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# CAMBODIAN AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT IN THE PERFORMING ARTS

  
CHANGING THE STORY



Cambodian Living Arts  
2022 Cultural Season

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## Research Findings Report

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Swansea University December 2023.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is growing research on arts audiences - particularly regarding theatre and dance (Sedgman 2019; Walmsley 2019; Reason et al 2022). However, much of this work remains centred on the 'Global North' and there is little published research on arts audiences in South East Asia in general, and Cambodia in particular. The exception to this is our previous report (Rogers et al 2021) which was the first time that research has examined audience composition, understanding and preferences for the performing arts in Phnom Penh. This research raised a bigger question around who the arts are for and highlighted that young people did not always understand what they were watching. The project discussed here builds on this previous work, as it sought to further understand the composition of audiences attending Cambodian performance events, examine their reactions, and consider how using simple forms of technology may promote audience engagement and understanding. In particular, via a QR code, audiences were asked to a) engage with the shows presented using the digital tool Mentimeter to express their responses to the work they had seen and b) complete a survey. We also created supplementary digital content to accompany the performances. The research used Cambodian Living Arts' (CLA) 2022 Cultural Season of performances, workshops, and talks as a case study through which to experiment with this and other methodologies. The Cultural Season (titled Action Today: Consequences Tomorrow) was held in Phnom Penh and then toured across Cambodia, also giving the research the unique opportunity to find out more about arts audiences in the provinces. The project was funded through the Swedish International Development Co-operation Agency (SIDA) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (United Kingdom Research and Innovation - UKRI) via the Network Plus Grant 'Changing the Story'. The findings provide insights into the level of knowledge and understanding of the arts among different audiences across Cambodia, their preferences in terms of types of arts consumed, and the choices surrounding their participation and involvement in the arts. This research has provided the basis for a future joint project which examines how to facilitate the design and implementation of a festival led by young people.

## Research Aims

- 1 To find out more about arts audience demographics in both Phnom Penh and the provinces.
- 2 To test the use of digital technology as a means of gathering audience data to track the extent of youth participation in the arts. This includes their level of understanding, the extent of their desire to learn more about the arts, how the arts are valued, and if/how audiences might critically reflect on performances.
- 3 To examine how young audiences might respond to the arts online through screenings, which during covid, became a lifeline for artists to circulate their work locally and globally.
- 4 To share information with audiences about performances that they see, ranging from information about the artists, to the art forms and the piece itself. Our earlier research showed young people want this information to help them meaningfully participate in Cambodian arts and culture.

## Key Findings

**1** Our findings do not support a popular or academic narrative that Cambodian performing arts audiences are predominantly expatriates (Čopić and Šešić 2018; Nut 2019). Our previous research also challenged this assumption but was undertaken during a time of Covid-19 restrictions in Cambodia which skewed data. The current project was undertaken under a more 'normal' set of conditions and shows that expatriates account for around 14% of all audiences.

**2** Students are the largest group of arts consumers (approximately 30%) - but there is also a substantial proportion (around 25%) who are 'white collar' workers. Around 66% of the arts audience is under 30 years old, and 81% is under 35 years old in Phnom Penh. In the provinces this demographic accounts for nearly the entire sample owing to venues (school settings) and partnerships. Nevertheless, in urban centres, these findings remain important as it signals a shift in audience demographics, and a growing, young, middle-class Cambodian audience who are willing to consume and support the arts. Evidence suggests that this is beginning to move beyond a core arts-going audience.

**3** Our findings suggest that audiences are often not sure about exactly what they are watching; their understanding can be quite basic. In the capital there is greater awareness, levels of knowledge and criticality, but there is still a desire across the board to learn more and a feeling that young people do not know enough about the arts or know it clearly enough. There remains a tension over the purpose of arts for audiences - around whether the arts should comment on cultural and social issues, their value, and the extent to which the arts should conserve or develop tradition. It is important to know these dynamics to support the sustainability of the arts - something that co-exists with a wider debate over if and how the arts should be a commercial enterprise, a topic inevitably shaped by Cambodia's history of artistic near eradication and revival.

**4** Audiences are keen to watch 'new things', but this may be traditional arts that they have not seen before. In general, there is a real appetite for seeing different types of work. This means that it is important to maintain the diversity of Cambodia's arts ecosystem.

**5** Audiences are quite reflective, even though they do not always understand everything they watch. Responses show that arts activities increase a sense of importance attached to particular topics and knowledge about particular cultural or social themes (e.g. indigenous traditions or environmental degradation). Our Mentimeter data illustrates critical reflection and helped to encourage this. However, this is complicated by the fact that young people often expected 'an' answer to certain questions or 'an' interpretation of an artwork. They sometimes found the multiplicity and ambiguity of artistic work frustrating.

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Using technology in real-time to collect audience responses substantially increased the response rate in terms of gathering opinions and demographic data (1 in 3 audience members attending the works where we tested these approaches, compared with 1 in 6 in 2020). In general, using technology in the way we designed works better in smaller knowledge exchange events than in larger productions - though we successfully used it in both. This is likely due to the type of event and the audiences attracted (i.e. audience members at knowledge exchange events are likely to be more interested in learning and reflecting on the arts). There are technological difficulties even in large venues, and in larger events some people just go to watch and be entertained. Our approach was also new and unfamiliar to audiences, who normally leave their seats as soon as performances finish.

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Despite online information and screenings, young audiences overwhelmingly want to see performances live to directly show their support to artists and want live interactions (this is also less likely to be interrupted by internet difficulties). However, online screenings and formats were a lifeline to those interested in the arts in the provinces who otherwise would not have the opportunity to see productions. Artists also found them helpful for expanding their own ideas and networks, and used them as an archive. This is important given that Cambodia does not have a specific documentation archive for the performing arts.



It is well-known that Cambodian arts have undergone a period of revival and reconstruction following the Khmer Rouge (1975-1979) and that this has been central to the rebuilding of the nation in the aftermath of war. However, whilst there has been a strong focus in government, policy and research on Cambodian artists, their creative processes and products, there has not been sufficient research on the audiences for the performing arts. The National Policy for Culture (2014) makes very little reference to audiences or consumers of cultural products beyond “promoting and encouraging public participation in conservation and development of national culture” and supporting communities and organisations in these activities (p.6). Whilst there is a desire to promote participation and dissemination, there is little sense in policy terms of how to do this, of who audiences are within the sector, or their degree of knowledge, understanding or engagement. Yet all of these are important areas to know about to effectively enable civic participation in the arts, to promote Cambodian culture, and to inform decision making around the kind of support artists might need for outreach and engagement activities.

This project begins to redress this imbalance. It builds on our previous work (Rogers et al 2021) which was the first study to include research about Cambodian performing arts audiences. The current study provides a more detailed account of arts audiences in Phnom Penh and begins to extend this into the provinces (with caveats given the locations of the Cultural Season tour). As such, it counters a dominant trend in research with and on audiences that is often focused on the Global North and responds to the “urgent need to actively engage in both the diversification and decolonisation of the critical studies of audiences” (Reason et al 2022). Artists in Cambodia are often very concerned with connecting their work to society, but audiences do not always see the connections, or have different priorities around what they feel are important social issues that they want to see the arts engage with (Rogers et al 2021). There is always a tension between individual and collective reactions in audience research, as well as a complex dynamic between audiences and performers (Walmsley 2019). This study does not wish to promote a consumer focus that could be interpreted as imposing on artistic creativity or as arguing that artists should create to meet market demand. However, like Reason et al (2022), it argues that audiences are key in the making and communicating of ideas around the performing arts, and, as such, it is worth understanding their perspectives and preferences – even if audiences sometimes struggle with expressing their thoughts and feelings.

In addition, this study uses various forms of technology to try and capture audience demographics and engagement. This is based in the recognition that Cambodians, especially younger generations, are tech-savvy. Mobile phone usage is growing across the country and is now the primary means for communication and internet access (Kemp 2021). As such, we wanted to explore how audiences might be accessing and watching digital works, as well as looking at other arts-related content online. We also wanted to explore the possibilities of harnessing mobile technology for facilitating audience engagement in ways that might be more interactive or stimulate critical reflection on the performance works presented. In this respect, this study contributes to wider research that is interested in how audiences engage in the arts and the different methodologies that may be harnessed to this end (Snyder-Young and Omasta 2022). Using mobile technology to capture data and engagement among performing arts audiences is currently underexplored in existing studies (but see Jacobson 2022), making this research an important contribution to existing work both in Cambodian terms and more broadly.





## CAMBODIAN LIVING ARTS CULTURAL SEASON

The research was conducted as part of Cambodian Living Arts' 2022 Cultural Season. This event started in 2018 and consists of a 2-month programme of events curated around a theme that aims to start a conversation between artists and audiences, and to encourage reflection on Cambodian society. As an event, the Cultural Season stages a diverse series of arts events, including staged readings of new scripts, film screenings, and of course staged performances ranging from spoken theatre to varied forms of music and dance. Most of these events are new commissions by CLA. The Cultural Season also has an interactive programme that accompanies the arts programme. This includes workshops, talks, demonstrations, and panel discussions. These aim to engage audiences by encouraging additional forms of participation (e.g. workshops on particular topics or art forms) and stimulating dialogue and debate on ideas related to the theme.

In 2022 the theme was Action Today, Consequences Tomorrow. The intention was to present work connected with this theme in different ways; for example, work that represents effects of actions and policy decisions taken at a national level on people's daily lives, such as the contemporary dance piece Mother Nature, which illustrated the daily life activities and performances of Kouy indigenous communities in Stung Treng but also considered the impacts of environmental destruction on their livelihoods. Similarly, work addressed the consequences of personal decision making, such as Success in the Air, a spoken theatre piece which explored pyramid schemes and microfinance loans - a growing problem in contemporary Cambodian society.

The 2022 Cultural Season involved 124 artists and 8 production professionals across 9 new performing art works, 3 short films and 4 pieces of creative writing. There were also 2 panel discussions on arts in contemporary Cambodian society. Three productions (Mother Nature, Nature Farm House and Success in the Air) alongside an exhibition, readings of creative writing, and film screenings, toured to Siem Reap, Battambang, Banteay Meanchey and Kampong Thom. Not every production toured to every location - rather CLA worked with the directors of local schools, teachers and arts leaders to plan appropriate touring content for each place. The province tour included 12 different communities including training colleges, public schools, pagoda, villages, and indigenous groups, especially those that lack access to the arts.

## METHODS

Not all productions were tested owing to timing and spread of events. We used Mentimeter on four major productions in Phnom Penh: the Lakhaon Niyeay (spoken theatre) Success in the Air by Sous Yamy; Saker the contemporary dance film based on Lakhaon Khaol (all male masked dance drama) by Nget Rady; the music piece Chapei Diaries led by Keat Sokim; and the contemporary dance piece Mother Nature - a collaboration between the Kouy arts leader Kha Sros and SilverBelle. We also used it in three smaller interactive programme events, namely a screening of short films about indigenous communities, a creative writing reading, and a songwriting workshop. This gave us a good spread of participants with different interests. In the provinces, technology proved more challenging, and our selection of works was guided by CLA's touring schedule - but we sampled four of the same productions for consistency and comparison (Success in the Air, Mother Nature, the creative writing readings and the indigenous film screenings). However, in the provinces, some audiences in focus groups had also watched another Lakhaon Niyeay piece that CLA toured, The Nature Farmhouse, by Chea Sokyou.

**1** At the end of performances, we placed a QR code on a screen that connected to Mentimeter and asked audiences to respond to a series of questions or quizzes related to the production that they had just watched. Questions were explicitly designed to ask audiences to reflect critically on the art works presented, for example, by placing themselves in the position of characters in the play and asking what they would do, or by asking if they would select alternative courses of action for characters, or by asking how they would define a particular piece of work. Audiences were able to see responses to the questions in real time, but again, these were anonymous. In Phnom Penh 278 people provided responses, but the use of Mentimeter in the provinces proved more complex. We often had to adapt to technological difficulties - for example, we used lo-tech solutions such as colour coded cards instead of Mentimeter when internet connectivity was unavailable - including with over 100 students at the Secondary School of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh. Sometimes audiences also completed surveys by pen and paper if technology proved difficult, or if people did not have internet connectivity in the provinces - even on their mobiles. Province audiences were sometimes also unfamiliar with QR codes and not as tech savvy as we imagined. At other times, it proved too difficult to do any kind of survey at all, despite attempts.

**2** After Mentimeter, we then asked audiences to complete a short survey online again via a QR code. This was completed anonymously via mobile telephone and results were not publicly shared or seen. This resulted in 195 responses in Phnom Penh and 117 responses across all the provinces.

**3** Supplementary content related to the works shared through the cultural season was also created, namely 11 articles in Khmer, 2 bilingual articles (Khmer/English) and 6 Khmer language videos. This content was specifically informational and designed to give audiences more insight into the specific works created. It ranged from interviews with writers and actors, to more in-depth explorations of the stories behind performances. These were shared via CLA's Facebook and Telegram channels from an external website which allowed us to track viewing trends.

**4** We held 6 focus groups with 23 participants in Phnom Penh: 3 with audiences; 3 with artists. However, occasionally these mixed owing to scheduling and availability. In the provinces we held an additional 9 focus groups with 47 audience members (2 in each location, apart from Kampong Thom, where we held 3). The focus groups reflected on audience experiences, our use of technology and questions of interaction. In addition to this, we held short interviews with the contact points in the provinces to understand more about arts experiences in their communities.

**5** We organised 6 digital watch-alongs with 51 young audience members in Phnom Penh, Kampong Thom, and Battambang using Telegram groups. This involved small groups of 6-8 people watching an online performance together, providing comments or thoughts in real-time and/or immediately afterwards. We also prepared prompt questions for particular points in performances or for use afterwards – these were flexibly used depending on the group dynamic. Nevertheless, we were able to see audience reactions in real time and understand more about audience behaviours with online performances.



## AUDIENCE DEMOGRAPHICS

This section provides some key findings around demographics for Cultural Season audiences. Figures that are described as ‘previously’ are taken from Rogers et al (2021) for comparison. In Phnom Penh there was a considerably higher response rate compared to previous research, roughly 1 in 3 (195/612) using technology, rather than 1 in 6. However, this was also due to how the data was collected where audiences were to complete the Mentimeter and questionnaire before being able to meet the cast, crew, artists. This annoyed some audience members in Phnom Penh who wanted to ‘get on with things’, or simply leave but did not feel able to. However, in focus groups, many audiences appreciated and enjoyed doing it (see below), but it is worth highlighting that there were divergent reactions. In the provinces, when we did use Mentimeter, the response was overwhelmingly positive – partly because it supported the idea of art as an educational tool (see focus group responses below) and audiences in those settings were largely teachers.

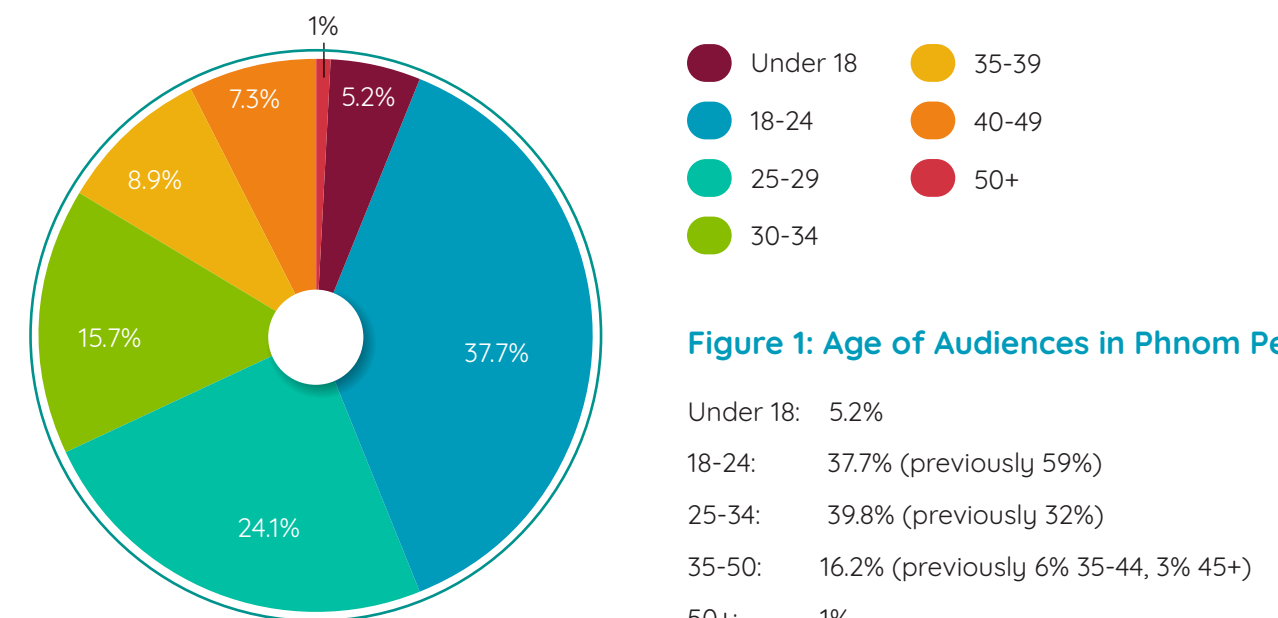
## EXPATRIATES

The number of expatriates and westerners attending events was low overall at 14.4%. Expatriates were absent in most of the interactive programme, which is unsurprising given that these events are mostly in Khmer. The type of performance also affects foreigner presence – it was higher in contemporary dance (29.8%) and Chapei Dang Veng (24%) works - forms that are more familiar, easier for westerners to interpret or experience, and more open to cross-cultural dynamics. There were fewer westerners in more culturally specific pieces like Saker (8.8%) and Success in the Air (8.7%) probably because language skills or a specialist interest would be needed. Nevertheless, these results challenge the perception that much of the arts scene audience is foreigners irrespective of Covid-19. There were only 3 western audience members who came to see the film screenings at a Battambang teacher training college, but beyond this there are no other westerners surveyed in the province data.

## AGE OF AUDIENCES

### PHNOM PENH:

In Phnom Penh This means that around 83% of the arts audience is under 35 years old, and 67% of the arts audience is under 30 years old in Phnom Penh. According to the 2019 Cambodian population census, around 2/3 of the population is under 35. The Royal Government of Cambodia defines young people as aged 15-30 and 28% of the population falls into this age group (Ministry of Planning, General Population Census of the Kingdom of Cambodia 2019). Note that for UK research ethics reasons, our youngest participants were 16 years old (see figure 1).



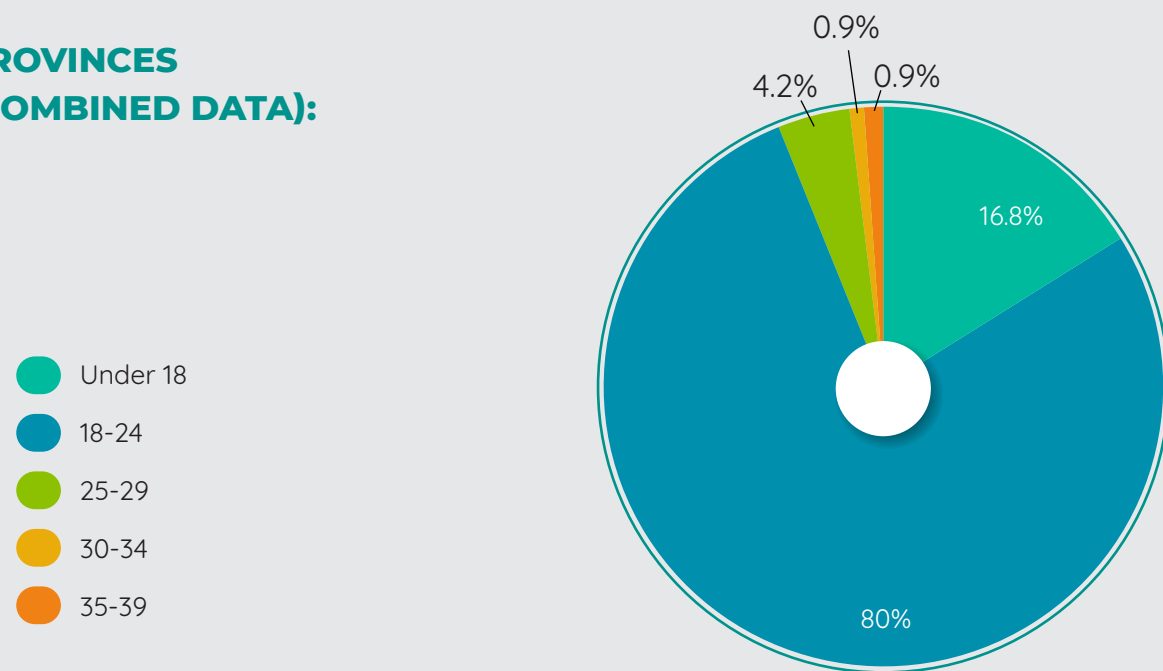
**Figure 1: Age of Audiences in Phnom Penh.**



There is, therefore, an over-representation of young people seeing the arts compared to the population as a whole. One explanation for this might be sampling strategy but given the survey mechanism of using Mentimeter (rather than researchers with implicit biases) and a far higher response rate, it is likely that the 2022 figures more accurately reflect the audience's composition. Some caveats around bias in the results include that expatriates (approximately 14% of the audience) are likely to be excluded from these results as the surveys were conducted in Khmer, and younger audience members are also more likely to use their smartphones.

Nevertheless, there is a significant drop off in the 18-24 age bracket compared to the data published in 2021. As a result, the proportion of older audiences is slightly higher in 2022 than in 2020. There are fewer students in the 2022 Phnom Penh sample (see below) which helps to account for this drop – possible explanations for this include the closure of CLA's National Museum venue and, as a result, fewer students 'dropping in' from the Royal University of Fine Arts next door, or from other central locations.

### PROVINCES (COMBINED DATA):



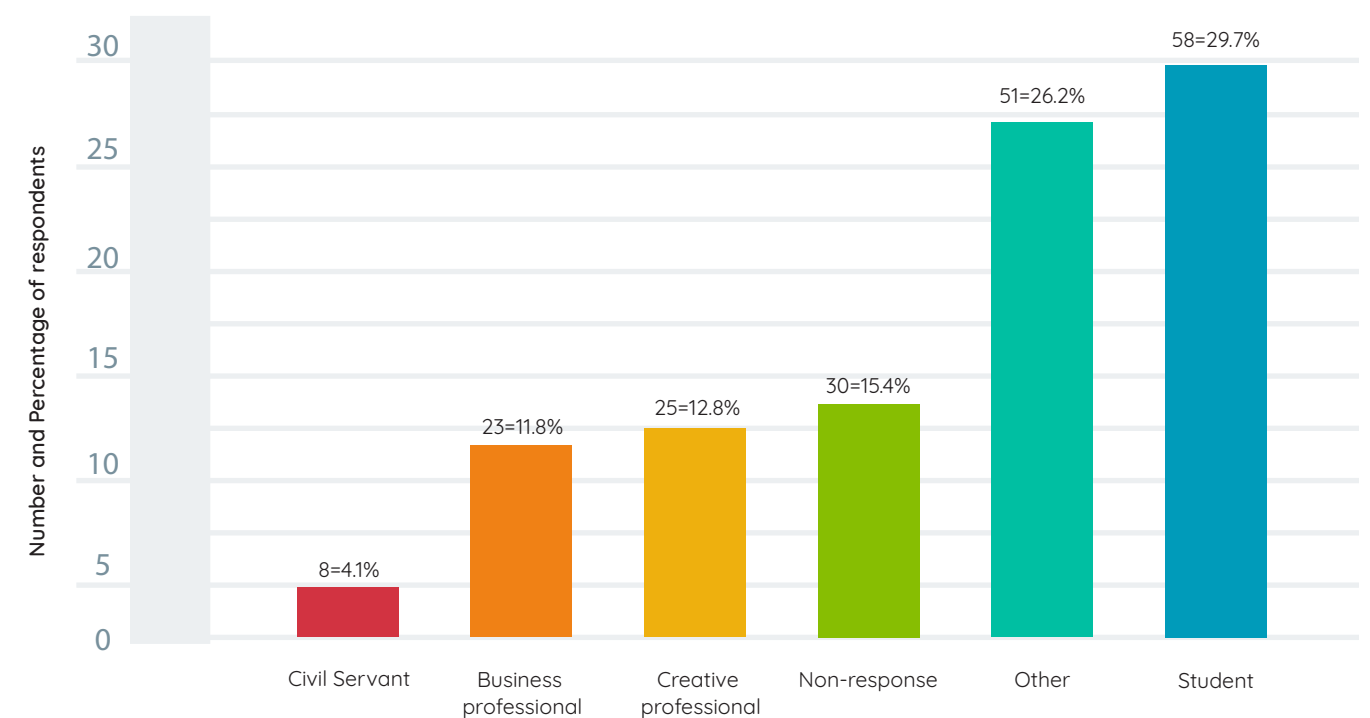
**Figure 2: Age of Audiences in the Provinces**

We have combined the results for research in the provinces as the samples are small for individual locations and there are significant common trends in the data. Nearly the entire sample is under 35 years old, and there is a significant proportion of 18-24 year olds (see Figure 2). This is due to bias on multiple fronts, notably that fact that the location of touring venues were schools and teacher training colleges, and the ease of getting the technology to work in these settings (in many locations it was not possible to do Mentimeter or online surveys owing to lack of internet, difficulty or impossibility of internet access, a lack of smartphones, rain/weather). However, this bias is useful in other respects, particularly in terms of finding out what young people wanted to see, what they enjoyed and what their artistic experience or knowledge is.

## OCCUPATION

### PHNOM PENH:

Once again, students are the largest audience group at nearly 30%, but as mentioned above, this has fallen by about half compared to the data published in 2021, most likely this is because of venue locations (see Figure 3). The other occupational categories are reasonably similar, although there are slightly more creative professionals in attendance and fewer business professionals. However, when the 'other' category is broken down, respondents come from a varied set of occupations with individually small numbers, but they are largely 'white collar workers'; a lot are in administration, human resources, sales, medical professionals, IT etc. Essentially, these are middle class occupations, which illustrates a broader argument about the middle classes looking for new or interesting experiences on which to spend disposable income – with the arts being one avenue for this.



**Figure 3: Occupational structure of audiences in Phnom Penh.**

Student:	29.7% (previously 66%)
Business professional:	11.8% (previously 19%)
Creative professional:	12.8% (previously 7%)
Civil Servant:	4.1% (previously 4%)
Other:	26.2% (previously 4%)
Non-response:	15.4%

## PROVINCES (COMBINED DATA):

In the provinces, 28% of those attending performances were students, and 64% were teachers or trainee teachers (see Figure 4). Although there are small representations of other occupations in the data, the overall results reflect the bias of the data collection methods and its geographies – that is the use of Mentimeter in educational settings, and the touring locations being teacher training colleges.

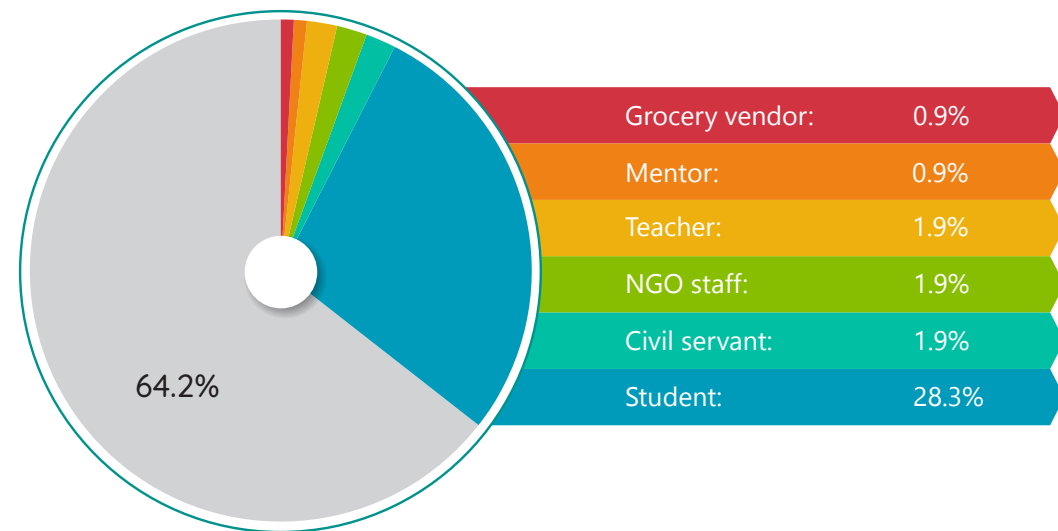


Figure 4: Occupational structure of audiences in the provinces.

## GENDER

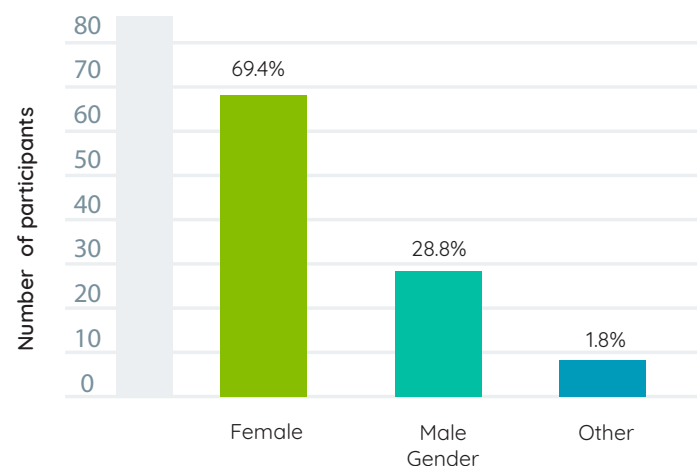


Figure 5: Gender composition of audiences in the provinces.

According to UN data for 2019, around 51% of the Cambodian population identifies as female and 49% male. Official statistics simply report men and women, rather than the full spectrum of gender identities. In 2020, there was a roughly equal proportion of men and women in the audience. In 2022, a slightly larger proportion of the audience was female than male (54.4% female, compared to 41% male), with 'other' identified at 2.1% (the non-response rate was 2.6%). However, in the provinces, there was a significant skewing of the data towards those identifying as female (see Figure 5):

The proportion identifying as 'other' holds fairly steady across all the samples, at around 2% (it is hard to ascertain if this is the proportion of incidence within the wider Cambodian population given that this data is not collected in official statistics).

Although there is generally a slightly higher proportion of women than men going to the arts, this was not a significant difference in the data for Phnom Penh. However, we had a closer look at why the province data was so skewed towards female respondents and found that it is due to an over-representation of female teachers in teacher training colleges. As of June 2022, 59% of primary school teachers in Cambodia identified as female according to the World Bank and the ratio of female to male students in secondary school in Cambodia was 1.08 in 2020 according to UNESCO. However, in our sample, 72.1% of trainee teachers identified as female compared to 64.3% of students. Those who identified as 'other' came from the student group. This shows a higher female proportion of both students and teachers compared to incidence in the population and the profession. There may be specific local factors for this beyond the scope of this research, but it explains the skewing within the data collected from the questionnaires (however, we successfully made the effort with focus groups and watchalongs to secure a greater gender balance).

## FREQUENCY OF ATTENDANCE

In Phnom Penh, 22.7% of the audience had rarely attended an arts event or were attending for the first time, suggesting around 1 in 5 people were attending for the first time (see Figure 6). This is comparable with the 2020 data (again around 20%). This suggests that CLA is regularly attracting newcomers to its programs. There is what we would interpret as a core 'arts-going' audience of around 45% of respondents in the 2022 Phnom Penh data. This comprises around 28% of respondents who like to go as often as possible, and another approximately 20% who go once a month. This shows a slight increase compared to 2020 data where these two categories comprised around 37% of the sample and was the largest group. There could be many factors for the increase, including post-covid demand. More interesting is the 22% of audiences who go every 2-3 months in 2022 compared to this group being only 12.7% of the sample in the data from 2020 (published in 2021). This feels more significant as this group are not those who really love the arts, but who are growing to love the arts, and who are more regularly attending arts events. Importantly, this group is growing and perhaps, in time, they will go more often. As a result, the positive messages from the 2022 data in Phnom Penh are:

- There is less polarisation between a core arts going audience and everyone else;
- A growing arts audience overall;
- A more regular and diverse arts going audience.

All of this points to the increasing attractiveness of the arts as a leisure activity that young people particularly are willing to consume.



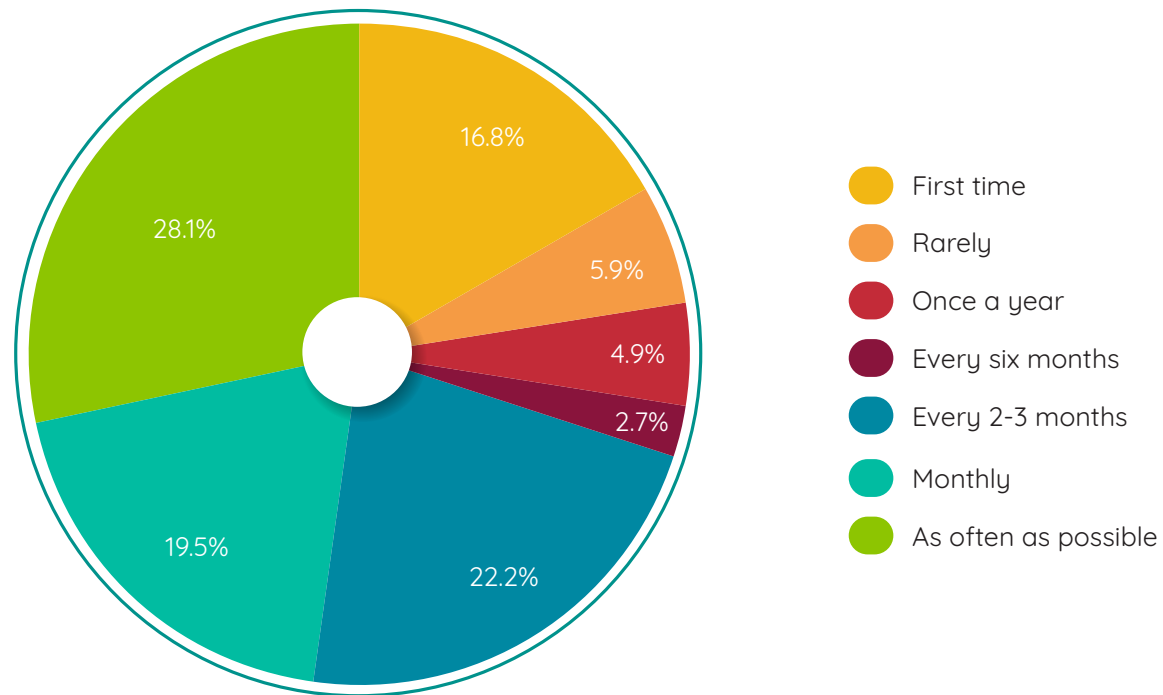


Figure 6: Frequency of attending arts events among Phnom Penh audiences.

In contrast, in the provinces the audience was very polarised in terms of frequency of attendance. Respondents either answered that they were attending for the first time or that they went as often as possible, though it is worth remembering the bias in this data. However, attending as often as possible does not necessarily mean high frequency, and this was illustrated by focus group data. In the provinces, audiences described attending as often as they were able, but they were most likely to attend pop music concerts. Beyond this, they only saw performing art forms during holiday celebrations, weddings, or at the pagoda. As a result, the type of performances that they did see were often linked to religious festivals – for example blessing dances or trot dance at Khmer New Year. Hence, respondents would probably go once a year at Khmer New Year to see a performance at the pagoda. The pagoda was therefore the key site for seeing arts in the provinces (and indeed was linked to the Cultural Season programme) but this raises issues around a lack of exposure and variety (see more below).

We correlated frequency of attendance with occupation, and in the provinces it is hard to observe any particular patterns owing to the majority of respondents being either students or trainee teachers – but the polarisation in attendance holds across everyone (see Figure 7). In Phnom Penh, the division is less stark, and there isn't anything significant within the correlation beyond the unsurprising fact that creative professionals are likely to go to the arts very regularly. However, business professionals are the other group who display this pattern, probably owing to greater disposable income (see Figure 8). Students have quite a large range of attendance with most stating that they attend every 2-3 months or that this was their first time going to a live performance. Beyond students, first time audiences are distributed across occupations quite widely, again supporting the assertion that arts-going is reaching into the population more widely. Again, it is hard to discern any significant patterns, so beyond the above, it is hard to ascertain whether a particular occupational group is likely to go more frequently beyond creative and business professionals.

OCCUPATION							
How often participants usually go to arts events?	Civil servant	Mentor	NGO staff	Student	Teacher	Trainee teacher	Total
This is my first time	1	1	1	10	-	36	49
Rarely	-	-	-	5	-	8	13
Once a year	1	-	-	-	-	2	3
Every six month	-	-	-	-	1	-	1
Monthly	-	-	-	4	-	1	5
As often as possible	-	-	1	10	1	21	33

Figure 7: Occupation cross-tabulated with frequency of art events attendance in the provinces

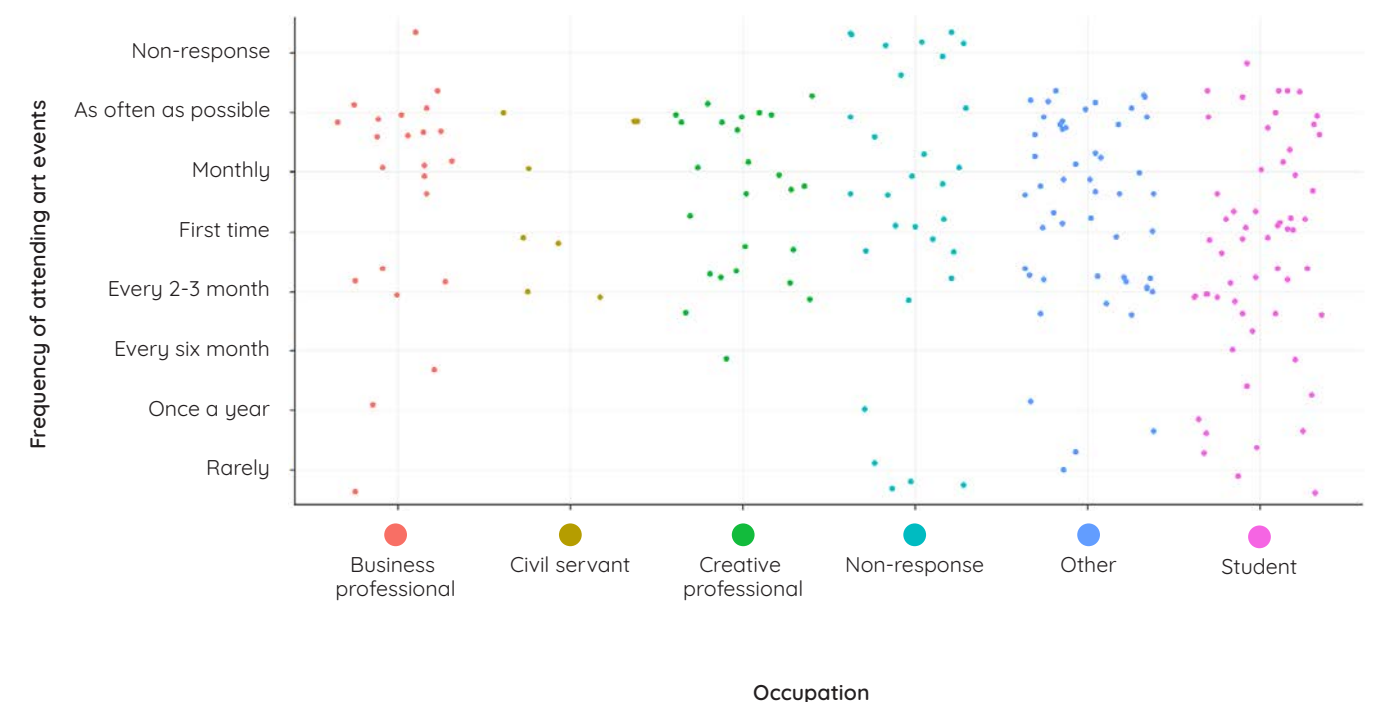


Figure 8: Occupation correlated with frequency of art events attendance in Phnom Penh.

## Reasons for Attendance

There were more varied reasons for attendance in the data from 2020 (published in 2021) than in the 2022 data. In the 2022 data, there was much less focus on attending to be entertained, attending to see contemporary dance specifically, or attending because people wanted to see a friend in a show. Instead, what comes over very strongly in the data from Phnom Penh is that audiences were more likely to put ‘interested in Cambodian culture’ as a key reason for attending (45% in 2022, compared with 24% in 2020) as well as ‘wanting to learn something new’ (this was nearly 26% in 2022, compared to 15% in 2020). There was a slight decrease in ‘support and promote the arts’ (19% compared to 24% in 2020). However, most people who are categorised as ‘interested in Cambodian culture’ (because this was the first thing they wrote) also mentioned learning something new, and so these two reasons are closely connected. Similarly, supporting the arts often goes along with being interested in Cambodian culture in responses.

Overall, this again suggests moving beyond an audience who already knows a lot about the arts, or the arts community directly. It also suggests an appetite for learning about different art forms and for consuming new cultural products. In the focus group data from artists, artists themselves would often also discuss going to performances to learn about other art forms that were not their speciality, or to see something new and different to get ideas for their own practice. It is also likely that the Royal Government of Cambodia’s current emphasis on, and use of, the arts on national and international platforms (such as the ASEAN chair, National Games, South East Asian Games) is also raising the profile of Cambodian culture generally, and making people interested to find out more.

In the provinces, data from the focus groups illustrate a very similar set of reasons given for attending a performance. Here seeing something new featured particularly strongly, as did preservation of culture. A common response among audiences was that they wanted to go because they had not seen Lakhaon Niyeay before, or seen contemporary dance before, or they wanted to see the Kouy performance because it was new and different. This aligns with the reasons selected for the performance locations and specific program toured by CLA – i.e. through conversation with contact points there was a desire to expose communities to art forms that they had not really seen before. Students also stated that they attended because they were told to by their teachers! This does not mean that they did not enjoy it, but it does highlight the importance of the relationship with teachers and contact points in bringing young people to events, and any potential influence that they may have.

## Media and Events

In Phnom Penh, social media is, unsurprisingly, the biggest information source for finding out about the Cultural Season (see Figure 9). This remains constant across all age groups. However, word of mouth is a big influence as well. As this was a multiple response question, it is likely this links with friends and personal networks. Taking these two responses together highlights the importance of social networks ‘in real life’ as an information source – the most significant outside social media. This remains constant across all age groups, but it is, surprisingly, slightly more important for younger than older audiences, especially for young people under 35.

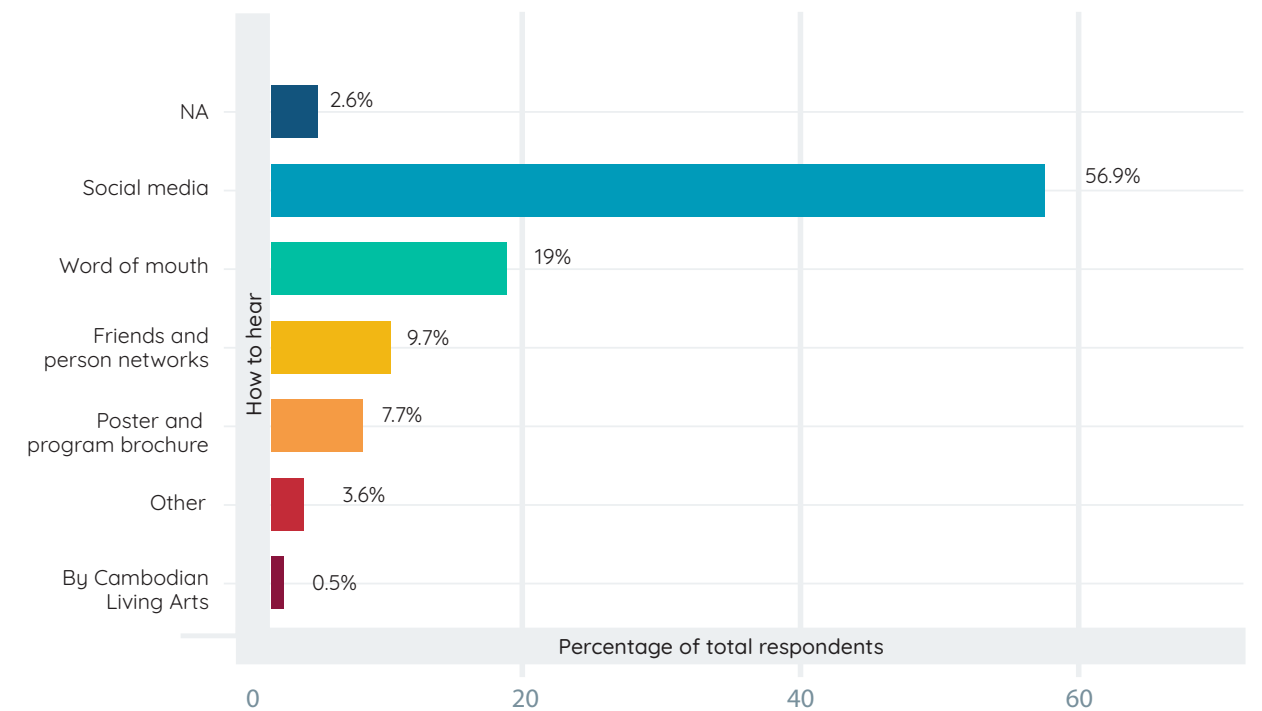


Figure 9: How respondents found out about Cultural Season events.

In the provinces when audiences were asked how they found out about the specific event they attended, the poster/season program brochure was the highest response (35.6%), followed by other social media (24.4%), Facebook (16.7%), word of mouth (15.6%), school (5.6%) and Telegram (2.1%). However, when asked overall about all sources the picture is a little different. Facebook features more strongly and more in line with the Phnom Penh data (at around 50%) but word of mouth does not. This could be due to inconsistency in the data or everyone writing down everywhere they’ve seen the Cultural Season advertised. However, a key point about the province data is the importance of the poster/season program brochure (see Figure 10). In focus groups it was apparent that a lot of young people saw a poster in real life, but a lot also saw and shared it on social media. This was a key means for sharing information about Cultural Season events. The way we have collected the data and the way people have responded means we can’t draw this distinction out fully, but in the provinces, the poster image was very important in raising the profile of Cultural Season events. This was very different to Phnom Penh where the poster or season brochure was identified as an important information source much less frequently.

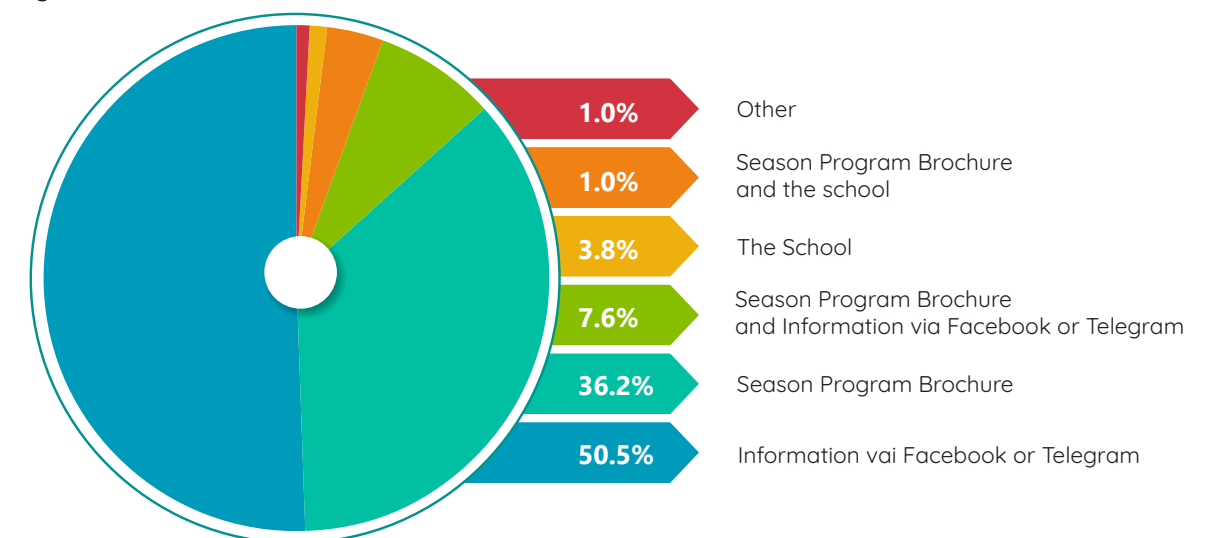


Figure 10: How audiences in the provinces found out about the Cultural Season





## KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING

Even in Phnom Penh, there can be a superficial level of engagement and understanding of what audiences are watching in artistic terms. That is, audiences did not always understand the specifics of artistic forms or conventions. This was evidenced in the watch-alongs, which highlighted that some of those watching did not know that Lakhaon Khaol as a form is all-male and kept asking why women were not performing female roles. The lack of female dancers was seen as discrimination rather than the convention of an artistic form. In the watch-alongs, where there was the ability to interact quietly in real time or after the screening, participants who knew more about certain art forms shared their knowledge to answer questions. As a result, the research inadvertently facilitated knowledge exchange. However, this kind of participant tended to be in Phnom Penh and Battambang, in the urban centres where audiences have likely had more experience of, exposure to, and education in, the arts. Importantly though, a lack of knowledge inhibits cultural participation, especially as audiences often became fixated on a particular issue or question that they wanted to know about, such that they potentially overlooked the rest of what the performance was doing.

The research supports a commonly held view among artists that audiences often want stories, they want to be able to follow what is going on and that they see the arts has having an interpretation that is quite literal or “correct”, or an intention that is clear (FGD, Phnom Penh). Audiences want a clear representational frame in a way similar to traditional performance forms, and struggled to experience and understand works that were more experimental as a result. Audiences asked a lot of questions about the pieces that they watched, some of which illustrate their lack of understanding and the desire for artists to explain what they are doing more, or for movements to always have a clear and direct meaning:

*“I asked my peers what ‘Saker’ means” (FGD, Phnom Penh).*

*“I didn’t understand the meaning of each part. What did they want to show in this part? Sometimes they switched roles. They had a few performers that switched roles back and forth and so I didn’t understand it. .... What I wanted to understand more is why did they perform this piece in this format? If they gave a little bit of explanation in each part, it would have been better. Of course, they had a narrator to introduce each part, but it was not detailed enough for us to understand it” (FGD, Phnom Penh).*

*“There are some movements I do not understand! I do not understand what kind of place she grows! Um, she used wood to plant ... I don't understand that part! Like, want to show the cultivation?” (FDG, Battambang).*

*“I’m really ashamed to the kid – When one of them asked what a contemporary dance is? I do not know what is it! When someone answered, I realised that I did not know about that at all. [We are] Never interested in the Khmer tradition ourselves” (FGD, Banteay Meanchey).*

Some participants felt ashamed of their lack of cultural knowledge, whilst some audience members were dismayed that the rest of the audience was not always fully paying attention as a performance was happening – especially in the provinces (see below). Participants in Battambang who had been to Phare, studied there, or attended workshops run by Phare were

less likely to articulate problems with understanding. In Phnom Penh, where focus groups combined artists and ordinary members of the public, those who were not artists felt that what they understood was different to what the creator wanted. They then said, *“I blame myself”* for limited knowledge and understanding. This assumes the artist is always right and that they always create work that can be easily ‘read’, whereas artists, particularly those who explore contemporary expressions, often want audiences to think. However, artists in this situation told audiences to stop blaming themselves, *“to pay attention more to the feelings”* rather than trying to decode the work. As a result, artists tried to educate audience members into how to read or, more accurately, experience, a performance. Indeed, artists saw understanding as something that evolved over time, including for themselves, as a working through of ideas that might be useful in future. In this respect, understanding was future orientated for artists, whereas audiences wanted a more immediate sense of satisfaction in knowing what a piece was about. As one artist described:

*“We have to think beyond the actual performance on the individual experience that we have because sometimes it is not for the 100 people watching them and understands everything, some understand, some don’t understand because they have never had much experience in watching art forms. Thus, for me, I keep continue because I think that even after finishing, we continue to understand [...] Sometimes we don’t know that the experience we have seen it may help us when we do something new [...]. Thus, it can be a tool or an element that can complement us when we make any form of art, or innovation as theatre, music, contemporary [...] the traditions of our indigenous people. Sometimes there is always something to help us. Sometimes it’s hard to say because it’s the inner thoughts we get” (FGD, Phnom Penh).*

Works can therefore be interesting to watch without having full understanding, they can still be enjoyed as experiences, and understanding can be something that happens later (indeed, as discussed below, this is supported by how audiences use information). Artists do not necessarily always understand art forms outside their expertise when in an audience capacity either, and sometimes they asked similar questions to general audiences about ‘what did they want to show’? There is of course a question around intention of meaning, as some artists are deliberately more expressive, others are deliberately more ambiguous, and so on, but it was interesting to see similar thought processes in operation.

In general, therefore, audiences were less familiar with the idea that artworks can be experienced or open to multiple interpretations. However, sometimes in Phnom Penh, audiences particularly liked contemporary work because it was not obvious and audiences liked not knowing what will happen next, they liked the open interpretations so that they could think about what they were watching:

*“I feel like when I touch the arts, I feel like my freedom of thought cannot be hindered by anyone. When I watched, listened, I saw all of these provide the freedom in talking with myself through watching the performance that I’ve seen and heard. So, no one comes to tell me not to watch, not to see it, because they cannot see [what I think of]. Therefore, I have freedom of thinking. Opposite to nowadays society in which sometimes we are allowed or not allowed [to know/do something]. [...] They think this way, we think that way, therefore, sometimes we have to get along with each other. We cannot be ourselves 100*



percent. Yet throughout the arts, I have seen that when we think of the word art, it is freedom. I mean I am myself. I mean if I think of something, I can do it 100 percent so that I don't need to compromise with other people" (FGD, Phnom Penh).

Watching the arts as an audience member enabled freedom of expression in terms of thinking and interpretation, and particularly in terms of thinking critically. In this respect, the arts were seen as democratic, something that came up multiple times in focus groups, and certainly as enabling individual freedom in ways that were not ordinarily accessible in daily life. The arts are therefore important enablers for individual audiences to express themselves but also to connect and think about society in ways that might promote an alternative point of view.

As reflected in the survey data, a key reason audiences came to the arts was to learn or be educated in some way. There was a real willingness to engage and find things out, to participate in the arts, and some focus group respondents even described it as being like doing research. This desire to improve knowledge and understanding was strongly expressed in data from both Phnom Penh and the provinces – audiences wanted to learn more about arts and culture which they *"feel they don't know clearly"* (FGD, Phnom Penh). For example, audiences could identify that Saker was 'new' but not always why it was new (although some could identify the use of chanting, props, role-switching, contemporary choreography and music – particularly in the Phnom Penh watchalong). In Phnom Penh there were focus group participants who also wanted to *"test my knowledge and capacities"* and who joined in with, for instance, the song writing workshop just to *"try new things"*. In focus groups, the idea that audiences attend the arts to learn, to have new experiences, and see new things came across very strongly. In the provinces, audiences went to see Mother Nature and the indigenous film screenings because they wanted to *"learn about Kouy people and ... their life"* (FGD, Banteay Meanchey). They had also never seen a contemporary performance live so they wanted to experience it for themselves. This impulse was partly linked to a desire for showing and preserving cultural difference and uniqueness. This is especially true of indigenous artworks where focus group participants identified that they liked finding out about the traditions, religion, beliefs and practices of Kouy people – it was educational, and audiences were curious:

*"I wanted to understand what they would show us. I wanted to understand the meaning behind so that I can get more knowledge and experiences that are expressed through that performance. For today, as these are video documentaries about the indigenous people, I wanted to understand how they live? What are their lifestyles? After that, I may share this knowledge with friends or my future students"* (FGD, Battambang).

*"It's because I have never heard and known about it before. I have never been to the indigenous people's communities and so I had no idea how the Kuoy community lived. So I wanted to understand their lifestyle, culture and beliefs. How are theirs different from ours? Like today, we have watched documentaries showing the lives of indigenous people. Although we have never been to their communities, it's still a good opportunity for us to understand their traditions such as making wine and Tro Khlok. That's the knowledge of the lifestyle of the indigenous people"* (FGD, Battambang).

Indeed, in a focus group in Battambang, one participant explicitly highlighted the expectation that if they go to a performance it is to be educated, *"What message do they want to educate*

*us about? What do they want us to know?"* (FGD, Battambang). Again, there is the idea that art carries messages, and is used as an educational tool in some way (this can, of course, include social norms and morality tales, something to be expected from arts based on Reamker or Cambodian Ramayana stories).

As suggested in our previous report (Rogers et al 2021) a lack of arts education in the general educational state system was seen as a key problem that prevented full cultural participation in the arts. Audience members raised the issue of not having arts education in schools in both Phnom Penh and the provinces. Artists too wanted greater education and knowledge about arts among young people. They discussed the need to train young people about arts and put this awareness into the school system. However, in Phnom Penh artists also talked about having a responsibility as well *"if we have no responsibility in outreach, they also don't know what those arts are?"* (FGD, Phnom Penh). Although many festivals, including the Cultural Season, have an educational component through workshops and talks, outreach was discussed in broader terms as part of an artistic responsibility to help disseminate knowledge about the arts more widely. However, what that might look like or consist of, remained unclear beyond formal teaching and festival events. Audiences in focus groups (who were more disposed to like the arts) also viewed it as their responsibility to learn about art and culture:

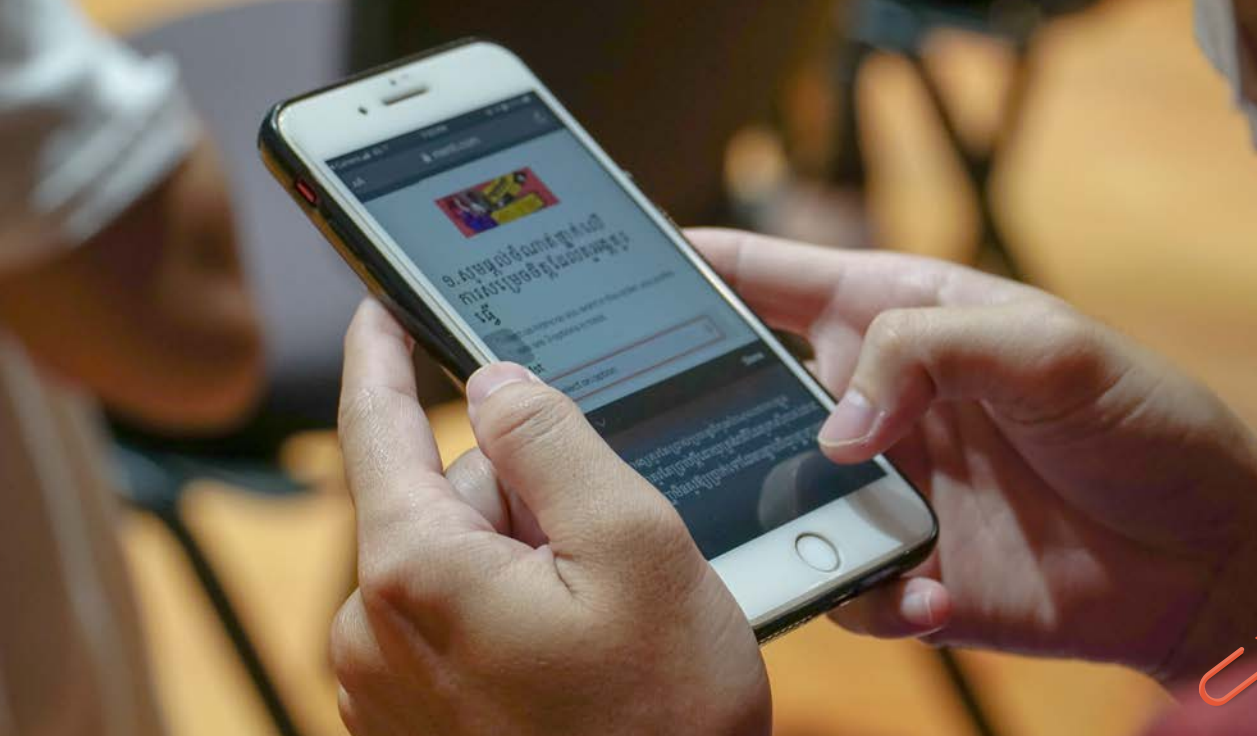
*"Since they [audiences] are Khmer, art belongs to them. So, they should have the responsibility, whether small or big, to preserve and protect it."* [The discussion focused on watching arts could be a way of helping to maintain and promote arts] (FGD, Siem Reap).

*"People follow what's popular in their generation. It was not well developed before, but now it is really developed. Before people strictly followed tradition and religion. As the world is developing, we tend to follow other countries' religion, culture and fashion"* (FGD, Siem Reap).

Globalisation was often identified as a problem for Cambodian traditional arts, with the associated issue of valuing modern arts, and particularly modern arts from elsewhere. However, one focus group participant challenged assumptions of the arts as a means of accessing cultural knowledge by suggesting that in trying to get young people involved in the arts, you have to start with something that will interest them, rather than assuming the intrinsic value of art and culture:

*"Start with something easy that they can feel belonging. So they wouldn't feel bored with that piece because they understand [...] When they feel they belong to that kind of thing, they would question themselves: why shouldn't they preserve? So first thing is that we have to inspire them to love and to preserve their own heritages"* (FGD, Battambang).

This response pinpointed the underlying dynamic of the quotations above – that young people do not feel that arts and culture belong to them. It implicitly highlights that young people are disenfranchised or disconnected from society and culture, and that this needs re-establishing before they can fully participate in the arts. In this respect, efforts in arts outreach, education and promotion – including recently by government on international platforms – are vital in establishing a connection to young Cambodians regarding the value of arts and culture.



## 'NEWNESS' IN THE ARTS

In the quotations above there is an implicit assumption that young audiences are navigating between tradition (particularly Ramayana stories) and modernity, but also fluidly adapting across both. In focus groups, audiences really liked those pieces that took something traditional and made it 'new', such as Chapei Diaries and Mother Nature, *"If we compare it to food, it's like we used to eat that kind of food, but this new style mixed with something else makes us interested"* (FGD, Phnom Penh). Similarly, in the song writing workshop, there was a strong preference for traditional forms of romantic songs, but equally people felt that social issue songs were important. In Saker, when we used Mentimeter to hypothetically ask audiences what course of action they would have liked the main characters to take, responses were very divided over, for instance, whether Preah Ream should have sent Hanuman to rescue Sida rather than doing it himself. This reflects the strong social conservatism and respect for tradition among some young audiences.

However, there remained desire for new stories that are relatable to now, as also indicated in the 2020 data (Rogers et al 2021). Artists share this desire, adapting the traditional expression of 'repetition is the enemy to the eyes' to *"repetition is an enemy to the audiences"* (FGD, Phnom Penh). Artists know audiences want new experiences and also described how they themselves were tired of seeing performances re-staged, instead preferring to see new works. This could encompass a variety of practices, from art forms that have yet to be fully reconstructed and revived, to art forms that evolved by mixing western and classical styles, to learning different techniques and technical skills. One artist focus group discussed poetry theatre and the debate around heritage, rights and reconstruction:

*"Can it be conserved and can it be developed? .... What is the "right way"? Whose is the responsibility? ... For me as a young person, for me as an artist, can I do some research make that a new theatrical performance? .... Do we, the young people, have the right to do research? Can I do a new performance?"* (FGD, Phnom Penh)

This is familiar territory for artists, but it still goes to the heart around newness, tradition and development in the arts, and who can or is able to create, and in what directions. Because artists in Phnom Penh did not always feel that they were seeing work that was especially new, they discussed the traditional and the project of reconstruction in terms of thinking through what they could do to encourage innovation in their own practice (see below).

What exactly 'new' means can therefore be quite varied. In Phnom Penh, audiences talked about what this might look like in two ways: first, in terms of specific examples from the Cultural Season that they identified as new (e.g. Chapei Diaries and how it incorporated the harmonica and everyday objects such as forks as part of its musical sound), indicating how newness was established vis-à-vis the adaptation of traditional forms in ways that audiences did not expect; and second, in fairly general terms, that is, a new production was one that resonated with contemporary social issues or that used contemporary forms because these were seen as being more free to discuss a particular issue or context.

Whichever form it took, newness was important as it was seen as making the arts relevant to young people today. It was one way to establish that connection, or belonging, to the arts among the population discussed earlier:

*"It has to be new and interesting even as we defend older forms"* (FGD, Phnom Penh).

*"We should not stay in one place. Art should run"* (FGD, Phnom Penh).

*"They cannot stay in Reamker for another 20 or 100 years. They should not focus too much on the Reamker story. They should have a new story that cultivates the mindset of the audience, which is the audience in Cambodia for them to see the future, what is the future like?"* (FGD, Phnom Penh).

Many audiences and artists expressed the belief that young people needed to learn more about traditional forms and learn them clearly so that they could tell the difference between traditional forms and their contemporary adaptation. However, as evidenced above, audiences also expected artists to imagine the future, to create innovative cultural products and therefore produce Cambodia's cultural future - and to start doing so now. Although it was less prominent when compared to the Phnom Penh data, audiences in the provinces articulated a similar desire to see new or 'attractive' things through cultural mixing:

*"Art is a creative, creative way of making it attractive and popular with the audience. So, they need to make it. Nowadays, the artist has mixed traditions with the modern thing, which is allowed. To be more attractive, all artists should consider this point to be more attractive and young people can be more involved"* (FGD, Battambang).

This participant also implicitly illustrated how government agendas around cultural development and preservation has filtered imaginatively into popular discourse - but audiences also wanted artists to push further beyond this as well. Audiences also described how people are multi-dimensional and they wanted to see that reflected more in works. In this regard, traditional forms were not necessarily seen as enough for expressing the complexity of social life, although some forms such as Lakhaon Niyeay (spoken theatre) are often orientated towards tackling difficult topics. Again, Again, as with previous research, what was 'now' and what might be 'the future' blended as audiences wanted to see artworks addressing a range of



popular issues such as climate change, gender equality, and freedom of expression. However, there are well known challenges in this context that mean performing artists must be careful in terms of how they express their ideas, and certain topics are known to be off-limits (see Rogers 2018, 2020). Performing artists know what social issues they can address, but they stated that they may not necessarily be brave enough to talk about these – owing to a fear of repercussions. However, some artists also discussed the choice to be neutral, and *“that is a right too”* (FGD, Phnom Penh). It was possible to *“touch too much”* on politics (FGD, Phnom Penh). In this sense politics was less oppositional and more about coming together, to create *“an opportunity to be united”* (FGD, Phnom Penh) – however, this was a different understanding of the purpose and value of the arts and one that audiences did not consider. Rather, some audiences wanted – and expected – artists to incorporate an element of social commentary in their work, particularly in the capital.

Newness was also something simply not seen before, and as such could encompass the arts in all their variety. This was particularly the case in the provinces. For example, on tour, audiences viewed Mother Nature as new because contemporary dance was a ‘new’ form that had not been seen before:

*“I was trying to visualise how it would look because I have never heard about this before. I only saw Khmer dance, blessing dance as such. I doubted contemporary dance. Would it be different from our dance? That’s the reason I became interested”* (FGD, Battambang).

*“I want to see it more. I look forward to seeing more development. I want to see the theatre, spoken theatre and contemporary dance. These are the things I’d like to see because I have never seen them before”* (FGD, Battambang).

In the indigenous film screenings, audiences were interested in the tro khlok maker as it was completely new *“never seen before he had a bamboo pipe and a gourd. Never seen!”* (audience survey). Similarly, the two spoken theatre pieces, Success in the Air and Nature’s Farmhouse, were seen as new and interesting, particularly in the provinces. Audiences wanted to see these works because they had not seen Lakhaon Niyeay before and wanted to see it. In focus groups, participants also described how they liked to watch the skill of acting, and acting in character, as this was also new to audiences. In Siem Reap and Kampong Thom certain performance forms are seen more regularly, such as Yike or Lakhaon Bassac, and so these were seen as common or normal, whereas these were less well-known in the capital and identified as ‘new’. What is new therefore depended on where you were – there was a literal geography to it. Focus group participants in the provinces described how they wanted to see shadow puppet theatre, an Apsara dance, a Peacock dance, Lakhaon Khaol, Bokator – all of these would be ‘new’ to see live. This remained the case even if audiences had watched them on television. Circus was loved in Battambang (unsurprising given that this is the home of Phare) yet a desire to see Lakhaon Khaol featured strongly overall. As this form has gained cultural visibility and prominence through the efforts of government and artists, and particularly since being listed in 2018 as Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding of UNESCO, it has filtered into the wider cultural imagination. The work of the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts in promoting this form, alongside television performances, the support of the Union of Youth Federations of Cambodia, as well as various Lakhaon Khaol Youth Theatre groups and practitioners have clearly paid off in terms of raising the cultural visibility of this art form and this may be something to model arts appreciation on more widely. In thinking about this further,

it was clear that there was, therefore, a real appetite to know and see ‘more’ arts:

*“I want them to see it more. I want to know more. I would like to see more because we have different styles of living and diverse traditions in the areas. I want to see them improve by showing the dance and other art forms to us. There are some types of dance and performing arts that we haven’t seen yet”* (FGD, Battambang).

The emphasis on ‘more’ indicates a desire for variety and seeing Cambodia’s rich artistic heritage. Audiences wanted more regular arts events as well as greater exposure to art forms that clearly dominate in certain areas of the country. This suggests the need and desire for a more co-ordinated approach by the arts sector in terms of organising arts activities, touring programmes, and support generally.

This was also highlighted by artists who were programmed in the Cultural Season and who watched productions as audience members. Here seeing ‘new’ work was an integral part of creative development as an artist. Although being part of the Cultural Season as performers enabled artists to access different opportunities, networks and collaborations, they also attended Cultural Season events to see good people producing high quality work in order to improve their own practice. This was particularly the case in the provinces where some dance students wanted to see dancers in order to improve their own skills. In this respect, performances from Phnom Penh were seen as a rare opportunity: *“I don’t really have a chance to see a live performance like this”; “I rarely see it”* (FGD, Banteay Meanchey). Artists also went to see new talent, learn about new art forms and ways of approaching things as this may eventually relate to their own work. They also expressed a desire to see more international work and to show their work internationally, because that also has *“the capacity to craft the new thing”* – to give new ideas and experiences (FGD, Phnom Penh). They wanted to see new creations and more collaborations and to think across forms as a way of helping them to produce exciting work:

*“Really, we think this form is different, that form is different. But we have no idea what it is like to work together to create something together. When we think too isolated, sometimes the relationship does not exist”* (FGD, Phnom Penh).

In focus groups, performing artists saw the visual arts as having a strong social message for audiences, as linking to current society, as coming up with new concepts and ideas. They were *“really interested in the approach”* as in, how visual artists make work (FGD, Phnom Penh). They wanted opportunities to try and collaborate (such as in Chapei Diaries) to find ‘new discoveries’ as part of the ongoing development of an art form, but also across art forms – both inside and outside Cambodia.



## SOCIAL ISSUES

Despite the seeming ‘gaps’ in arts education and understanding, audiences do pick out general social themes from works and see the bigger picture. Forms that enable an easy connection to current society and social issues, such as Lakhaon Niyeay and contemporary dance were particularly discussed among audience members in focus groups as showing the ‘newness’ and connection that they wanted the arts to make to their daily lives. In the contemporary dance piece Mother Nature, for example, it was not only Kouy life and traditions that were interesting, but also the environmental issues (in the Mentimeter responses, audiences identified the piece as being primarily about environmental problems, perhaps feeling more free to express this owing to the anonymity of responses) and how these two themes connected:

*“Before I also used to think about preserving and protecting [environment], but I haven’t started it yet. When they said that we can start doing it from small actions, I think that we can start doing small things like they told us. We can start planting. It has changed my view”* (FGD, Banteay Meanchey).

*“For instance, human actions impact on the destruction of nature and humans need to reinstate nature as capable [best?] as they can. That’s what I was really interested in and it was an experience for me as I have understood that, if we, humans, rely on forests, we should preserve them and prevent them from deforestation”* (FGD, Battambang).

*“I know they want to talk about the nature that I look at and talk about deforestation affecting their communities. And the problem of deforestation is also sensitive in Cambodia. And I commend them for their ability to put such a sensitive subject into action, as when we watch it, we did not know that we were talking about it directly. [...] And this artist, they are so talented at incorporating it into a message, both in the form of a dance and other things are good, especially unique, they use the same approach as in the Kouy indigenous community to show it, I think it is good. I rarely see people who value indigenous artists, so I rarely see them on the big stage. So, I think this is what I really like. And another point is the combination of contemporary dancers and themselves [Kouy performers]. I see that form is giving value to the indigenous people. Both the way they tell the story, the people who is friendly to indigenous people, and all the musicians, when they put it all together, I see and I think that this works is trying to uplift and try to focus on the indigenous people, and their problems, such as deforestation that are affecting their livelihood. Like the issue of resin harvesting and spiritual guardianship”* (FGD, Phnom Penh).

Audiences did love Mother Nature, they felt it looked different and unusual, especially as in Phnom Penh they often had not seen indigenous culture before. It was seen as bold aesthetically, in terms of foregrounding indigenous culture and combining it with contemporary dance, and in terms of talking about sensitive topics. Audiences were therefore able to appreciate the combination of concept, content and form, even if they did not always understand every part of it. The piece also stimulated considerable reflection on relationships to the environment, especially in the provinces:

*“Living in the forest and relying on forestry products is very beautiful. I used to live like that. It’s simple and beautiful. [...] Although the world is moving forward, all the development always brings destruction regardless small or big. If we are pure and we live with nature, we won’t feel guilty with nature because that’s the good way to connect with nature and live interactively with it. We don’t ruin each other, yet we have a love for each other”* (FGD, Battambang).

There was a very real connection to individual experiences and ideas when watching Mother Nature. In the provinces, people are more aware of both environmental issues, particularly environmental destruction, because they see it more first hand, and indigenous culture.

Similarly, Success in the Air also touched on social issues and connected well with audiences as they recognised the situation and the dilemmas it raised. Audiences, especially in the provinces, nearly always identified the situation in the play in relation to lotion sellers, clothes sellers, loan schemes or pyramid schemes. They recalled these and joked about how many “successful masters” there were, even if they had been cheated themselves or people had attempted to cheat them. The play was therefore directly relevant, but it also made them think about this situation more deeply:

*“I think it conveys a big education message to the audience. The audience can see, reflect on themselves and put it into practice”* (FGD, Siem Reap).

*“We shouldn’t trust people based on their success. We shouldn’t trust them without thinking critically”* (FGD, Siem Reap).

Some participants described how locally parents would push their children to be sellers but don’t do anything themselves. They felt that this kind of play told a different message that emphasised “the need to think beforehand about what we do” (FGD, Siem Reap). A lot of respondents, particularly in Kampong Thom, highlighted how the play made them think about the need to think critically before making decisions, and discussing this with family and surrounding people that they trust before making a decision. It also made them think about the consequences of their actions:

*“Participant: If we make the right decision, we will get the good consequence, but if we make a bad decision, the consequence is not good, we need to think carefully.*

*Tola: Can you help me highlight any part of the story?*

*Participant: Like the part where a woman decides to invest money with the successful tutor, she didn’t think critically enough on the usefulness, how much money would she need, just being greedy. Then taking the money to invest and get cheated”* (FGD, Kampong Thom).

Some focus group participants also described how they felt that the audience was confused about whether the play had ended as they expected a simple morality tale where the police would come at the end, with all the problems being solved. Instead, the open ending meant that whilst there may have been some confusion around whether or not the piece had finished, “last night’s show makes us wonder” (FGD, Kampong Thom).





## Questions of Value

In our previous report (Rogers et al 2021) there was a disconnect between what artists make and what audiences want to see. This theme emerged again, as outlined above, in terms of how the arts should connect with society. However, it also emerged in relation to questions of value and imaginations of what the audience/artists are like or should do. It was clear from focus groups that many performing artists do not make work for an audience (apart from performing traditional music or dances for particular festivals or rituals) – they make it from what they want to say. However, audiences had a more commercial mentality, stating that *“the artists can perform what the audiences want to see”* (FGD, Phnom Penh). However, artists have been trained in a system that encourages deep cultural respect for the arts in and of themselves. Artists are also aware that if you only focus on what people want, you may lose other art forms in the process. Artists were concerned about this; *“the scariest thing is losing what is ours”* and some in Phnom Penh wanted to see the reconstruction project continue as not all Khmer art forms have yet been properly researched (FGD, Phnom Penh).

Some audiences in Phnom Penh therefore wanted to see arts operate more as a business, but this meant that they thought that audiences should pay for and value the arts appropriately. Some suggested that if there was better financing, artists *“can work on art full time”* – recognising the competing demands that artists often face (FGD, Phnom Penh). Of course, some artists do work full time on their own practice, but many are juggling different commitments, particularly as teachers and making art as freelancers as well. Indeed, a recent report by Young et al (2023) highlights that around 25% of creative worker income comes from non-cultural sector activities (p.25). Audiences in Phnom Penh identified the impacts of this, as they stated that they wanted to see more *“elevated arts performance”*, identifying other performing artists like Sophiline Shapiro who they felt were working at that level (focus group, Phnom Penh). Although this infers that not all artists are working at that level of conceptual and technical execution, in context, audiences were discussing how they wanted to see performance works being pushed at this level, and that this could only happen when there is greater support and funding to work full time on arts as this also enables development and experimentation. Again, Young et al’s (2023) report highlights that although pre-Covid 19, artists earned slightly above the average GDP per capita, since this time, average GDP per capita is rising faster than artist earnings. In addition, there are discrepancies within the sector, with the performing arts earning the lowest annual income (\$1,125 in 2019, compared to \$259 in 2020) and music the second lowest (\$1,676 in 2019, \$713 in 2020) (ibid., p.27). As such, it is difficult to pursue being an artist full time and to have the funds necessary to create the type of work audiences might want to see. This is additionally complicated by the recognition among artists that they need greater entrepreneurial skills and skills training, particularly to help with marketing (see below).

In contrast, however, some audiences suggested making the arts free, certainly initially, to build interest among young people. However, artists asked, *“Why have to perform for free? Why not value the arts? I’ve trained for ten years”* – the argument being that *“if you love the arts, it cannot be for free”* (FGD, Phnom Penh). This ties into artists discussing the desire to see a greater valuing of their work both culturally and economically, which is unsurprising given Young et al’s (2023) findings. Artists wanted greater private sector support and payment to increase their general sense of worth and also to support their creative independence. Indeed, independence and freedom were seen as one of the hallmarks of being an artist and what should be valued among audiences, something that ties into the idea that artists are at the forefront of cultural creation:

*“So, they should be more open, do not embrace too much, do not restrict the freedom related to the expression of culture too much like that too. In general, I think that the art creator, both the audience and the creator, I think they always have an idea, they want to help, want to restore, want to respect, want to promote the culture, but the way the expression should be more open”* (focus group, Phnom Penh).

Audiences were therefore very supportive of freedom of creative expression, and the desire for openness in expression can perhaps also be linked to the desire to see new ideas, aesthetics and forms. This remained the case even when we did an exercise with the audiences in focus groups where we asked them what they thought the role of the arts was in order to see how they were valued. We asked them to rank different statements about the arts (e.g. promoting national culture, peace and reconciliation, entertainment, creating dialogue on social issues).



## TECHNOLOGY AND AUDIENCE RESPONSES

### MENTIMETER

Promoting national culture often was placed first, but what was interesting in both Phnom Penh and the provinces is that people were less inclined to rank the statements but took it as a process, so what they started with was often the purpose or end goal of arts. What this illustrated was that the arts were not simply viewed and valued as a tool for cultural transmission, or as vehicles for conveying messages as suggested so far. Rather they were seen in active terms, as being able to create culture, social identity, justice and so on. Although audiences expect a lot from artists and their work, they view this as for the betterment of society and national culture as a whole.

What this section on audience perspectives has shown is that audiences are diverse and complex, but also sympathetic towards artists. Whereas artists often perceive audiences, particularly young audiences, as interested in simple art forms like music and songs, music videos, or short comedy films, this is not necessarily always the case. Especially in the provinces, whilst young people may have been to concerts sponsored by beer companies (and it is worth highlighting that these events are likely to be one reason why audiences expect arts to be free), they also had seen traditional arts at the pagoda, and wanted to see a range of art forms as outlined above. Artists often thought that young people displayed a lack of general understanding about the arts, suggesting that they wanted entertainment, they *“use the eyes to watch”* – that is to say they want to see something beautiful and emotional so that they can feel *“happy without much thought”* (FGD, Phnom Penh). However, whilst this research illustrates that many audiences do not always know much about what they are watching and can struggle with interpretation and understanding, the picture is also much more mixed due to a lack of exposure and education. Young people want to be entertained, but there is also a very strong desire to learn and to have new experiences. Indeed, some artists highlighted how over time, particularly with the listing of art forms as UNESCO intangible cultural heritage, government efforts at promotion – including the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts livestreaming performances on Facebook, and outreach from artists and organisations, young people were beginning to learn more about the arts *“little by little”* (FGD, Phnom Penh):

*“The last time I performed sbek thom (big shadow puppet theatre), they did not even know what form it was. Ask, “what form?” Knowing that it’s shadow, but what shadow? Some don’t know. But now they are beginning to know more about the big shadow puppet. Now we see the momentum of their interest growing. [...] So, I believe that in the future, our young people will know what art is, what dance is, or what traditional dance form is. Now they know more”* (FGD, Phnom Penh).

Artists also talked about how they wanted their work to *“look good, look to catch, and look intelligent”* and were often concerned with making the audience think (FGD, Phnom Penh). As is apparent throughout the above, audiences in focus groups and survey responses were often very reflective – indeed, in Battambang, in a focus group with trainee teachers, they discussed how they were asking each other questions when watching the indigenous short films, even though they felt unable to ask those questions at the end. They also felt that they learned a lot from these films about the maintenance of indigenous traditions. There is, therefore, a critical questioning happening, and a desire to learn and understand.

Building on the findings from the previous section, the key reason we experimented with technology was to find out if this could assist audiences in developing their understanding, critical thinking and engagement with the arts. We trialled Mentimeter as a way to foster interaction and used it after a performance had finished (it took a few minutes to set up and load) before giving audiences the code to the questionnaire at the end of the Mentimeter sessions. This was so that audiences could remain in the flow from the production, rather than completing a questionnaire and then going back to a more detailed discussion about a production’s content. By placing the questionnaire last, audiences also had the opportunity not to complete it as a research activity that contained more personal data and preferences (even though these were anonymized). We had 376 Mentimeter respondents in total, 278 in Phnom Penh and 98 in the provinces. However, as audiences became quite engaged with the Mentimeter questions and activities, we found that this also led to a high response rate in the questionnaire overall. In Phnom Penh around 70% of audiences also completed the questionnaire (195 responses) and across the provinces in total, 84% of audiences completed both (117 questionnaires).

In focus groups most participants suggested that they enjoyed using Mentimeter. However, the letter limit for open question responses meant that some participants felt that they couldn’t fully express their thoughts and feelings about a performance, especially when in Khmer language. This particularly came up in the Battambang focus groups, where audiences were quite reflective about what they had watched. Some audience members in the provinces completed the questions by paper instead, and thought it was quicker and easier that way, whilst others wanted more time to think than the Mentimeter provided – although there were mixed preferences around this. Nevertheless, this all illustrates the diversity of audience preferences in terms of how to use technology to promote interest and engagement. Audiences generally liked the interactivity of Mentimeter and seeing answers come up on the screens. They also appreciated that their names were not shown as they could make mistakes and express their opinions and feelings on the performances – they found they could *“be brave”* (FGD, Phnom Penh). This anonymity therefore gave those who were initially hesitant more confidence to answer. When watching responses, there was a noticeable initial hesitancy among the audience in providing answers because results are visualised to the whole audience in real time, but once the pattern of activity was established, this initial hesitancy reduced. It is possible to suggest that the public presentation of some ideas may still have excluded some audiences, meant that they did not respond, or led to ‘herd’ responses, though this is not evidenced in the research because a diversity of responses was always present.

Audiences described how they wanted the Mentimeter to be more fun, and so there was an issue in terms of research design, where our bias was to use this software in an educational or deliberately thought-provoking way. We were also criticised for only providing the questions in Khmer, and therefore, not enabling many foreign audiences to participate! Although some expatriates can read and speak Khmer, we did not design the questions to be inclusive in this way in order to try and keep the research focus specifically on Cambodian audiences, though there is some limited potential for overlap. As stated earlier, the Mentimeter questions



highlighted that audiences often think about art as having a ‘correct’ or singular interpretation. Indeed, during one focus group in Phnom Penh, Amanda was directly asked, “*Why didn’t you show people the ‘correct’ answers afterwards?*” This idea came up in both the provinces and Phnom Penh as some participants were concerned that they were giving the “*wrong*” answer. Similarly in focus groups, audiences also said that they liked the interaction but asked “*what were we meant to learn?*” However, the questions were deliberately open-ended (see examples below) to see how audiences would respond. Although we stated that we were interested in ideas and views, such responses again emphasised the educational function of art, the idea of its singular interpretation, and the idea of Mentimeter as a “*test*” rather than as a tool for opening up critical reflection. Some audience members in focus groups said that they wanted it to be more competitive and more like a game with prizes and answers. Whilst we used Mentimeter to push audiences towards reflection, audiences themselves wanted to use it to increase their knowledge about a production or art form. This ties in with the over-riding emphasis on, and desire to learn about, arts and culture, perhaps so that audiences could leave feeling that they had formally gained knowledge. This suggests that there are potential uses of technology for learning within the performance setting that audiences would be receptive to, and that the research perhaps moved too far too fast for where audiences currently are at in terms of understanding and engagement.

The Mentimeter felt a bit long to some audience members (particularly in Phnom Penh, but also in some province locations where people had far to travel) but was seen as “*a good habit*” to get into (FGD, Phnom Penh). Rather than promoting this method specifically, what this signalled is that people liked to have the opportunity to reflect and think about what they had just watched, and indeed, in focus groups people stated that it helped them to “*think about what we were watching*” (FGD, Phnom Penh). There are many ways of doing this, of course, but it is also supported by evidence from how audiences used/read social media content (see below). Viewing figures for the accompanying blog posts, videos and interviews improved as the Season progressed. Generally, informational pieces, such as interviews with creatives, had higher viewing figures. In focus groups, participants stated that they were less likely to look at content before a performance and instead simply rely on information they had seen in Telegram or on Facebook, but more likely to look at it afterwards and this is possible to track in viewing figures. For example, blog posts about the Kouy indigenous people and Mother Nature had increased views after a performance or after the tour, suggesting that audiences were looking for further information and reflecting more on what they had seen. As such, marketing material was more of an initial promotional ‘hook’ but then understanding and experience came later, and audiences were willing to invest in this. Artists had mixed views about Mentimeter, some felt that it helped them to understand audiences more, whereas others felt that “*we know ourselves whether it was done well or not*” and were less concerned by audience reactions (FGD, Phnom Penh).

Using Mentimeter questions and responses, we were able to identify some interesting dynamics within audiences. For example, in the screening of the dance film Saker by Nget Rady which was based on Lakhaon Khaol, we asked audiences what alternative courses of action the characters in the traditional Reamker story could take. . This included asking should Preah Ream have sent his servant (and monkey warrior) Hanuman to rescue Sida as in the traditional story, or should he have gone and rescued her himself? Or should Sida keep waiting to be rescued (as in the traditional story), try to escape, or just accept her situation and live with Asura?

These questions allowed us to playfully gauge the extent to which audiences are willing to adapt traditional stories or accept adaptations, something that is a key debate in the Cambodian dance world. In general, audiences wanted to maintain the traditional story arcs and keep the main plot points the same, but there were some close responses (such as a nearly 50/50 split in the answer to the first question) and sometimes audiences wanted to overturn Sida’s or Preah Ream’s actions. However, overall, audiences wanted performances to conform to existing social and cultural expectations of the story and women. For example, 52 responses stated that Sida should keep waiting, 38 responses said she should try to escape, and 8 said she should live with Asura. As such, it was possible to see the importance of maintaining tradition for audiences at a larger scale, though clearly there were also audiences who were willing to experiment and push beyond this. This was supported by Mentimeter responses from elsewhere, such as in Chapei Diaries led by Keat Sokim where we asked audiences to identify instruments or choose which instrument they wanted to learn most – with the Chapei Dang Veng coming top.

We also asked audiences how they would describe a performance from a selection of terms, something that is important given the prominence of debates over whether or not artworks should express Cambodian identity (Eggert 2011, Rogers 2018). For example, at the Secondary School of Fine Arts, on a scale of 1-5, most audiences felt that the piece Chapei Diaries was a fusion or mixed form of Cambodian culture (average score of 4.4) and interpreted this as the evolution of traditional culture that incorporated external influences, not just internal dynamics. As such, the research illustrates wider assertions that young people in Cambodia often straddle tradition and globalisation and can move between both (Eng et al 2019). In Mother Nature by Kha Sros and SilverBelle, when we created a question asking audiences to select their favourite description of the work, most audiences chose the selection of Kouy contemporary dance (15 responses), followed by fusion dance (10 responses), then contemporary dance (9 responses), and finally traditional dance (1 response). Of course, there can be confusion around terminology and slippage between these terms, but what this kind of response illustrates is that audiences are fully able to hold multiple ideas together when describing a work – for Kouy contemporary dance can explicitly be many things. For particular genres of work, such as those pieces that are experimental or more contemporary, the audience is often capable of seeing the multiple possibilities in a work, rather than just conforming to a singular interpretation – even if they articulated that this is what they wanted in focus groups and surveys. Perhaps what this therefore suggests is not that audiences are unable to read more abstract, contemporary, or mixed form works, but that they need more affirmation and confidence in their interpretations and in recognising the multiplicity and ambiguity of what they see.

This was also evidenced by those questions where the Mentimeter captured what audiences thought pieces were about. For example, Mother Nature was often discussed in publicity and promotional as being about the indigenous Kouy and their livelihood – and this was one of its key themes, but the biggest theme that audiences identified in the piece was environmental destruction (19 responses) rather than Kouy life (7 responses) and community (5 responses). However, the piece itself often portrayed issues of environmental destruction in an oblique way (apart from a segment that illustrated forest burning and clearing) and focused positively on supporting the maintenance of forests and highlighting planting for the future. Given the prominence of Kouy life depicted in videos, and indeed, their presence on stage via traditional dance and rituals, this kind of response highlights that audiences were able to move beyond reading what they were simply presented with. Mentimeter was also able to capture the way





The lack of wider arts criticism and dearth of social media content on the arts in terms of promotion and awareness consistently came up in focus groups with artists and audiences as an issue that needs addressing. Artists want to see more mainstream arts criticism and journalism and audiences also mentioned that they wanted to read reviews too. However, there is also an issue here with timing as the review sometimes comes along after the performance has finished. Performances are often only staged for one or two nights, and so there is no build up, or ability to see something after a review has been read. Relatedly, a common situation was described where word of mouth happened after events had taken place. This kind of response from participant friends, for example, was commonly described:

*“Oh! The performing season has stopped. Why didn’t you tell me while they were performing it?” I said: “Why didn’t you see my posts when I shared about it?” (FGD, Phnom Penh).*

Isolated or key individuals were often responsible for promoting arts events through word of mouth – the arts are not yet part of a trendy cultural zeitgeist that young people follow. Rather, focus group and survey data illustrate that it is one friend or acquaintance who encourages others to attend. In the provinces especially, participants talked about the difficulty of getting friends to come to the arts – they would talk to their friends about it but they still wouldn’t come, especially as it was often further, more effort, and they seemed to have more competing demands on their time in terms of studying, doing household chores, and working. It was also clear that going to the arts was seen as a group activity due to distance and travel which meant that going in a group was safer. A lot of them described how they didn’t know a lot about the Cultural Season in general as an event, suggesting that it doesn’t reach beyond those people who know where to look for it.

In the provinces the lack of promotion is a particular problem and some participants in Siem Reap described how distance between villages meant that their reach even on social media was limited as people could not travel far and they themselves do not have the real-life networks to help information spread. In this respect, any arts activity remains highly localised. It is striking in the data overall that it is difficult for audiences to find information about arts events – there is nowhere central to see what is happening, no review round-ups online or in the media. There’s no literal or social media “hub” to promote what is happening locally, regionally or across Cambodia. This is a significant disadvantage for those wanting to learn more about the arts as they do not always know where to look, or which individuals or groups to follow. In addition, in a focus group in Siem Reap province an arts group identified how even when they promote, they can only reach 2 or 3 villages through social media – they do not have the networks to connect more widely. Even social media promotion operates in a very local way and their geographical reach can only be small because of distance and travel.

Focus group participants had a range of suggestions for supporting this, from having workshops in schools, better advertising, street banners, or a regular public program in a public space. Indeed, in Phnom Penh the need for a central arts space came up as a consistent issue in whether audiences attended arts and cultural events. Venues were seen as being far out and designed for an alternative purpose (e.g. a conference centre) which seemed to add another hurdle to audience attendance. In social media terms, both artists and audiences

discussed using influencers or famous people to help promote the arts and boost posts. Audiences in the provinces were particularly attuned to this and talked about artists performing in beer sponsored concerts. In Phnom Penh there was also a desire to create distinctive Instagram or TikTok moments from performances that they could circulate and promote on social media in order to encourage their peers to attend (e.g. with the artists, a fun space or area to have photos taken, performance-specific images that were visually striking). Artists in Phnom Penh focus groups also discussed the need to also make audiences curious through images and titles. This was supported by a focus group in Siem Reap where participants said that they were not really interested in going to see *Success in the Air* until they heard the title. Once they heard this, they wanted to find out what the performance was about and how it fitted with today’s society.

Artists also identified the need for more skills and training in marketing their work and in being more entrepreneurial to attract arts audiences:

*“People like to watch vlogs, but artists not yet create vlogs” (FGD, Phnom Penh).*

*“We don’t have the way to promote our art” (FGD, Phnom Penh).*

Artists discussed not knowing how to promote their work, film, take photos, edit, combine to create something new that would capture the interest of young people and audiences: *“If we have something new for them to see, let them think Oh! Now, do Cambodians have much progress on that or not?” (FGD, Phnom Penh).* Of course, this is not universal, but it came from artists across the board. Again, collaboration was seen as important in order to *“help improve each other”* and promote each other’s work (FGD, Phnom Penh). Artists were also clear about needing to have more insight into what exactly young people in particular want to see, particularly on social media:

*“We know what young people like these days. For example, they like Tik Tok. What can we do to spread the message on that platform? It’s like playing a game of politics in the arts. If we put that piece there, we should understand how many likes and views we want to get from them. If there are 3000 people there, it can at least attract one person. That little thing can impact one of them. It will work out better gradually, but we have to understand their preference. If they like K-Pop, we have to know why. Is it because of the modern style of dancing? So we have to showcase a new style of dancing there to attract them. We don’t attract them to do something bad, but we attract them to understand and give value [to the arts]” (FGD, Phnom Penh).*

Across the board, audiences described wanting to learn more from artists, about their experiences, meanings, intentions, the creative process, what was unique about what they are doing, their inspirations, specific techniques, backgrounds, *“their journey”* to being an artist, what their lives were like, what their motivation is to keep going, and how they deal with criticism. In essence, they had a lot of questions about creative choices alongside the specifics of art forms. Audiences wanted *“behind the scenes”* insights as well. Indeed, one put it quite bluntly that they wanted *“not just artists have it hard”* narratives (FGD, Phnom Penh).

With pieces related to indigenous culture, people in urban centres (Phnom Penh and Battambang) often had questions about lifestyle and traditions – something that perhaps also explains why content specific marketing did well in terms of numbers of views as articles did give that kind of insight. However, in terms of understanding social media usage among young people as indicated in the quotation above it is worth highlighting that certain sectors of the creative economy do have this knowledge in Cambodia, most notably the music industry, where VannDa's (2021) song Time to Rise gained a huge TikTok following which then led the song to explode across social media in Cambodia and beyond. Yet, many performing artists are not working in such a highly commercial, globalised sector and do not have this degree of knowledge or experience. As such, there are real opportunities to learn across sectors to promote arts and culture to audiences both nationally and internationally. There is, again, a need for a more co-ordinated approach so that more people can participate in the arts.

## SUMMARY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



This study represents the most comprehensive investigation into performing arts audiences in Cambodia to date, with a particular focus on young people. This is important because examining audiences and promoting engagement in the arts is vital for promoting the democratic access to culture (Hadley 2021). In terms of audience demographics, it supports our previous research, which shows that the majority of audiences for performing arts are now young Cambodians, particularly those under 35 (83% of the audience in Phnom Penh).

The market for the performing arts is middle-class, well educated (including university students) and in 'white collar' professions. Evidence presented here suggests that this group extends beyond a core 'arts-going' audience and that there is a segment of the audience that is starting to attend events on a reasonably regular basis.

Our research here shows that the audience wants to be educated about the arts and that they see attending arts and cultural events as educational experiences. There is also a widespread desire to support and promote national culture. Audiences do not necessarily always fully understand what they are watching owing to a lack of education about, and exposure to, the rich variety of Cambodia's artistic heritage and its ecosystem. However, this does not automatically mean that audiences are not reflective in terms of what they watch. There is a tension within the audience in that they often want artworks to be easily readable and understandable, with a singular interpretation or message, yet they can also be reflective, critical, and questioning. In part, this can be an issue with having the confidence to embrace ambiguity and multiple meanings, to focus on the experience and reactions rather than being told what to think, or what to read into a work.

In this respect, the arts can help to promote critical engagement on society and culture, and audiences often expected to see quite a direct correlation between the arts and social issues. Responses to Mentimeter questions illustrate that the audience is happy to see, and want to see, cultural mixing in artworks and there is the possibility to push this further. This is particularly because they want to see new things. However, what is considered new is highly variable and dependent on where you are in Cambodia. It is very easy to assume that young people are the vanguard of society and are plugged into global trends that they want to see represented. Whilst this is true, young Cambodians are also very interested in, and concerned by, their own tradition and can be culturally conservative across the board. As such, opinions about the nature of art works, their topics, their connection to society and perceived value are inevitably highly varied. What this points to is the importance of maintaining a diverse arts ecosystem overall with different art forms and varied approaches to, and creative uses of, those forms – both internal and external to tradition. There is a clear desire for this diversity, and this includes being able to see traditional art forms that are currently localised to particular regions of the country.

In terms of maintaining the diversity of an ecosystem, there is currently also a tension between a commercial or entrepreneurial mentality, making work that supports the maintenance of tradition, and a desire for experimentation. Artists sometimes feel that they lack the kinds of entrepreneurial skills needed for a digital and social media age – one inhabited by young Cambodians especially. There was a feeling that developing these skills could continue to foster greater outreach and connectivity with audiences or the public at large, supporting and developing recent government efforts in promoting arts and culture on national and international platforms. Some artists identified that there was currently a lack of ownership sometimes among young people regarding the arts, and there are several identifiable barriers to participation. These include, the need to make a diversity of work that appeals to different groups, the lack of a central arts space or centre, the difficulty of finding out about the arts and arts listings – even on social media, a lack of critical writing about the arts, short lengths of showings (one or two nights), and in the provinces especially, the difficulty of distance, internet connectivity and social networks. Live screenings were especially important for audiences in the provinces as a means of access to the arts, even if they were watched later.



In terms of using technology to engage audiences, it was clear that there was an ease in doing this for a large segment of the audience and that, by and large, they enjoyed it. It also substantially increased our research engagement in terms of finding out more about audience demographics and preferences. Using Mentimeter enabled us to offer a space where young people could share their responses to performances that they watched and begin to open up dialogue between audiences and artists - something that can be further developed in future. Most notably, we have only used Mentimeter in a one-way direction and not engaged with artists in designing how we use the technology. We could also use it as a way that audiences can ask questions of artists. Mentimeter enabled us to understand how audiences receive and interpret works, test the boundaries of how much cultural and creative development they might accept (this is very variable), and encouraged greater reflection on, and critical engagement with, the events presented. Tracking viewing figures of associated digital content illustrated that audiences kept thinking about performances after watching them, and that they were interested in learning more about creative processes, art forms, and indigenous cultures that they may not be familiar with.

It is worth noting that the timing of introducing technology for responses in live performances must be carefully navigated, may not work in all settings owing to internet connectivity, and may work better for particular types of events (small-medium scale or those already addressing deeper reflection). Similarly, we should not necessarily assume that young people prefer technological modes of engagement with the arts (e.g. digital screenings, surveys and watch-alongs - where some participants wanted to wait until the show was over before voicing their opinions). Many preferred low-tech options and were keen to have more in-person connection with artists especially.



## AS SUCH OUR RECOMMENDATIONS ARE:

### 01

To recognise and capitalise on a growing arts audience, building on and extending recent promotional efforts by government and independent organisations regarding arts and culture. This may include providing training for artists in digital skills, greater educational resources about the arts, longer showings and fostering a culture of critical writing on the arts that is publicly available.

### 02

Relatedly, there needs to be greater co-ordination and collaboration across the sector as a whole - in terms of, for example, knowledge sharing within and across sectors and co-ordinated social media sites for listing arts activities. There also needs to be greater network building, particularly for smaller groups and troupes in the provinces who would benefit from longer-term collaborations and opportunities. There could also perhaps be a digital repository of artworks or central archival location for viewing past productions in addition to the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts' Facebook page.

### 03

To maintain and support the diversity of Cambodia's arts ecosystem, to ensure that there is a range of work that can connect with what is a diverse audience. This can encompass both traditional and innovative works. Related to recommendation 2 in this regard is also a need to establish better infrastructure and touring possibilities for art forms across the country. There is a desire to see art forms live that are currently concentrated in particular locations (e.g. Yike is more likely to be seen in the provinces than the capital, whereas the reverse is true for contemporary dance).

### 04

Digital technology can be helpfully applied in the context of performances to assist audiences in understanding, learning and critically reflecting on what they have watched. In this regard technology can help foster deeper engagement in the arts - as can greater supplementary digital writing and commentary on the arts. However, this must be carefully applied according to the location and context of use, as well as the type of performance event.

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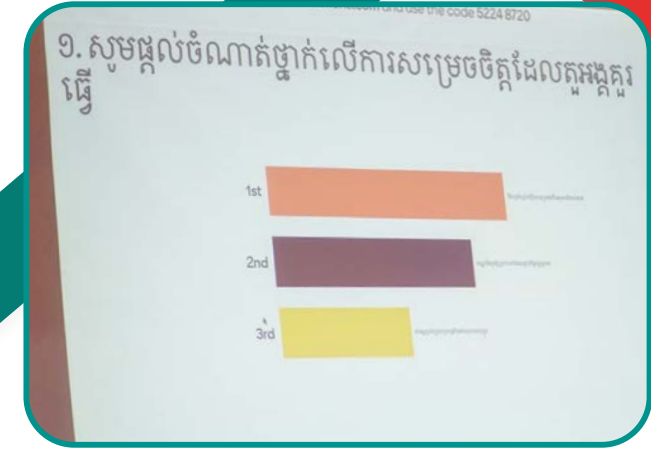




# CAMBODIAN AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT IN THE PERFORMING ARTS

៥. តើការសម្តែងនេះនាំអារម្មណ៍អ្នកឱ្យគិតលើរឿងអ្វីខ្លះ?

គ្រួសារជំនុំជម្រះ រឿងស្រុកស្រីមេត៌មាត់លៀង  
 ភាពលាភលន់ facebook scam  
 ការអប់រំ education ការរកស៊ី បញ្ហាស្រុក  
 បញ្ហាស្រុក បញ្ហាស្រុក បញ្ហាស្រុក  
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Cambodian Living Arts 2022 Cultural Season

