, disenfranchised, and exploited people?

- Wilkinson, A. (2020, April 2). [Let's think twice about Tiger King.](#) Vox.

These articles contain some theories why Canada coped with the pandemic better than the US. Do these speak to different values? Might there be other forces involved?

- Beauchamp, Z. (2020, May 4). [Canada succeeded on coronavirus where America failed. Why?](#) Vox.
- Hess, D. B., & Bitterman, A. (2020, June 3). [COVID-19 response highlights major differences between U.S. and Canada: U.S. pros.](#) CBC.