When the COVID-19 pandemic began, many museums pivoted quickly to virtual content as a way to continue to engage museum audiences. If museums had to be closed, and people were spending a lot more time at home, it seemed like a good idea.

But how did it actually play out?

To find out, we asked frequent museum-goers about their virtual engagement during the first pandemic year (roughly March 2020 - February 2021).

Additionally, we asked about virtual content broadly, from a variety of organizations (not just museums). We wanted to understand breadth of virtual engagement as well as frequency of virtual museum engagement.

So, what did we find out?

First, let's look at the top five types of virtual content adults reported engaging in at least once during the previous pandemic year:

- Live programming, such as lectures, book clubs (via Zoom, etc.)
- Online classes
- Virtual camps
- Longer videos (e.g., via YouTube, not TikTok)
- Social media

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While about a third of frequent museum-goers casually dipped into virtual museum content, nearly one in five museum-goers were “super-users:” they were engaging at least once a month or more online.

There was some not-so-good news, however. When we examine non-museum-visitors from our concurrent broader population sampling, only 4% tried out any virtual content from museums.

Of those who did, non-visitors who were 60 or older were 2.5 times more likely to try out virtual museum content (5%) than adults under 40 (2%). While these numbers may be small, they do point to a potential growth audience: the broader population of older adults.

Overall, these numbers present some complicated findings, indicating museums need to think strategically about the virtual content they produce and share. In our next Data Story, we’ll highlight two audiences for whom virtual content worked effectively ... as well as some of the barriers potential audiences experienced.