The quest for new digital skills for opera artists and opera companies during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract
The coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has emerged as a global phenomenon that is significantly affecting almost all sectors, irrespective of whether they have a well-established economic system or not. However, the brutality of the COVID-19 pandemic has been predominant in most sectors such as opera artists and became worst in many developing countries. Emerging countries like South Africa among others are at the receiving end of this. The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked and exacerbated the existing vulnerability of opera artists, and this has become an issue of great concern. The difficulty in obtaining employment for opera artists and funding for performing arts organisations have caused seriously challenge opera artists to survive during the COVID-19 pandemic. This article is aimed to examine the quest for new digital skills for opera artists and opera companies during the COVID-19 pandemic. A qualitative research method was adopted utilising approaches interviews with opera singers (hereafter opera artists), selected retired opera practitioners and managers of opera companies. In this article, scholarly literally writings were also reviewed to yield trustworthy findings. The findings demonstrate that there is a high demand for opera artists to upgrade their skills to digital skills. This is partly attributable to the closed and suspension of live theatre performances in the present era. The paper concludes by affirming that digital skills are key skills in the opera industry for resuscitating the economy of the industry that is continuously changing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19; Digital skills; Economy; Opera artists; Opera Industry

Introduction
Perhaps, it is prudent to highlight that when the first case of the coronavirus 2019 (hereafter COVID-19) pandemic was discovered in South Africa on March 5, 2020, the government enforced a 21-day national shutdown that commenced on March 26 to curb the spread of the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to wreak havoc in the performing arts in particular the opera industry in the country by affecting all spheres of live performances and disrupting all theatre-based performances. At the inception of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, opera artists were severely affected by the national lockdown. Also, it is not within the scope of this article to point out and discuss the challenges faced by other arts organisations or artists because the researcher believes that the situation could be different from other organisations such as visual arts, as well as specific individual occupations architects, graphic designers among others. It is important to state that digital transformation in the performing arts industry has emerged as an important phenomenon in the world of academia (Faber, Coetzee & Munro, 2021; Rentschler & Lee, 2021; Vizcaíno-Verdú, Aguaded & Contreras-Pulido, 2021). Digital transformation has transformed and replaced the theatrical live performances in the time of the pandemic through the use of digital technologies (Li, 2020; Vizcaíno-Verdú, Aguaded & Contreras-Pulido, 2021). Digital transformation has led many performing arts organisations into a new era. Therefore, it should be noted that the term performing arts industry in this article will broadly refer to the South African opera industry.

The COVID-19 pandemic came in South Africa while various stakeholders, organisations, scholars and other relevant entities were discussing a way forward on how to develop sustainable funding for the performing arts industry, in particular the Opera industry. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic various scholars, stakeholders, and employers have already asserted that for opera artists to be employable they require additional skills other than the basic skills such as acting, singing, and sight-reading in the performing arts industry (Pollard & Wilson, 2013; Poole, 2011; Van Zuilenburg, 2012; Yende & Mugovhani, 2021). To be more accurate, in 2021, Yende & Mugovhani conducted a study on the demand for new skills for opera artists (Opera singers) in South
Africa. The primary objective of their article was to investigate the curricula versus student job readiness and/or employability in the performing arts (opera) industry. In other words, Yende&Mugovhani (2021) sought to understand how relevant were performing arts courses to the industry for which the students are trained or produced?

The findings of their study revealed that the majority of performing arts graduates do not easily find employment due to the lack of business (entrepreneurial) skills, marketing skills, and administrative skills, among others (Yende&Mugovhani, 2021). Also, a study conducted by Van Zuilenburg (2012) Yende (2017) demonstrate that the above-mentioned skills are fundamental for the employability of opera artists and the opera industry. However, basic skills such as entrepreneurial skills, marketing skills, and administrative skills are no longer sufficient due to the restrictions that are brought by the COVID-19 pandemic (Webb, 2021; Faber, Coetzee & Munro, 2021; Yende, 2021). The demand for digital skills in the opera industry during the COVID-19 pandemic has become an area of concern in South Africa, as well as across the globe.

This article was propelled by the growing awareness among scholars that digital transformation will be fundamental to ensuring the survival of the opera industry during the COVID-19 pandemic (Faber, Coetzee & Munro, 2021; Rentschler& Lee, 2021). When the COVID-19 pandemic was declared a global disaster, all venue-based sectors such as cinemas, performing arts, live music, museums and festivals had to move to online streaming or platforms to meet the demand caused by the lockdown (Yende, 2021). Scholars such as Faber, Coetzee &Marth Munro (2021); Rendell (2021) highlight that virtual performances and online streaming have become necessary for both the performing arts industry and opera artists to keep them continue to operative during the lockdown when audience sitting-based performance is not possible. Even though virtual performances and online streaming were perceived as a key to ensuring that the theatre industry and opera artists continue to survive during the COVID-19 pandemic, however, virtual performances and online streaming seem to demand a new set of skills that will make both the theatre industry and opera artists to face the challenges that are increasingly affecting the normal way of performance. More recent studies Trubnikova&Tsagareyshvili (2021); Rambarran (2021); Yende (2021) show that there is a demand for digital skills such as digital marketing, virtual performances and online streaming for opera artists. Although there is extensive literature on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa and across the globe (Faber, Coetzee & Munro, 2021; Trubnikova&Tsagareyshvili, 2021), limited attention has been given to studying the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic in South African performing arts industry and challenges experienced opera artists in particular.

This study was motivated by an existing study by Park (2021); Yende (2021). Yende paper highlights that it is important for opera artists and the opera industry to acquire digital skills as part of their careers. Furthermore, Yende (2021) agrees that skills such as entrepreneurial skills, marketing skills, and administrative skills require to be incorporated with digital skills such as digital marketing, video editing, virtual performances, managing online platforms and online streaming among other skills. These skills are in demand in the performing arts industry as the world is shifting to digital performance. In this context, digital skills were deemed as fundamental skills for the performing arts industry and artists. In addition, skills such as digital marketing skills, video and sound editing, as well as learning how to monetise their offerings in a virtual environment play an important role in placing artists in a better position to continue with their performance in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic (Faber, Coetzee & Munro, 2021).

In light of this, there is a necessity to examine the quest for new skills for opera artists in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, in the current article, the researcher focuses on specific questions that originate from the literature on the demand for digital skills for the performing arts industry and opera artists in South Africa.

**Research questions**

In this article, the researcher addresses specific primary questions that seek answers and give more clarity on the ongoing crisis:

i. What are the challenges faced by the opera industry with the digital skills in South Africa?

ii. What are the benefits of adapting to online streaming performances for the opera industry?

**Theoretical framework**
There have been growing conceptual and theoretical debates concerning the nature of digital skills in the performing arts industry worldwide (Imran, Shahzad, Butt & Kantola, 2021). The analysis of this article adopts digital transformation that is framed and grounded within the larger question of the importance of acquiring new digital skills in the opera industry. As already outlined above, the question of the importance of acquiring new digital skills in the opera industry is one that has continued to define and transform the opera industry in South Africa. In this analysis, the article employed digital transformation theory to argue that digital technologies are essential in this opera industry for opera artists may be approached as a vital instrument to attract new audiences while retaining and increasing the loyalty of the existing audience (Imran, et al., 2021; Jones, 2016). The theory of digital transformation examines how digital transformation is experienced, with a specific focus upon certain members of the opera industry, and uses the concept of digital technology as a lens through which digital transformation can be understood (Ford & Mandviwalla, 2020; Yende, 2021). Weinberg, Otten, Orbach, McKenzie, Gil, Chisholm & Basuroy (2021); Trubnikova & Tsagareyshvili (2021) highlight that the process of digitisation of the opera industry is critical for various reasons include the stability of the theatre. Hence, Trubnikova & Tsagareyshvili (2021:7) states that:

From the point of view of integrating new instruments in the operatic show and using them for promoting the cultural product, the respondents see these instruments as a positive influence on modern perception of opera.

Most scholars view digital transformation as a fundamental instrument for promoting and preserving operatic theatre during the COVID-19 pandemic era (Ford & Mandviwalla, 2020; Imran, et al., 2021). It is inevitable that there exists an imperative nexus between digital transformation and online streaming performances to enable the opera industry and opera artists to improve, as well as better their products and services audiences. In the argument of this article, the increase of online streaming performances have been demanded the opera practitioners and the industry to have additional skills such as digital marketing and strong digital facilities for virtual excursions to opera halls, as well as for promoting live opera.

**Methodology**

A qualitative research method was adopted in this article whereby the researcher followed a phenomenological technique, by interpreting the meaning the intervention had for the opera artists, practitioners and managers of opera companies who participated in the study (Thorne, 2000; Padgett, 2016). From an epistemological viewpoint, phenomenology is grounded in a paradigm of personal knowledge and subjectivity. Perceptions and interpretations led to an in-depth understanding of the motivations and actions of the opera artists, retired practitioners, and managers of opera companies over a year of this study as they adapt to digital technologies for their performances (Lichtman, 2012).

In this article, snowball and purposive sampling were used, as all the participants were known by the researcher and located in Western Cape province and Gauteng province where the researcher had easy access (Thorne, 2000). In this article, ten opera artists participated in the study (with no specified gender and race), ranging in age from 25 to 41 years. Five practitioners were selected in this article to participate to obtain their perception about digital technologies in particular online performance in the opera industry and lastly, three managers of opera companies were selected to acquire their experiences and challenges with digital technologies in performances.

Data were collected from (1) unstructured open-ended conversational mask-to-mask interviews with the selected participants (Nakahama, Tyler & Van Lier, 2001); (2) field notes taken during the interviews; (3) reviewing scholarly writings such as journal articles, book chapters, books, and theses to yield trustworthy findings. As already mentioned, qualitative data were collected from the interviews and thematic analysis was adopted to accurately identify emergent themes or topics that are discussed in the ‘Findings and discussion’ section of this article.

**Ethical clearance**

In this article, the researcher obtained a necessary ethical approval letter and the clearance number is **HDC REC04/2021**. Also, letters of consent were attained from the selected participants in the study. All the participants were informed about the nature and purpose of the study prior to the mask-to-mask interviews.
Signed informed consent was obtained from each participant in the study. In this article, participants all participated voluntarily and the researcher ensured that their privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality is honoured.

**Significance of this study**

The article is critical as it explores the new skills demanded by the digital technologies in the opera industry for promoting online streaming performance in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, this study reviews the importance of digital transformation and its values are justified because it seeks to promote and preserve opera as an art form. The study is, therefore, important as it may lead to new insight into the importance of digital technologies. This study may also act as a tool for enlightening opera artists, and the opera industry in general to seek ways of acquiring digital skills to ensure that they function during the pandemic. This is likely to be achieved because scholarly literature helps to bring insights on how the traditional live performance can be transformed to online streaming performance without losing the essence of opera.

**Results**

Perhaps it is prudent to foreground this section by identifying some of South Africa’s opera companies that are still in operation up-to-date, and these include Cape Town Opera, Johannesburg Opera and Opera Sempre (private company), to name a few. These have attempted to produce a substantial series of production and concerts during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, due to the new technological shifts opera artists and opera companies are required to possess some digital skills such as online marketing, social media advertising and managing a YouTube channel. These skills are recognised as the most suitable and direct skills to ensure that the opera industry functions well during the pandemic era. The findings presented in this article are common themes that emerged from the four selected, namely opera artists, retired practitioners and managers of opera companies. The findings of this article were also complemented by scholarly literary writings. The findings are divided into three major themes, namely:

a) **Perception of the opera artists**

b) **Practitioners’ perception**

c) **Managers of opera companies’ perception of the online streaming performances.**

Finally, the findings of this article responded to the three research questions that arose in this article and were all answered using the literature gathered in this article. The research questions are as follows:

1. What are the challenges faced by the opera industry with digital skills in South Africa?
2. What are the benefits of adapting to online streaming performances for the opera industry?

**Perceptions of the opera artists on digital skills**

Like many other opera artists from various countries across the globe, South African opera artists battle to transition from traditional live opera to online streaming performance due to various reasons. Opera artists’ postulations revealed that that online streaming performance demands some digital skills which most of them do not possess. While the majority of freelancing opera artists agreed that adapting to digital technologies are important for them. Some participants perceive online streaming performances as a saving platform for them because during the COVID-19 pandemic their revenues did not come from live performances, but through online streaming performances.

One of the opera artists said:

As freelancing opera singers, in today’s real-world COVID-19 pandemic, digital technologies are important for crucial to continue with our small concerts via online platforms.

Another opera artist highlighted:

Even though online streaming performances are crucial for us as opera singers, however, online streaming performances demand digital skills which most of us do not possess. In that sense, I think problematic and have increased vulnerability.

An opera artist proclaimed:
Our challenges include platforms such as Zoom, YouTube fatigue that affects our performances and viewers. We had to manage with Zoom and YouTube time lag, and employ mobile phones, invention skills and internet disruption.

A freelancing opera artist stated:

With the online streaming performances, it is easier for us as artists to sell tickets and generate some revenue for form online streaming concerts.

Most opera artists found it difficult to bridge from traditional performances to online streaming performances during the COVID-19 pandemic, and many of them are very frustrated. This shows that the basic attributes of skills that opera artists are not sufficient to survive the COVID-19 storm. Some freelancing opera artists have also agreed that virtual platforms have aided to generate some source of income during these perilous times. It was remarkable that both the freelancing opera artists and full-time opera artists expressed the same view with digital kills. Opera artists expressed that digital skills such as self-curating or co-curating their work online, creating an opportunity for the agency for artists are critical in this era.

**Practitioners’ perceptions in the online streaming performances**

Practitioners have agreed that the collapse of the live theatre industry affected not only artists but the various artist who work alongside them. This includes everyone from sound engineers, stage managers, directors, and equipment companies – and not to mention all the venues and the staff they employ. Practitioners stated that during the first national lockdown many artists globally could not get into a theatre for rehearsals. During the height of the coronavirus crisis in South Africa, it became noticeable that there is a major gap between established opera artists and freelancing opera artists. Most freelancing opera artists across the globe continue to be vulnerable as the COVID-19 continues to wreak devastating havoc in the industry.

One of the practitioners alleged:

But online streaming performance is not uncomplicated. For instance, in wealthier countries, where internet access, data and electricity are abundant and affordable, online streaming performances are well successful. However, in developing countries such as South Africa online streaming performance, comes at a much higher cost – and increased vulnerability and inequality.

Another practitioner also revealed:

Opera companies that have turned into digital platforms were and are able to continue with the performances and attract new audiences through the online market.

While another practitioner stated:

In South Africa, online streaming performance is difficult for all artists and companies as we are facing a high level of electricity and internet connectivity issues that frustrate the online streaming performances.

**Managers of opera companies’ perceptions on the online streaming performances**

The following are the summarised findings from the participants who have agreed that in the opera industry, digital technologies are realised as a robust driving force of online streaming and growth of the economy in the industry. Participants have mentioned that the opera industry has an opportunity to self-determine their professional status through online streaming performances on the internet.

One of the managers of opera companies stated:

I think it is clear that online streaming performance has become a key driver for the growth of the industry of performing arts, in the particular opera industry.

Manager of the opera company explained:

I think switching to online streaming performances for us as opera companies have been difficult due to internet connectivity but at the same time effective as we can attract new audiences as well as increase the constant ones.

Another manager of the opera company explained:

I think a challenge with online streaming performances for opera companies is the demand for new digital skills that cause serious threats in our functioning and not to mention the issue of electricity and the high cost of data.
Managers of the different opera companies have highlighted that the practice of online streaming performances has been important for their companies as they successfully expanded their geography and attracted new audiences. Based on the above responses, managers of opera companies are aware that online streaming performances are crucial for their operation. However, online streaming performances demand digital skills to ensure that they succeed in the industry.

**Data acquired according to the developed research questions using existing literature**

**What are challenges faced by opera industry with the digital skills in South Africa?**

Yende (2021) reveals that even though online streaming is a gamechanger for many opera companies in South Africa, however, due to the challenges such as lack of digital skills, inadequate electricity supply in the country it remains impossible for opera industry to successfully move to online streaming performances. A study conducted by Trubnikova&Tsagareyshvili (2021) reveal that although online streaming is essential for opera industry, issues that opera industry is facing is the financial support to the expensive online streaming. Therefore, the quality of online streaming performances for opera industry rests on the digital skills that enable them to remain firm and, even in the conditions of a pandemic. Opera artists and opera companies faced with serious challenges such as purchase new online equipment and systems, while artists have to learn new digital skills such as video and sound editing (Yende, 2021).

**What are the benefits of adapting to online streaming performances for the opera industry?**

Apart from the problem of digital skills that many opera artists and the opera industry face, adapting to online streaming performances have various benefits (Trubnikova&Tsagareyshvili, 2021; Stinton, 2020). These benefits include opera companies being able to reach out to new audiences, subscribers, and regular followers. Yende (2021) states that the ongoing challenges experienced by opera artists, in particular freelancers could be mitigated by the online streaming performances. This initiative would close the gap created by the COVID-19 pandemic in the country. According to Trubnikova&Tsagareyshvili (2021), online streaming performances have undoubtedly replaced real theatrical live performances and benefitted many opera companies in the time of the pandemic as through digital technologies companies were able to attract new audiences across the country.

**Discussion**

The current article sought to explore and examine the quest for new digital skills for opera artists and opera companies during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. This article has argued that online streaming performances in the opera industry have become a fundamental instrument for the sustainability of the economy. It has also highlighted that the online streaming performances have brought some significant challenges in the industry demanding that opera artists and opera companies possess digital skills. The article also agreed that skills such as entrepreneurial skills, marketing skills, and administrative skills are crucial but no longer sufficient as the industry is forced to adapt to digital technologies. The findings demonstrate that there is a high demand for opera artists and opera companies to upgrade their skills to digital skills. This is partly attributable to the closed and suspension of live theatre performances in the present era.

The research participants in this article describe the challenges they face with the increase of online streaming performances. Consistent with previous research of Trubnikova&Tsagareyshvili (2021); Faber, Coetzee & Munro (2021), the findings of the current article reveal the importance of the digital skills for both opera artists and opera companies as a key factor for effective operation in the era COVID-19. Evidently, opera artists and opera companies’ success in the industry relies fundamentally on online streaming performances. The study findings show that there is a necessity for both opera artists and opera companies to develop digital skills which are essential for online streaming performances. This finding is in line with the schematic of digital transformation theory that promotes digital skills such as online airings, online concerts and streams, and digital marketing which are necessary for industry preservation of opera.

Again, the findings of the current article show that digital technologies in the opera industry are a vital and fundamental aspect that can improve the challenges faced by opera currently. This finding corroborates with the results of Trubnikova&Tsagareyshvili (2021) who found that it is digital technologies in the opera industry is a positive factor, and believe that these technologies can increase the opera industry. The current article has established that the South African opera industry should strive to adapt to online streaming performances.
especially in the era of COVID-19 as this will increase their finances. This finding is in congruence with the findings of previous studies Faber, Coetzee & Munro (2021); Rentschler & Lee (2021) that online streaming performances are important as it has enabled the opera industry to continue with private performances, in particular, freelancers to practice virtual private performances. The results of this study reveal that digital technologies are crucial and important tools for promoting online streaming in the opera industry, however, due to the lack of digital skills, it is difficult for the opera industry to harmonious operation.

**Recommendations**

Based on these findings and reflecting on the article, the following recommendations are made: Firstly, the responsibilities of both opera artists and opera companies should equip themselves with the new digital skills that have become a gamechanger in the world of performing arts. This will promote the quality and effectiveness of their online streaming performances. Online streaming performances are vital for the preservation of the integrity of operatic theatre. Also, opera artists and opera companies adapt to digital technologies as this attract new audiences and preserve the existing ones. Government, policymakers, and other relevant stakeholders should develop a programme that will assist opera artists and companies to acquire digital skills.

**Conclusion**

This article reports on a study that set out to examine the quest for new digital skills for opera artists and opera companies during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specific focus was placed on the opera artists and opera companies in South Africa. The article looked broadly at fundamental digital skills that contribute to the success of opera artists and opera companies in the industry. The article recognised that learning and developing digital skills such as digital marketing, video and sound editing assist opera artists and opera companies to sell tickets and generate some revenue for their online streaming concerts. The article also recognised that online streaming performances are gradually replacing the traditional way of performances.

Using a framework of analysis that was largely informed by the central tenets of Imran, et. al (2021) digital transformation theory, the study examined the importance of adapting and acquiring digital skills as part of factors that contribute to an income source. By so doing, the article has argued and revealed that digital skills such as online streaming skills, digitally-relevant marketing skills video and sound editing are merit and necessary for both opera artists and opera companies as highlighted earlier.

The approach and analysis in the article were informed by what I view as a connection between digital transformation and online streaming performances that are gradually growing industry as a key for effective functioning and sustainability for opera artists, as well as opera companies. Cumulatively, the digital skills highlighted above have the ability to transform the South African opera industry. The paper concludes by affirming that digital skills are key skills in the opera industry for resuscitating the economy of the industry that is continuously changing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**References**


