



# **Exploring Parental Experiences of Online Engagement with Arts and Creative Activities During the COVID-19 pandemic**

## **The Talent 25 Longitudinal Sub-sample Study Executive Summary**

**December 2021**



# Acknowledgements

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The insights and recommendations offered in this report are based on focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with parents of children aged 3-18 months who are taking part in the Talent 25 longitudinal study in the city of Leicester. We would like to express our heartfelt thanks to these parents for sharing their experiences of engaging in the Talent 25 arts and creative activities that were delivered online from October 2020 – January 2021 as a result of the COVID-19 social distancing regulations. We extend our thanks to the members of the Talent 25 Board Team 2019-2021: Richard Russell (Chief Operating Officer, ACE), Nicky Morgan (Director, Special Projects, ACE), Rebecca Blackman (National Director for Engagement and Audiences, ACE), Joe Shaw (Senior Officer, ACE), Simon Bradbury (PVC/Dean for Faculty of Arts, Design and Humanities, DMU).

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# The Talent 25 Longitudinal Study

The Talent 25 is a longitudinal study that commenced in September 2019 in Leicester City and will run for 25 years. The study has several aims, including identifying approaches to increase engagement in arts and cultural activities among children and young people from less engaged groups or demographics. The study takes an action research approach, identifying barriers to arts and cultural engagement, considering these barriers in the design of the arts and cultural engagement, and examining the impact of the engagement on participants in the short, medium and long term. As part of this, the study also seeks to involve participants in shaping the arts and cultural offers.

The Talent 25 study is approved by the Research and Ethics Committee of De Montfort University and the NHS-HRA (19/LO/1431). The first phase of the research runs from September 2019 until March 2024. The research employs a staggered entry recruitment approach which means that individuals are recruited over the duration of the first four years of the research programme until a total of 400 participants have been recruited. The study recruits parents or carers with children between the ages of 3 and 12 months in Leicester City.

Participants are introduced to an initial eight-week programme comprising arts, cultural and creative activities. After the initial eight weeks, the parents and their babies are offered and signposted to age-appropriate, creative and cultural activities across Leicester city. These activities include those led by Talent 25 commissioned artists and activities within the local community that the programme suggests to parents.

**“You can’t use up creativity. The more you use, the more you have.”**

**Maya Angelou**



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# Introduction

On 11th March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. National lockdown measures taken by governments globally restricted most forms of social mixing and closed non-essential businesses, with venue-based arts and cultural activities - such as museums, libraries, performing arts, live music festivals, and cinemas - being suspended (Radermecker, 2021).

The report builds on previous Talent 25 sub-sample research, which examined the nurturing of babies during the lockdown (see Ochieng et al., 2020 for more details <https://talent25.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Talent-25-Executive-summary-report-Nurturing-Babies-During-the-COVID-19-Lockdown-Resilience-Art-and-Creativity.pdf>). Whilst a key focus of the prior study was an exploration of Talent 25 parents' experiences of the first UK national lockdown, the present study focuses on participants' experiences of the online arts and creative activities, which began in October 2020, following the Leicester city lockdown in July 2020.

## Cohorts and pre-online engagement with Talent 25

This study relates to a sample of parents with babies between the ages of three and 18 months from the city of Leicester, England, taken from three cohorts (C1, C2, and C3) of the Talent 25 study participants. These cohorts were recruited using a staggered approach from September 2019 (C1), January 2020 (C2), and October 2020 (C3). We recruited C1 and C2 before the lockdown, whereas C3 was recruited during the lockdown. The sizes for the individual cohorts are as follows: C1 (N=14), C2 (N=15), and C3 (N=16). The activities were paused for approximately six months due to the UK national lockdown. Following a literature review, a decision was made to transfer the face-to-face artistic activities to an online platform. This decision was also based on several recommendations from the literature. Once the transition to an online platform had been finalised, C3's initial eight-week creative sessions began during the lockdown in October 2020.

## Online arts and creative activities

The online approach involved various arts and creative activities led by Talent 25-commissioned artists, including storytelling, dancing, and rhymes. The aims of the sessions for C1 and C2 were to encourage families to reconnect with Talent 25, aid retention in the overall programme, reintroduce some creative input for the children and parents, and give the families an opportunity to meet each other virtually. Participants from C3 were offered eight-week online arts and creative activities as their first activity in the programme, similar to the face-to-face eight-week activities offered to C1 and C2 before the lockdown. The sizes for the individual cohorts are as follows: C1 (N=14), C2 (N=15), and C3 (N=16). It is important to note that not all of the participants from C1 and C2 chose to participate in the online activities delivered in October 2020. In contrast, all cohort C3 (N=16) participants consented and volunteered to participate in the online activities.



## Data collection and analysis

To examine parents' experiences of the online creative sessions, qualitative and quantitative data was collected from Talent 25 participants using surveys (quantitative and qualitative), focus groups, and session observations. Participants were asked to complete a baseline survey that gathered information on their socio-demographic characteristics (e.g. age, education, and employment), and current perceptions of and behaviour vis-à-vis arts and cultural activities. A follow-up questionnaire was administered after the eight-week creative sessions to compare any variations to participants' responses to the baseline questionnaire. Survey responses were entered into Qualtrics, a Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) software. A second qualitative questionnaire was used to elicit C1 (n=6), C2 (n=1), and C3 (n=16) participant experiences of the online arts and creative activities, and we include an analysis of these responses in this study. The second questionnaire explores participants' views on aspects of the length, content, and usefulness of the online sessions for both the participant and their baby.

Focus groups were conducted online with 15 participants via the DMU Blackboard. Data was collected from C1 (n=5), C2 (n=3), and C3 (n=7), focusing on topic areas including the motivations for online engagement, access to and experience of the online arts and creative activities, and future expectations from online creative participation. Four artists involved in online delivery participated in individual interviews or a focus group exploring their experience of delivering creative activities online. **This report presents the qualitative findings from the parents.** The findings from the artists and the quantitative data are presented in a follow-up report. The following section of this report provides findings from parents regarding the use of online activities amongst children, and the benefits and drawbacks of such online engagement.



## Moving arts and creativity online

Each online session had one or two artists who would guide participants and their babies through a series of creative activities such as storytelling, singing, movement, and messy play. During the face-to-face programme, artists would use materials such as balls and cloth as props to engage the babies. In order to replicate the face-to-face experience, prior to the online programme starting, similar materials were posted out to participants. The Talent 25 team posted some art materials (e.g. blankets, scarves, and crayons) to participants ahead of the sessions and encouraged them to source additional materials from around the home.

Participants reported that the audio quality on the online platform was sometimes low; they occasionally complained about 'not being able to hear' during the sessions. A participant described problems on the first day of the creative session when everyone had their audio on and the artist's feed kept disconnecting each time a participant made a sound. The artists resolved this by placing all participants on mute during the sessions, except when they were required to speak.

*“...does cut out audio. So, yeah, that's kind of a limitation of it [the creative session] being online, I suppose and that [having the audio on] would've been a bit more enjoyable for us and the babies, I think, if we could hear everyone's excitement all at once.” C3-017*

How participants used the technology – and how babies responded to the technology – also presented some challenges. For example, some participants' devices were positioned to provide only a partial view of themselves. Although visual expressions and upper body movement showed that such participants were taking part in the activity, it was often difficult for artists to see their actions and their child during the sessions. Participants also described the challenges of using devices for the online creative sessions as babies tended to reach for them or be distracted.

*“That is just the only thing, I think it'd be easier actually if I could just move it [mobile phone] on to the TV. [laughs] ...And that way, she could see everything, and we could take part and they could still see us and she [the baby] wouldn't be able to keep going up to it, and taking it and running away with it.” C1-005*



## Participating in online activities: motivations and enablers

During interviews and focus groups, parents focused on the baby's well-being, learning, and development when talking about their reasons for engaging in online activities.

*"...I know how engaging and how interacting [creative activities] it can be for kids, and their development, it does help them a lot. I know the benefit, and the impact." C3-007*

*"For me, my friend said, it was the best class that she took her son to. She said it was so, they were so engaging, and they taught her different things to do with her son other than like the normal stuff that they do at playgroups..." C3-008*

Interestingly, some participants reported not doing online activities for themselves during the lockdown, further underlining the baby's needs as a key consideration:

*"And I just couldn't get motivated and obviously I've got me other children at home as well, so it's like trying to do it without them interrupting or getting in the way, like was just too hard, so I just gave up that." C3-008*

Most respondents also reported that an interest in the arts motivated them to participate in online activities. A participant from C3 said that she was inspired to join the online creative sessions based on her childhood experience of engaging with art activities:

*“I mean, I’m now 29, and I know that it’s [childhood participation in arts activities] impacted on my life, and my brother is, like, 31 and he’s definitely been impacted by it, in positive ways, and I thought if I could be part of something that maybe speaks to the science of it, and actually has evidence to show that it is beneficial... like this is a worthwhile thing for baby to do, because I think the misconception is that it’s a waste of time. It doesn’t add any value.” C3-017*

The perceived benefits of the activities for babies may have been assumed to be more important to parents in the context of the pandemic. For example, some participants reported concerns for their baby directly related to the pandemic. In a focus group, parents from cohorts 1 and 2 described disruptions to their babies’ creative and/or social development due to the lockdown.

*“I have seen the difference in my son over the last few months while we have been in the lockdown and his kind of changes in his social interactions and things because we’ve been in the Leicester lockdown zones, he hasn’t had the opportunity to interact with other babies as well.” C2-015*

In some cases, parents also described their own challenges that had emerged or become more pressing during the lockdown: home confinement and boredom encouraged some participants to join the online programme. Whilst not a commonly reported motivation for survey respondents from cohorts 1 and 2, most cohort 3 respondents reported ‘they would allow me to meet other parents’ as a motivation for participating in the online activities. Interviewees also described getting help with the stresses of lockdown as a motivator:

*“...I just had a child, and not able to go out, it’s quite daunting and isolating, having to do home-schooling and everything as well. But I just felt that Talent 25 came at the right time.” C3-005*

## **Online activities as a response to the reduced opportunities of lockdown**

Parents who participated in interviews and focus group discussions described being motivated to join the online creative programme because of the conditions prevailing at the time: the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing social distancing meant that baby groups and creative centres were closed, and the Talent 25 online programme provided an opportunity to engage in activities with their baby at a time when there was limited or no face-to-face provision:

*“...in that time [during the lockdown], there wasn’t anything arty around, like nothing crafty, or even interactive at the time when I was looking at stuff, like there was, I mean, there’s a lot of baby groups, there’s a lot of activities and stuff, but they had all just shut down, completely shut down with lockdown, and there was no hope of when they were gonna re-open but that stage, when I did join, baby was just on three months.” C3-017*

Participants also noted that they were motivated to participate in the online activities because they did not involve any expenditure. Several participants from all three cohorts (C1, C2, and C3) either agreed or strongly agreed that one motivation to join the online activities was because the activities were free, such as:

*“...my main one was the cost of it. It was literally, like, free. you’re not spending. So, yeah, it did give them [other parents] that confidence, knowing that, yes, they were not going to spend much, because sometimes, I think it’s the money that frightens some people.” C3-005*

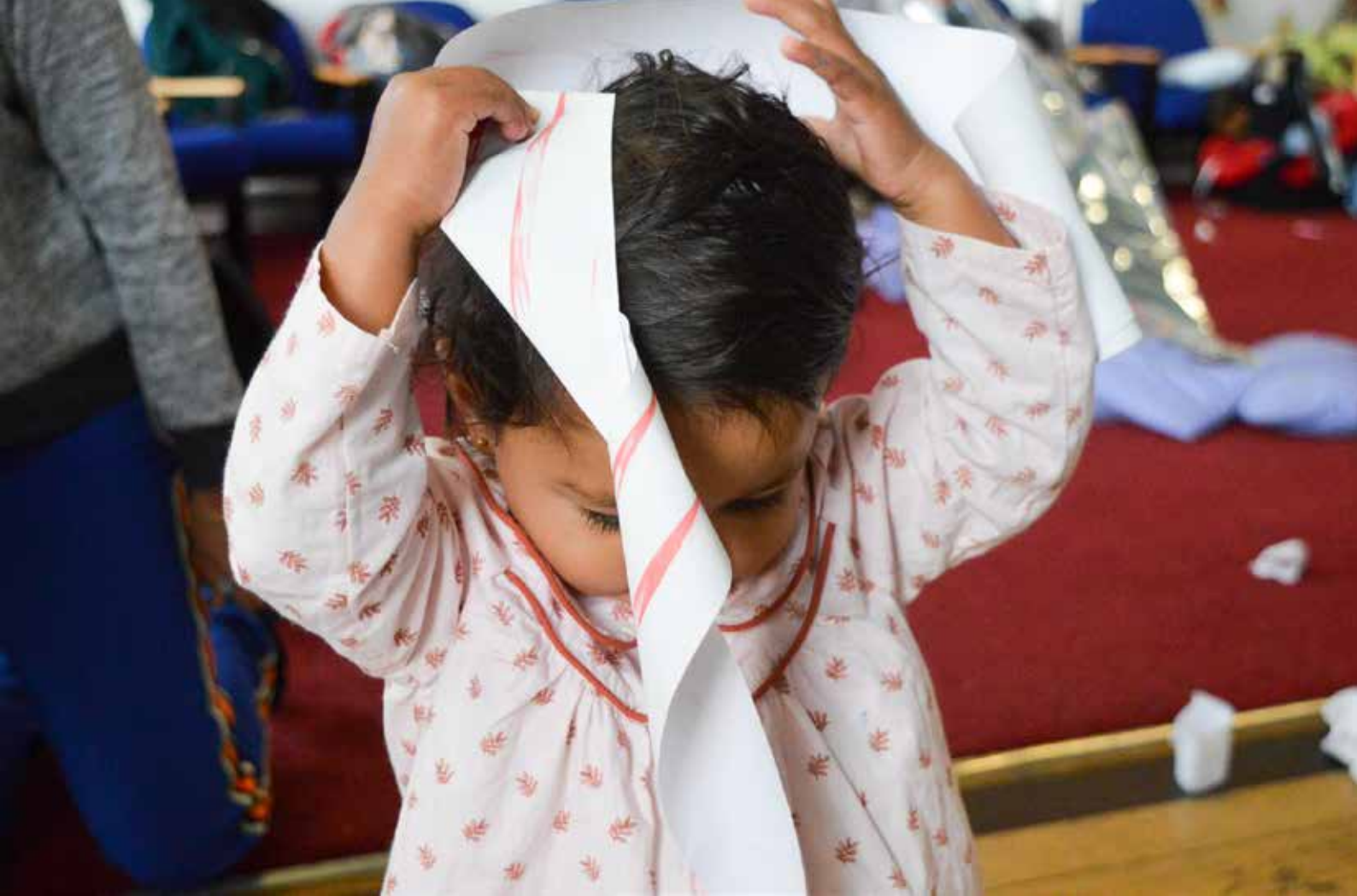
## **Parents’ views on future participation in online activities**

Notwithstanding, despite parents being complimentary of the online creative sessions, there was a preference for face-to-face activities across all three cohorts.

*“I would’ve preferred it to be face-to-face, so that she got to mix with other children...” C3-008*

Moreover, when parents were asked about future activities they would like to participate in, many of their answers reflected a perception of future programming as a face-to-face engagement.

*“Would have preferred face to face but then after sessions realised online is actually positive as able to use home facility to care for the baby during the session e.g. facilities, nappy change and then re-join the session. ... Believes that face-to-face would have been beneficial in terms of social interaction compared to online but having had online sessions found that both types of activities, face-to-face and online, are equally as good.” C3-017*



## Online arts and creative activities

Overall, we found that the shift to home and online delivery introduced both advantages and disadvantages compared to face-to-face delivery. The online delivery of the sessions due to social distancing regulations, and the lack of social interactions among participants during the sessions, were critical in the experiences of the parents and their babies. Participants were provided with art materials and instructions on how to engage the baby creatively: in effect, they were the primary channel through which the artists could access the babies.

*“She didn't look at the screen she was looking at me more.” C3-001*

At the same time, parents described the tendency for babies to be distracted, lose focus, or walk away from the screen in the home environment. In many cases, parents contrasted this to face-to-face creative sessions:

*“Other distractions in the house, so if you've got other toys, like, you can put them away, but they still know where the toys are, and they want to play with them...” C3-009*

## Social interaction and the shared creative experience

Participants described limits on social interaction amongst other parents and babies, often comparing the online experience to a face-to-face one. Some participants felt that the online sessions were more about following instructions from the artists and less about social interaction. Others thought it was more about the babies than the parents. Participants, especially from C1 and C2 who had built friendship networks from face-to-face sessions, spoke with regret about watching their friends without interacting.

*“Yeah, like I know one of the mums but we couldn’t talk in any of the sessions. I just saw her through the screen, but I couldn’t talk to her. Yeah, I didn’t like that we couldn’t interact and communicate with other parents.” C1-008*

*“No one ever says, “Oh, hi, how are you?” like you would...you’d look at someone and you used to actually sit and have a chat when we had our fruit or when you’re walking round the hall [at the face-to-face sessions] ...you don’t really get to see them on the screen or talk to them.... it was just about kids mostly, and we were just following whatever activity is going on, we couldn’t connect with parents that much.” C1-005*

Participants explained that face-to-face interactions enabled their babies to enjoy creative activities and develop from watching the behaviour of other babies.

*“Obviously like say, for instance, if we did the painting in a big group, obviously all the kids would get involved more together, you know, and it’d be more from watching them all and the same with like the storytelling, so going on a bear hunt, having them all interact and doing it together, would be rather enjoyable.” C3-002*

## Home-based artistic and creative activities during lockdown

There are some indications that home-based activities might enable participation from those who would either be reluctant or find it challenging to participate in sessions outside the home. For example, participants described online sessions as suiting them due to not being able to drive or being clinically vulnerable.

*“I think just the ease and the safety, comfortable in feeling safe, ‘cause...I am one down as a vulnerable, ‘cause I’m quite poorly.” C1-005*

*“But, it being at home and online, you could, you know, finish off and say goodbye to everybody, and a lot of the time, we were still playing for like half an hour afterwards, because baby was just so captivated by it.” C3-017*

## Views on social interaction and the online sessions

Despite all parents being complimentary of the online creative sessions, there was a clear preference for face-to-face activities across all three cohorts.

*“Only downside is not being able to do activities face-to-face. Overall, enjoyed every minute of the activities.” C3-007*

During the focus group for cohort 3, some participants revealed insights into their perception of the value of face-to-face social interaction, with parents describing a desire for peer support from other parents as well as wanting opportunities for socialising for themselves and their babies.

*“It’d be nice if we could have that communication, that friendship with other mums that have got babies the same age. I think it would be nice, because usually, like, you have your baby’s first birthday and you invite the friends from the playgroups. Whereas now, she’s only really got a couple of friends that are my friends’ kids, like, she’s not got other friends.” C3-008*

Some participants suggested that the artists allocate time for social interaction during the online sessions. A parent provided an example with a massage class she often attends online for 40 minutes, with 20 minutes being allocated for discussion among parents. The participant described how being able to speak to other mums was very useful within the lockdown context.

*“Or what they [Talent 25] should do, so at the massage group that I did... the massage session for about 40 minutes, and then 20 minutes, the mums would actually have a conversation.” C3-009*

Other participants suggested the possibility of having a blended programme, where artists could deliver online and face-to-face activities. For her, the online space provides safety and comfort whilst face-to-face creative sessions offer social interactions for her baby.

In general, online delivery and the home environment present many advantages and challenges to facilitating a positive, collaborative creative experience for parents and their babies. Some aspects of the Talent 25 approach to delivery may support more active parents and parent-baby collaboration and bonding – for example, by providing parents with art materials that helped extend creative playtime, collaboration, and opportunity for inclusive participation. It may be useful to explore mixing face-to-face and online delivery, or other means of reintroducing this lost social interaction, for future online creative activities for early years.





## Online arts and creativity as a tool for change

In focus groups, participants were asked about changes they had experienced linked to participation in the online sessions, e.g. changes in their ideas or behaviour. Participants described two types of changes: changes in how they thought about and engaged in play with their babies and changes in the parent-baby relationship.

*“Yeah, so that was the big lesson for me, to just give them whatever the material is and what are available, and just let them explore it...we can see how far their imagination and their thinking can go. Otherwise, we just tell them, “Okay, do this,” and they do that, but when we don’t tell them, they surprise us sometimes, so that’s what the mind can do...some of the things we couldn’t have thought of, like how to do certain things, it’s just the simple things and we can use it in various ways. So, it was really nice to get an idea of how we can use things around the house.” C2-003*

*“Baby really enjoyed it and the ideas - so have repeated a lot of the ideas that they have learned and in general thought the sessions were enjoyable.” C3-003*

Some parents described the online creative sessions as affecting their behaviour, including their routine, the choice of creative activities, or the practical ways they played with their babies.

*“... I think the classes have actually like encouraged me to play with her, like she just gets different feelings of material and it’s actually, yeah, it’s helped the bond, so I think it’s changed the routine in that way, instead of her just playing by herself, I’m getting involved more, as well with the singing to her and dancing and clapping, and I think, yeah, that’s helped with her development, really.” C3-008*

Parents reported that the online creative sessions changed their relationship with their babies so that they spent more time playing with their babies, bonding through creative activities.

*“So before, I’d just sort of leave her [baby] somewhere to play with her toys but now I’ll sit with her and play with her...my relationship definitely changed with mine, I think it helped us bond more. I’ve spent more time playing with her, like it’s definitely made her happier.” C3-008*

The results presented in this section include data from the focus groups and quantitative data from the addendum survey. The focus groups revealed that the online creative programme has helped provide participants with new ideas of engaging in creativity that they may not have thought of before taking part in the activities. In addition, participants appear to be implementing what they have learnt from the online arts and creative sessions.



## Conclusion

This report discusses parents' experiences of online engagement with arts and creative activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. It demonstrates that parents and their babies (0-2 years) can be effectively engaged in an online arts and creative programme, highlighting strategies used by artists to stimulate collaboration and active participation. These include providing parents with art resources, encouraging parent-baby collaboration instead of screen co-viewing, and supporting family participation in creative activities. A key finding is that the online creative activities gave parents new ideas and techniques for engaging their babies in creative play as well as encouraging continuity of participation. Providing participants with similar art resources also enabled inclusivity by encouraging effective collaboration and replication of creative activities. Although participants were largely positive about their online experience, they noted some issues with internet connections, limited interaction with other parents, a slow pace for some parts of the session, and baby distraction within the home. Most participants, therefore, expressed a preference for face-to-face provision, with some parents considering online sessions as a possible addition to a face-to-face cultural offer. This suggests that online provision should be considered when introducing new creative and cultural offers or when expanding an existing offer for the early years. As this study examined participant responses in the short term and during the ongoing pandemic, future research should determine whether participants continue to engage with arts and creativity online with their children or whether the engagement was ephemeral due to the lockdown and the closure of arts and community centres. Such a study would assist in examining whether online activities remain attractive in a non-lockdown scenario for parents with babies.



## References

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