



# CULTURE + COMMUNITY IN A TIME OF TRANSFORMATION

## UNTAPPED OPPORTUNITY: OLDER AMERICANS & THE ARTS

A special report on aging and older adults,  
in partnership with E.A. Michelson Philanthropy

A SPECIAL EDITION OF  
**CULTURE  
TRACK**

LaPlaca  
Cohen

slovenet  
AUDIENCE RESEARCH

e.a. michelson  
— PHILANTHROPY



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# Foreword

In just a few years, and for the first time in history, Americans age 65 and older will outnumber those under 18. Older adults today are healthier and more financially secure than ever before. And contrary to popular belief, the vast majority remain independent and cognitively fit well into their 80s and beyond.

The corrosive ageism that permeates our culture leads us to see older people as “other,” but it turns out that older and younger adults want the same things from life: we all have a deep desire to have fun, to connect meaningfully with others, to create and to learn.

This groundbreaking Culture Track report provides new data on people over 55 years

of age. Importantly, it reveals older adults’ priorities in engaging with the arts: opportunities to belong, to learn something new and to feel a sense of accomplishment.

The findings in this report align with E.A. Michelson Philanthropy’s \$20 million commitment to support creative aging programs in more than 100 organizations over the past decade.

It’s time to change the narrative around aging. This report challenges arts and cultural organizations to recognize something that has been hiding in plain sight—an enormous opportunity to develop and deliver quality programs of relevance to the fastest growing segment of our society.

We are grateful to the Culture Track research team for their expert analysis and for the many institutions working nationwide to offer cultural enrichment to older Americans.

**Ellen Michelson**

*Founder and President*

**Teresa Bonner**

*Executive Director*





# A Note from the Authors

Culture Track is a national online survey of audience behaviors, attitudes, motivations, and barriers to cultural participation, which has been conducted by LaPlaca Cohen since 2001.

*Untapped Opportunity: Older Americans & the Arts* aims to shed light on older generations' distinct preferences and behaviors to provide relevant insights for cultural engagement. Our findings are focused on the U.S. population aged 55 and over, who were surveyed as part of our *Culture + Community in a Time of Transformation* national survey, fielded from April 5 to April 30, 2021.

This special report is a collaboration between LaPlaca Cohen and Slover Linett Audience Research, graciously supported by our generous funder, E.A. Michelson Philanthropy.

**28.3K**  
**RESPONDENTS**  
**OVER 55 YEARS OLD**  
**FROM APRIL 5–30, 2021**



*This report includes U.S. data only.*

# Our Approach

**To reflect the experiences of all Americans, not just those actively participating in arts and culture activities, for the national survey we:**

- Invited cultural organizations from across the country to send the survey to their email lists
- Worked with the NORC AmeriSpeak panel to survey adults who are representative of the broad demographic diversity of the U.S. population\*

These two samples were then combined and weighted to provide an estimate of the U.S. population as a whole. The numbers on this page and the rest of our report reflect our weighted sample, providing a representative national picture of the data.

**For more information on weighting and methodology, please visit [www.culturetrack.com](http://www.culturetrack.com)**

**To ensure a sufficient sample size of the 55+ population for complex analysis, we:**

- Oversampled respondents aged 75 and older through the national NORC AmeriSpeak panel to guarantee at least 750 responses for this population group
- Statistically analyzed the behaviors of respondents aged 55+, yielding the following stratified age bands: 55-64, 65-74, 75-84, 85+

Throughout our report, we use the term "older adults" to inclusively refer to respondents aged 55 and older. Where there are significant differences in responses within the 55+ population, responses are shown by the age bands at right.

**28.3K**  
**RESPONDENTS**  
**OVER 55 YEARS OLD**

**55-64: 43%**

**65-74: 38%**

**75-84: 16%**

**85+: 2%**

*\*Benchmarked against the U.S. Census Bureau's February 2020 Current Population Survey.*



# A National Portrait, Part I

The data reflected on these pages describe the demographic makeup of our combined and weighted sample, presenting a representative picture of the U.S. general population.

Data corresponds to two main respondent groups: older adults (aged 55 and over) and its subgroups (55-64, 65-74, 75-84, and 85+), as well as younger adults (aged between 18 and 54 years old).

## ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME

**55+ | \$72,800**  
**18-54\*\* | \$69,000**

## HIGHEST EDUCATION

Graduate Degree	19% 13%
Bachelor's Degree	18% 21%
Some College / Associate's Degree	28% 27%
HS Diploma or Equivalent	29% 27%
Less than HS Diploma	6% 11%

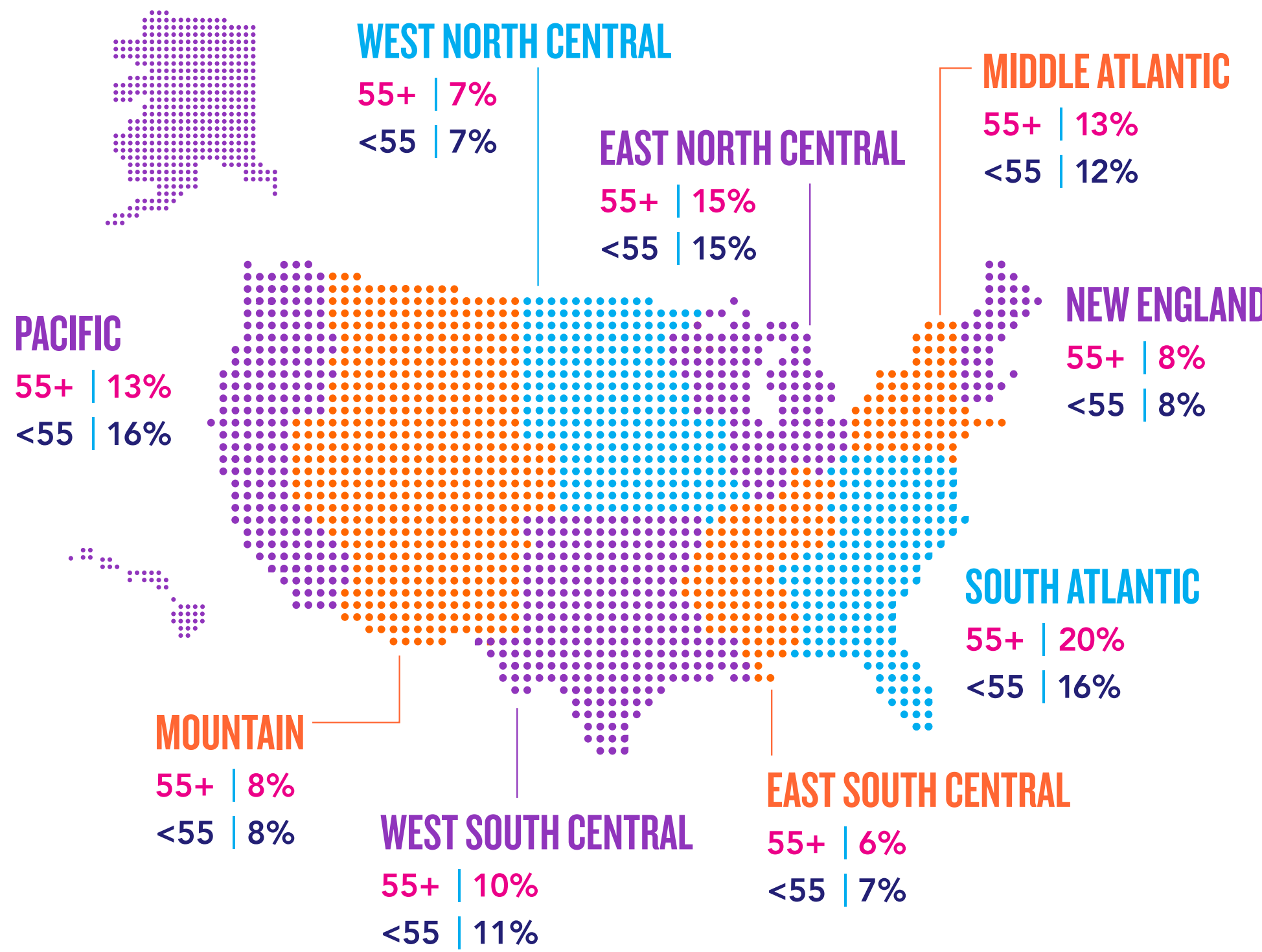
## RESIDENCE

Urban	26% 32%
Suburban	58% 51%
Rural	15% 16%

Figures throughout the report are rounded to the nearest tenth of a percent. Charts depicting single select questions may not equal 100% due to rounding. For more details on weighting and methodology, please visit [www.culturetrack.com](http://www.culturetrack.com)

**55+**  
**<55**

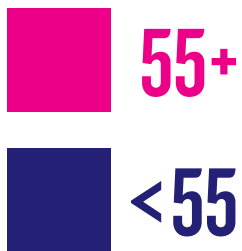
## RESPONDENTS BY REGION\*



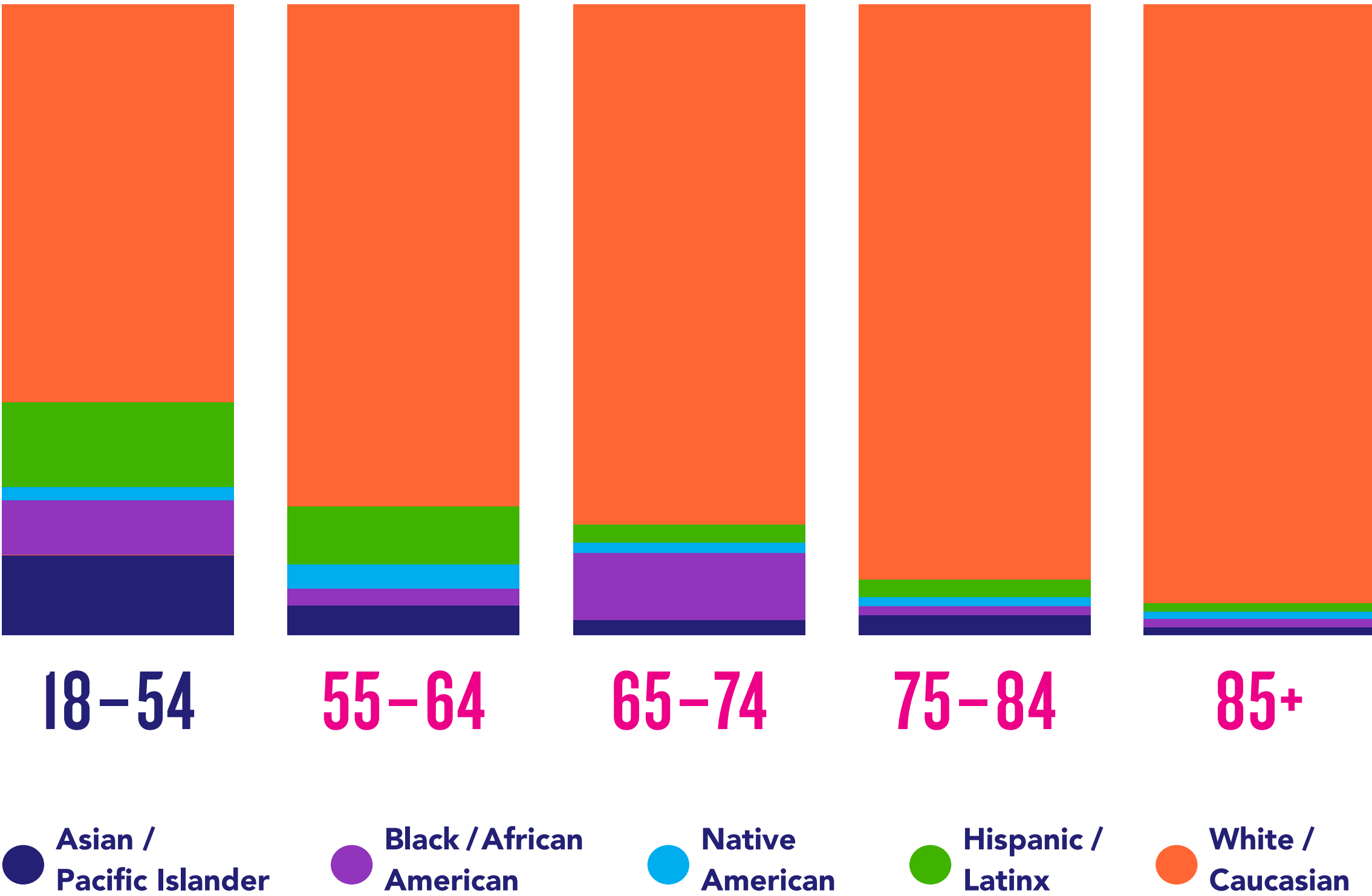
\*U.S. Territories <1%. \*\*All respondents are 18+.

# A National Portrait, Part II

Figures throughout the report are rounded to the nearest tenth of a percent. Charts depicting single select questions may not equal 100% due to rounding. For more details on weighting and methodology, please visit [www.culturetrack.com](http://www.culturetrack.com)



## RACE AND ETHNICITY BREAKDOWN



### RACE AND ETHNICITY\*

Asian or Pacific Islander	2%	7%
Black / African American	10%	12%
Hispanic / Latinx	10%	20%
Native American	<1%	<1%
White / Caucasian	75%	55%
2+ Races	1%	5%
Other	1%	1%

### AGE\*\*

55+ | 38%  
18-54 | 62%

### GENDER IDENTITY

Female	56%	56%
Male	44%	43%
Non-Binary	<1%	2%
Self-Describe	1%	1%

Following the methodology outlined on pg. 6, our combined and statistically weighted sample closely aligns with the demographic makeup of the U.S. general population. Numbers on these pages differ by no more than 1-2 percentage points to the U.S. census data.

\*Hispanic/Latinx includes all with Hispanic ethnicity regardless of race. All other groups are non-Hispanic. Due to the small sample size of the Native American group, we may be capturing less of the nuance that exists within this population. \*\*All respondents are 18+.

# Our goal is to inform and inspire transformational approaches to cultural engagement across the spectrum of age that promote lifelong connection, learning, and creativity.

Throughout *Untapped Opportunity: Older Americans & the Arts*, we strive to present valuable data and actionable insights that provide a clearer picture of the attitudes, wants, and needs of older adults.

This report joins a growing but overdue body of research investigating how engagement with arts and culture activities evolves over our lifetimes. We hope to challenge limiting misperceptions of the priorities and desires of older adults, and in so doing, deepen sector-wide conversations and commitment to intersectional inclusion, diversity, equity, and access in the arts.





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# Key Implications

## Challenge Perceptions about Age

- Older and younger adults share many of the same needs, priorities, and desires, calling into question age-defined approaches to audience engagement that perpetuate silos between generations.
- Arts and culture organizations can nurture meaningful relationships with and among audiences with programming that facilitates greater intergenerational connection, dialogue, and shared experience.

## Harness Digital Activities to Connect and Inspire

- Older adults have taken part in online cultural activities at higher rates than may have been presumed, and gained greater benefits from digital offerings than younger adults.
- Digital arts programming can be a powerful tool for meeting older adults where they are, providing more accessible opportunities to learn and experience new things, and to affirm and express themselves creatively.

## Center Equity, Welcome, and Inclusion

- Older adults recognize the vital role that arts organizations play in enriching and supporting their communities, and share many of the same concerns, values, and priorities of younger generations in envisioning a better future.
- Cultural organizations have a clear imperative to become more equitable inside and out. By learning from and collaborating with their communities, organizations can co-create powerful positive changes internally, locally, and for the sector at large.



# Perspective and Priorities

The global pandemic, and the upheaval and uncertainty it has wrought, has unquestionably impacted us all. Despite prolonged isolation at the time of our survey, older adults have weathered these challenges with a more resilient mindset than younger generations. Nevertheless, they long for social connection, laughter, and joy.

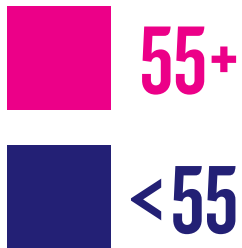




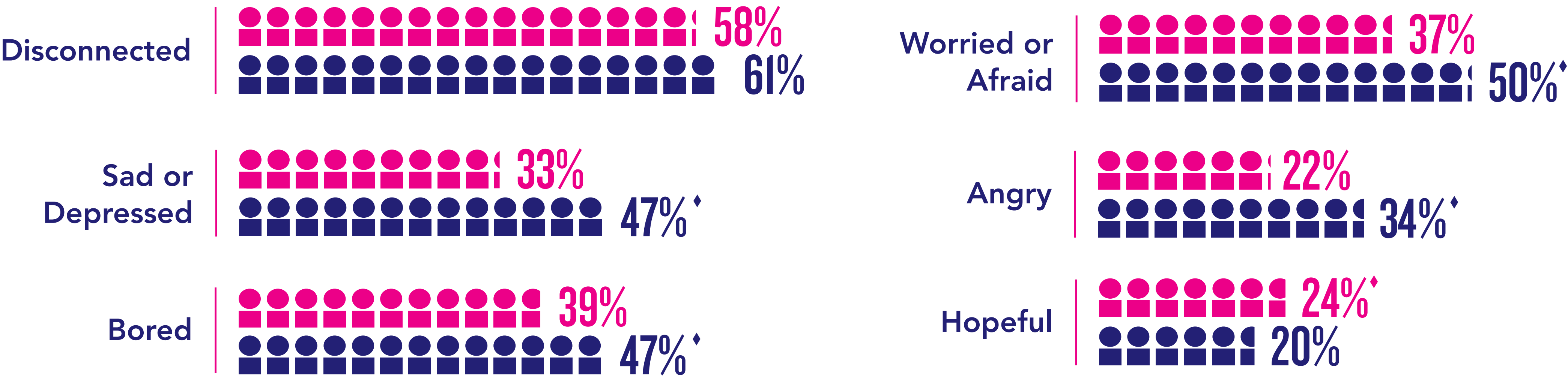
# Resilient Outlooks

Q

Compared to your life before the pandemic, how are you feeling these days? Please select one answer for each feeling.



Age and experience provide vital perspective for navigating unprecedented times. While the pandemic has left everyone feeling less connected, older adults are more likely to have a positive attitude than younger generations, with some even feeling more hopeful.



♦ Data is statistically significant.  
Respondents answered according to a five-point scale ranging from "A lot less" to "A lot more." Top two or bottom two responses are combined.

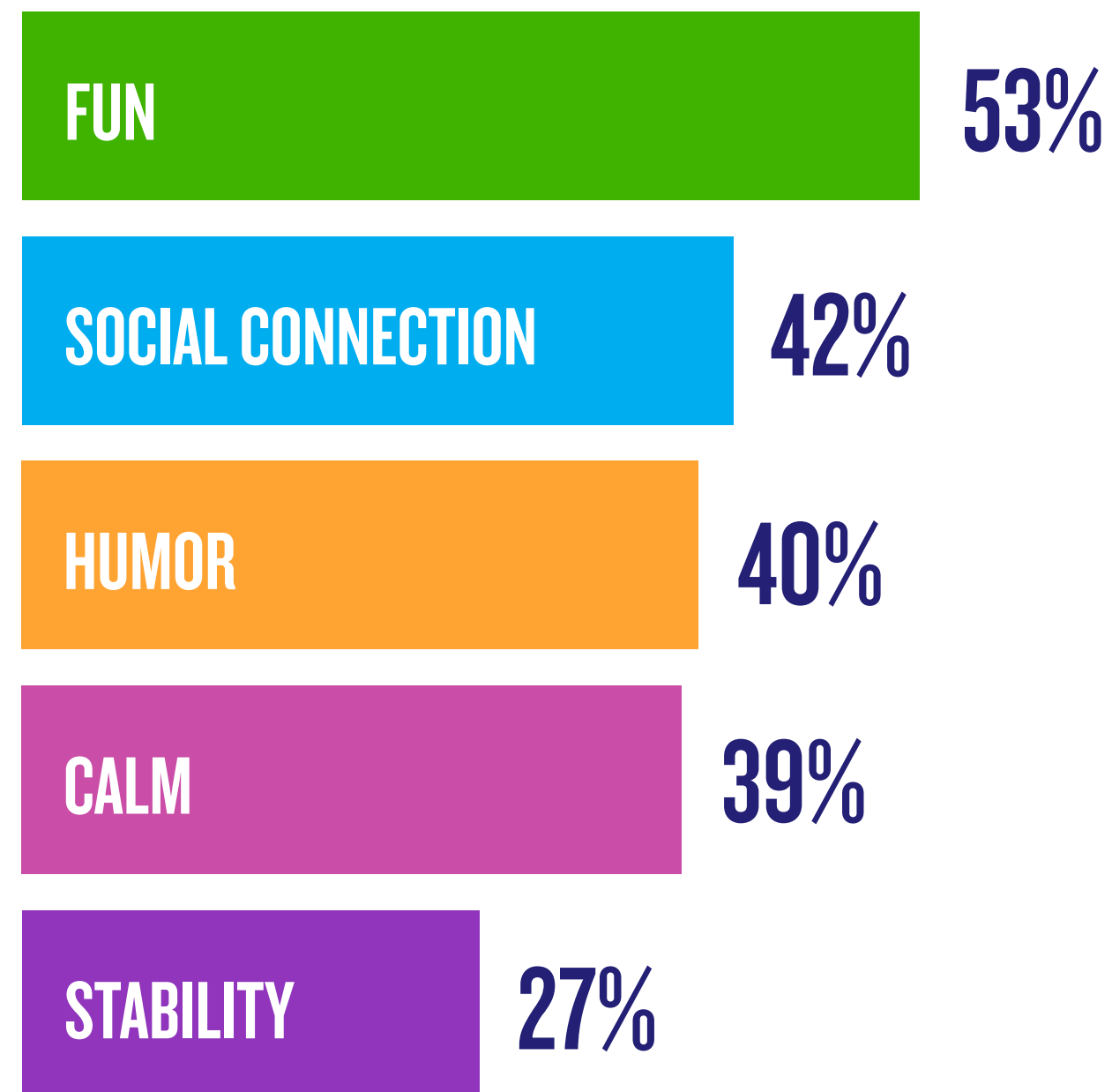
# Looking for More

A desire for more fun in their lives is consistent for young and old, but other priorities shift with age: older adults particularly want more opportunities to connect with others and to find humor.

Q

What kinds of things do you want more of in your life right now? Please select up to FIVE.

## TOP 5 (55 +)



## TOP 5 (<55)



Respondents could select from 14 options. Responses shown are the top 5 for each group. 2% of all respondents selected "None of these."



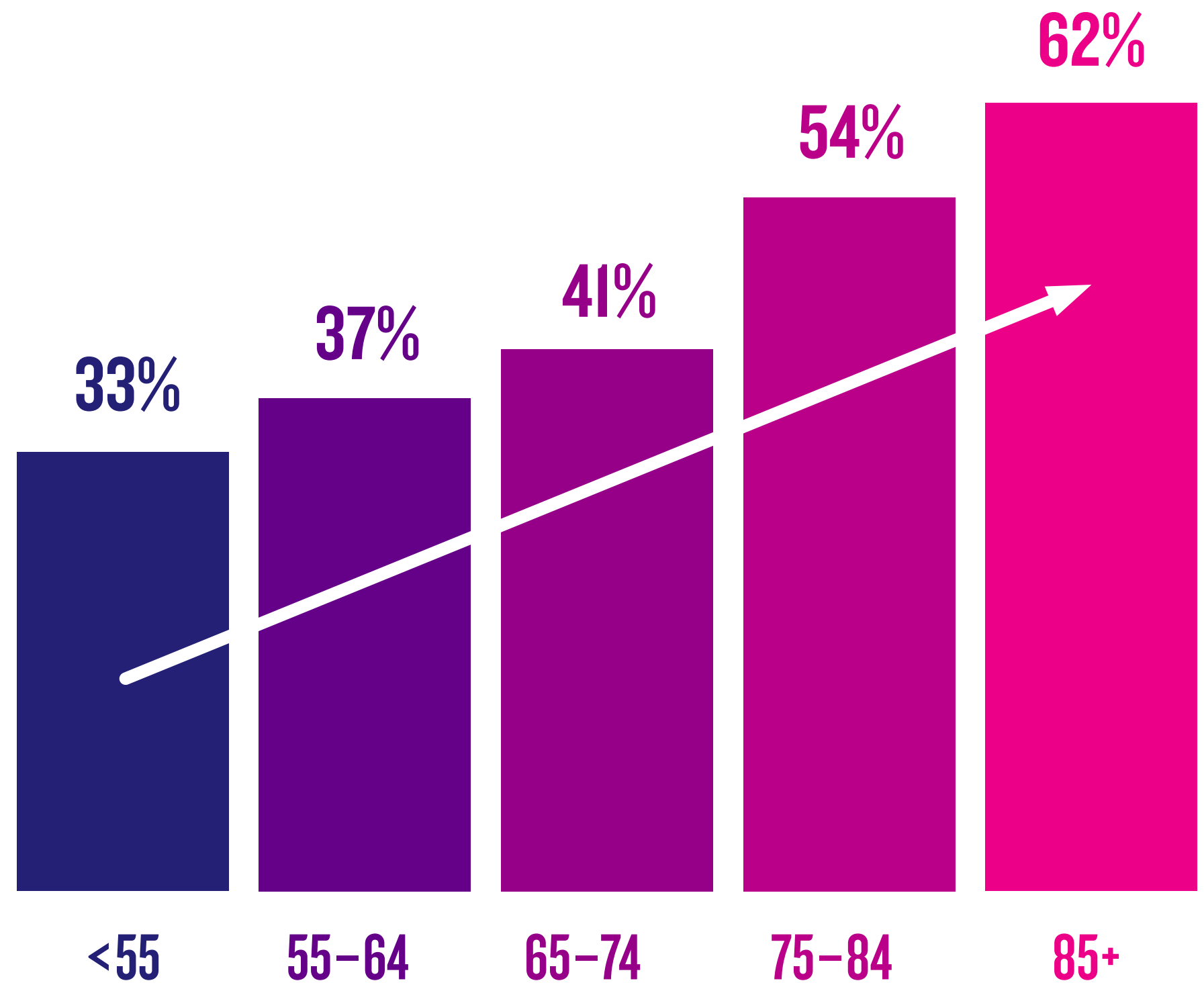
# Seeking Contact

Social connection is the second highest priority for what older adults want out of their lives, and this desire intensifies with age.

Q

What kinds of things do you want more of in your life right now? Please select up to FIVE.

## A: SOCIAL CONNECTION



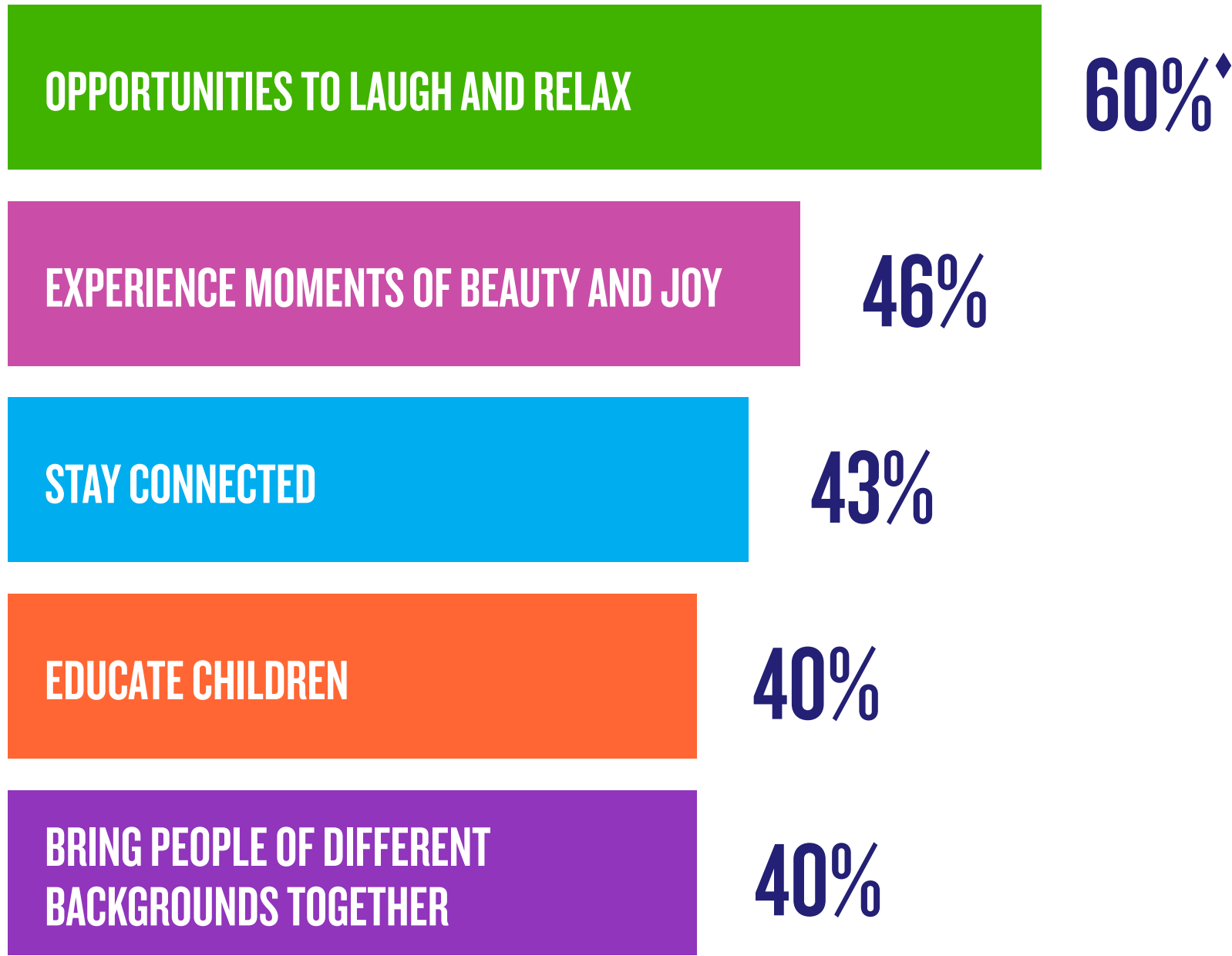
# Caring for Community

Beyond their individual needs, both older and younger adults recognize the vital role that arts and culture can play in supporting and bringing their communities together in times of uncertainty.

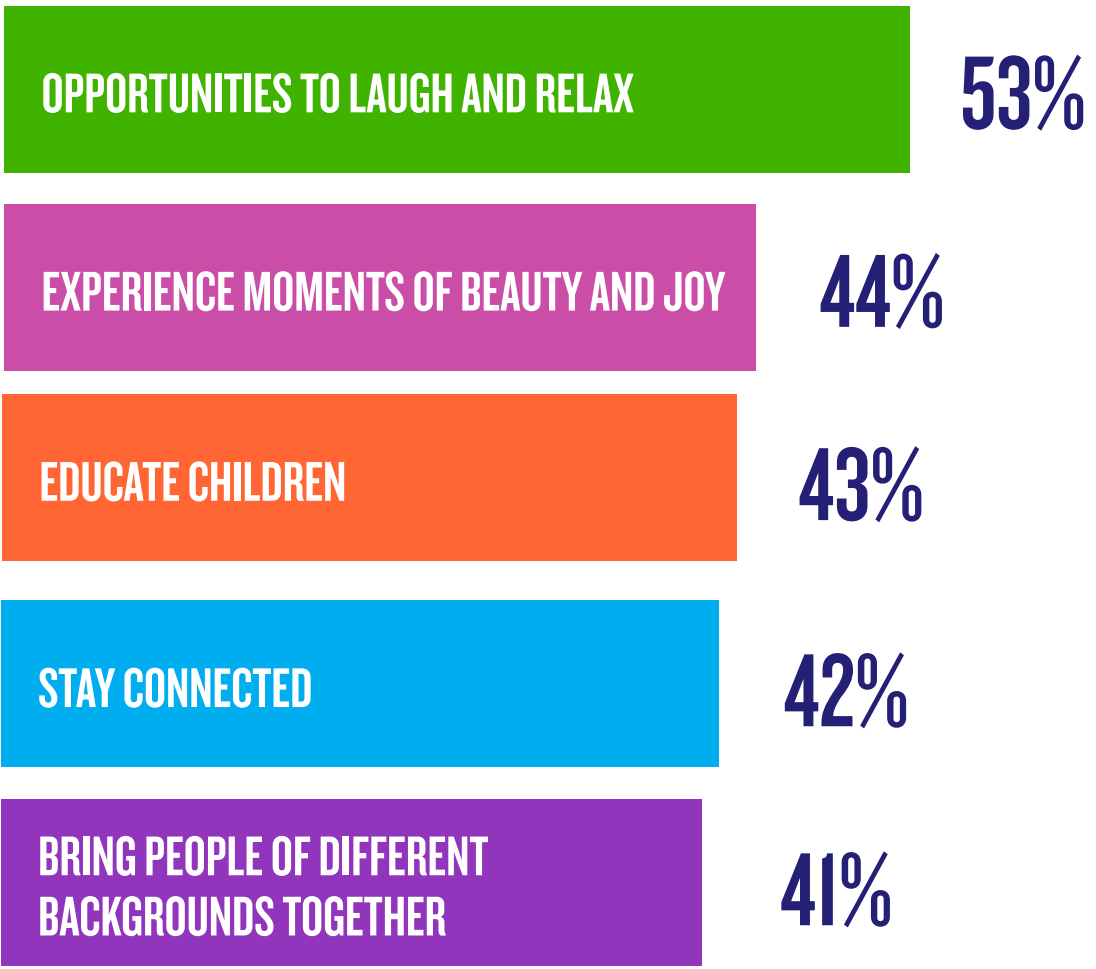
Q

How would you want arts & culture organizations to help your community during times like these? Please select ALL that apply.

## TOP 5 (55 +)



## TOP 5 (<55)



<sup>♦</sup>Data is statistically significant.  
Respondents could select from 14 responses, top 5 for each group shown. 5% of all respondents selected "I don't want arts or culture organizations to help in any of these ways."



# A Lifetime of Culture

Just as our identity and responsibilities expand as we move through the phases of our lives, what we seek and value from creative pursuits and experiences evolves as well. For older adults, creative and cultural activities provide meaningful ways to connect with others, find personal fulfillment, and expand their understanding of our shared world.



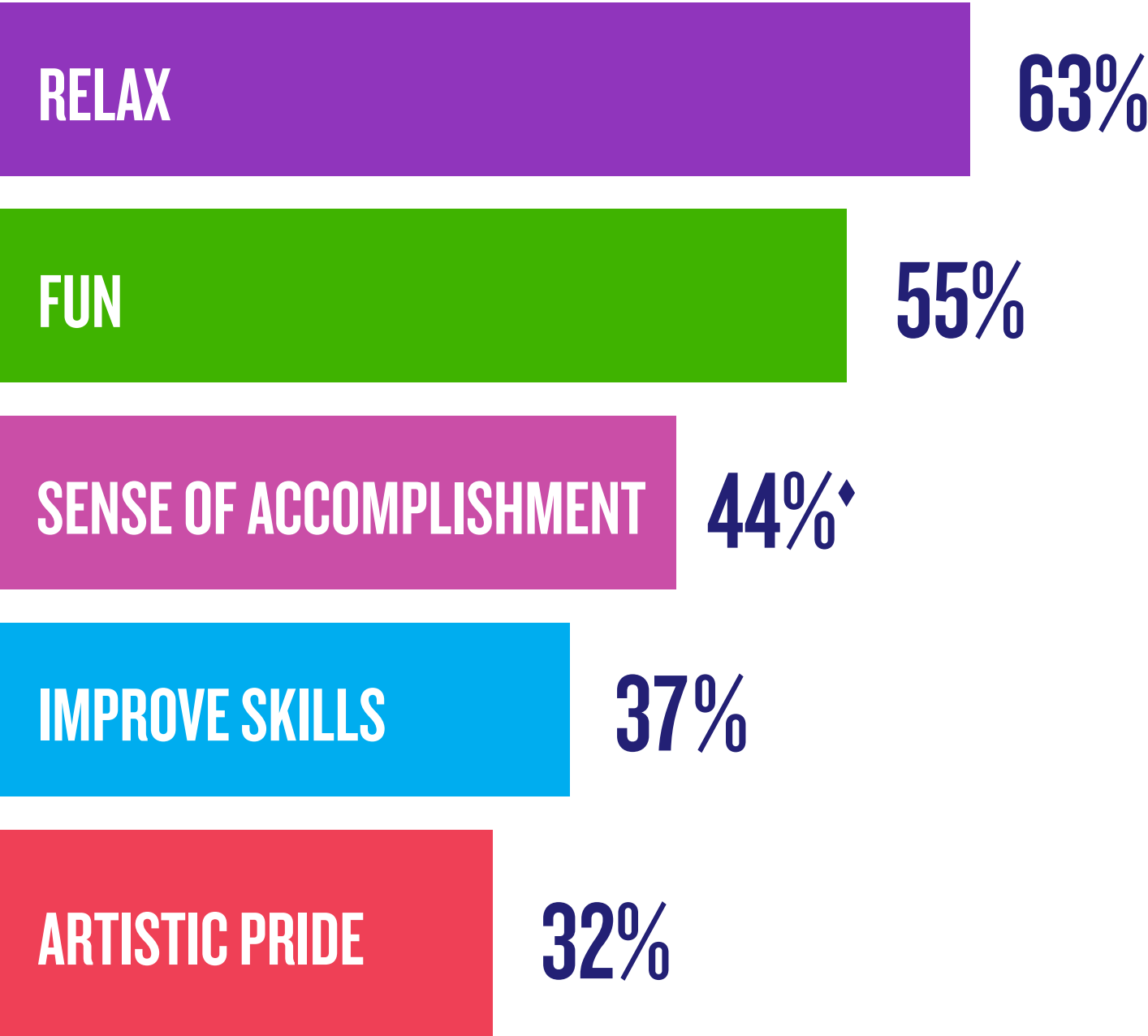
# Driven to Create

Motivation for pursuing creative outlets changes with age, with relaxation and sense of accomplishment taking greater priority for older adults.

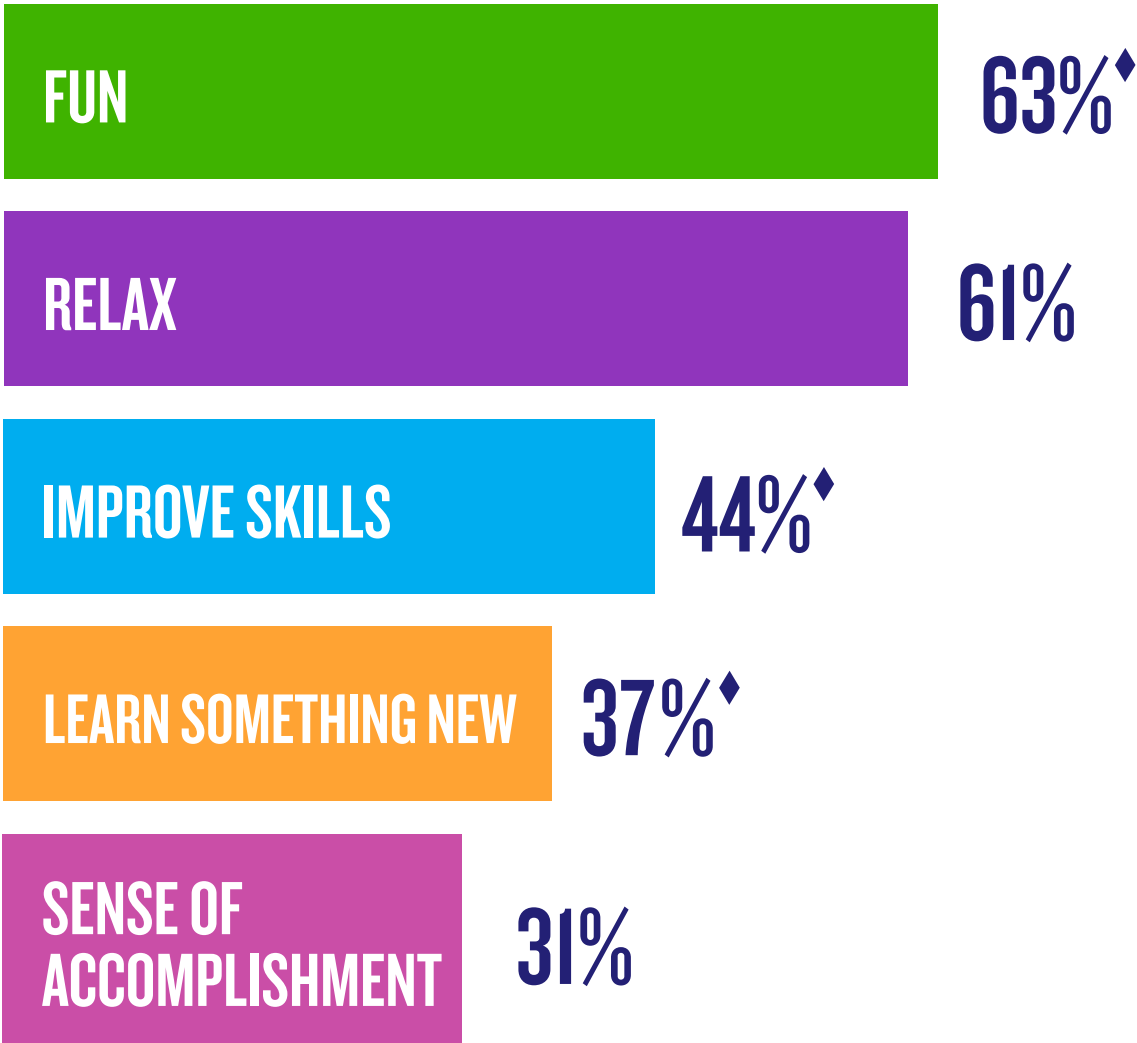
Q

Would you share some of the reasons you've done those creative activities over the past year? Please select up to FIVE.

## TOP 5 (55 +)



## TOP 5 (<55)



<sup>♦</sup>Data is statistically significant.  
Respondents could select from 14 responses, top 5 for each group shown. 1% of all respondents selected "None of these."



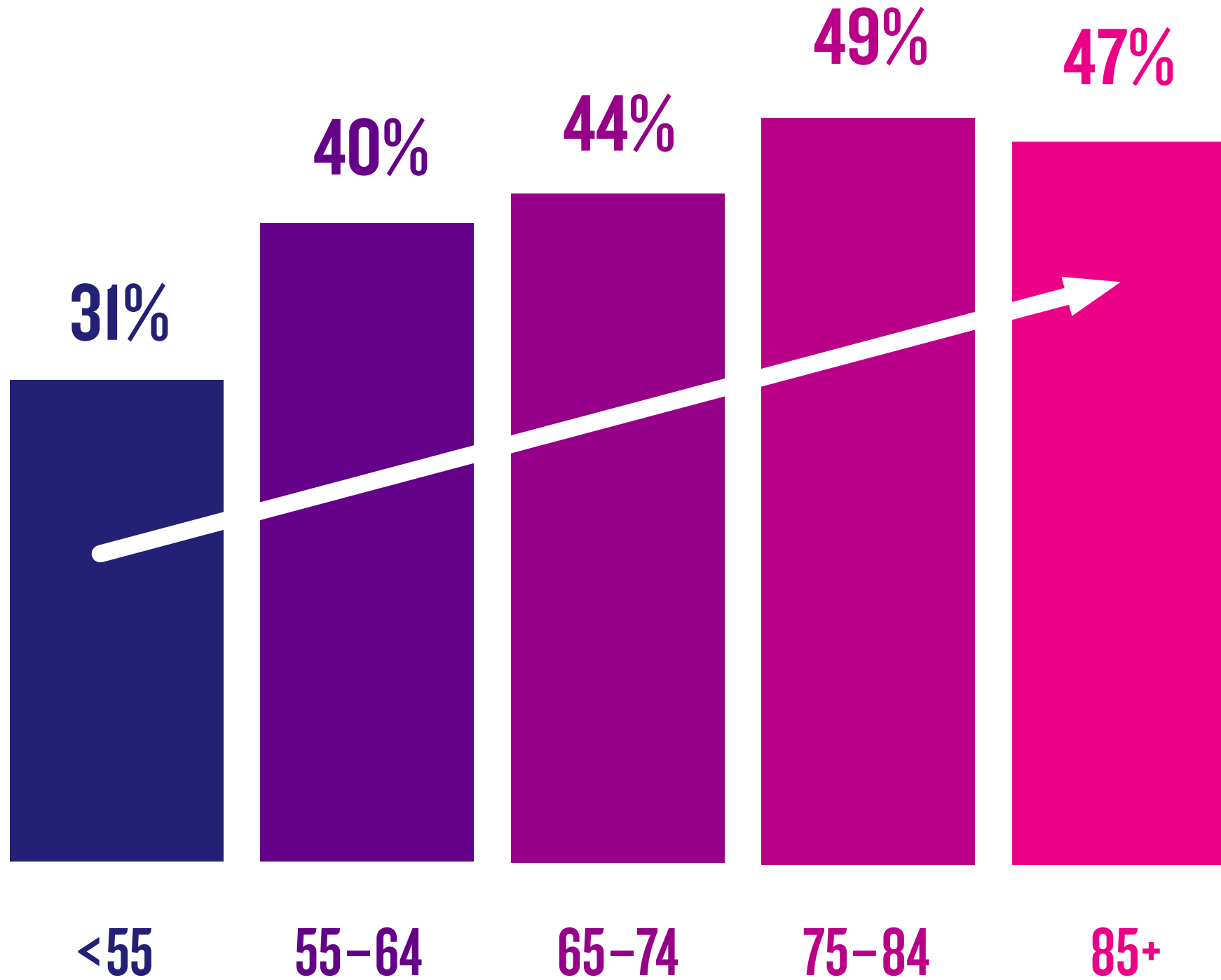
# Seeking Achievement

Creative activities that validate their skills and capabilities are increasingly important to adults as they get older.

Q

Would you share some of the reasons you've done those creative activities over the past year? Please select up to FIVE.

## A: SENSE OF ACCOMPLISHMENT



# For All Ages

When it comes to cultural experiences, age doesn't dictate engagement: older and younger adults choose to participate in the same kinds of arts and culture activities.

Q

Have you done any of the following activities in-person in the past few years (before or during the pandemic)?

■ 55+  
■ <55

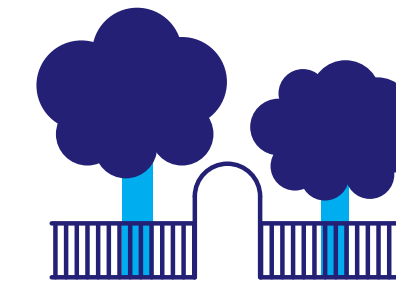
#1



Fairs and Festivals

53% vs. 51%

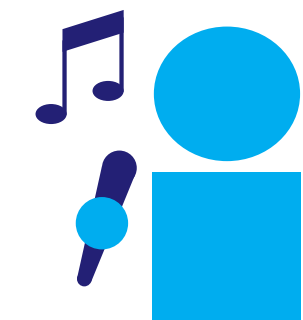
#2



Parks, Zoo, Aquarium,  
or Botanical Garden

49% vs. 58%<sup>♦</sup>

#3



Musical Performance

45%<sup>♦</sup> vs. 40%

#4



Historic Site  
or Tour

35%<sup>♦</sup> vs. 30%

#5



Theater

32% vs. 31%

#6



Museums

30% vs. 35%<sup>♦</sup>

<sup>♦</sup> Data is statistically significant.  
Respondents could select any from 16 options.  
In-person arts and culture activities shown are  
ranked by 55+ population preference. 4% of all  
respondents selected "None of these."



# In-Person vs. Online

Adults between the ages of 55 and 64 have a unique drive to go out and experience the world in-person, and are a prime target audience for organizations to welcome back to gatherings and events.

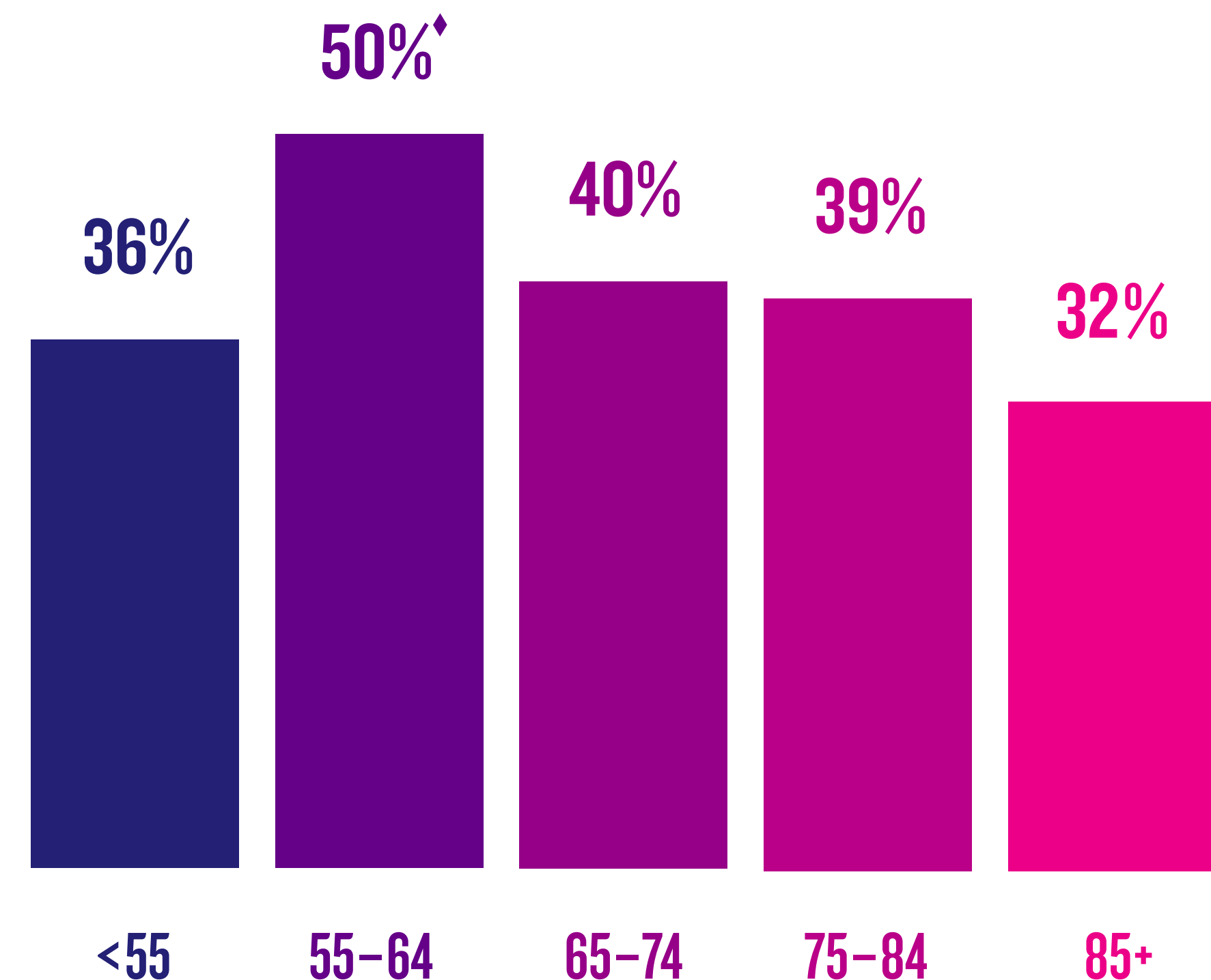
♦ Data is statistically significant.

Respondents could select from 5 responses. Only the top response "I'll almost always prefer in-person events over online activities" is shown.

Q

When you are able to engage in (or engage in more) in-person arts or culture activities, how do you expect you'll split your time between online and in-person experiences?

## A: PREFERENCE FOR IN-PERSON ACTIVITY





# An Expanding Digital Horizon

Cultural organizations offered a wealth of activity online over the course of the pandemic, providing access to activities from around the world as well as virtual connections to their isolated audiences. Despite common assumptions that older adults may be less disposed to digital engagement, they not only took part in but greatly valued these activities, and look forward to more.





# Digital Adoption

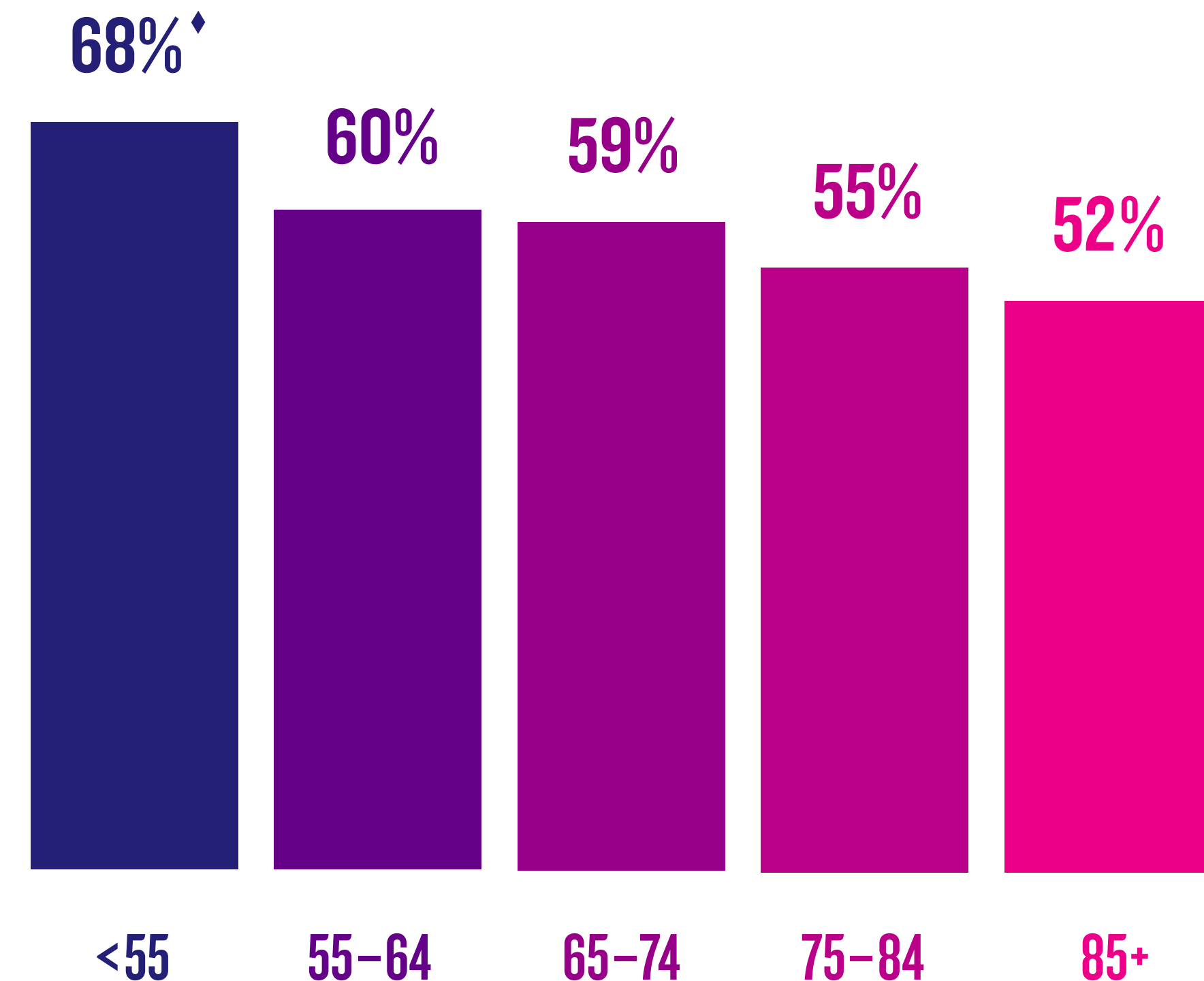
Although engagement declines gradually as respondents age, more than half of older adults had participated in digital cultural activities one year into the pandemic, a higher proportion than may have been presumed.

♦ Data is statistically significant.

Q

Have you done any online arts or culture activities or events over the past year? Please select ALL that apply.

## A: DIGITAL PARTICIPATION





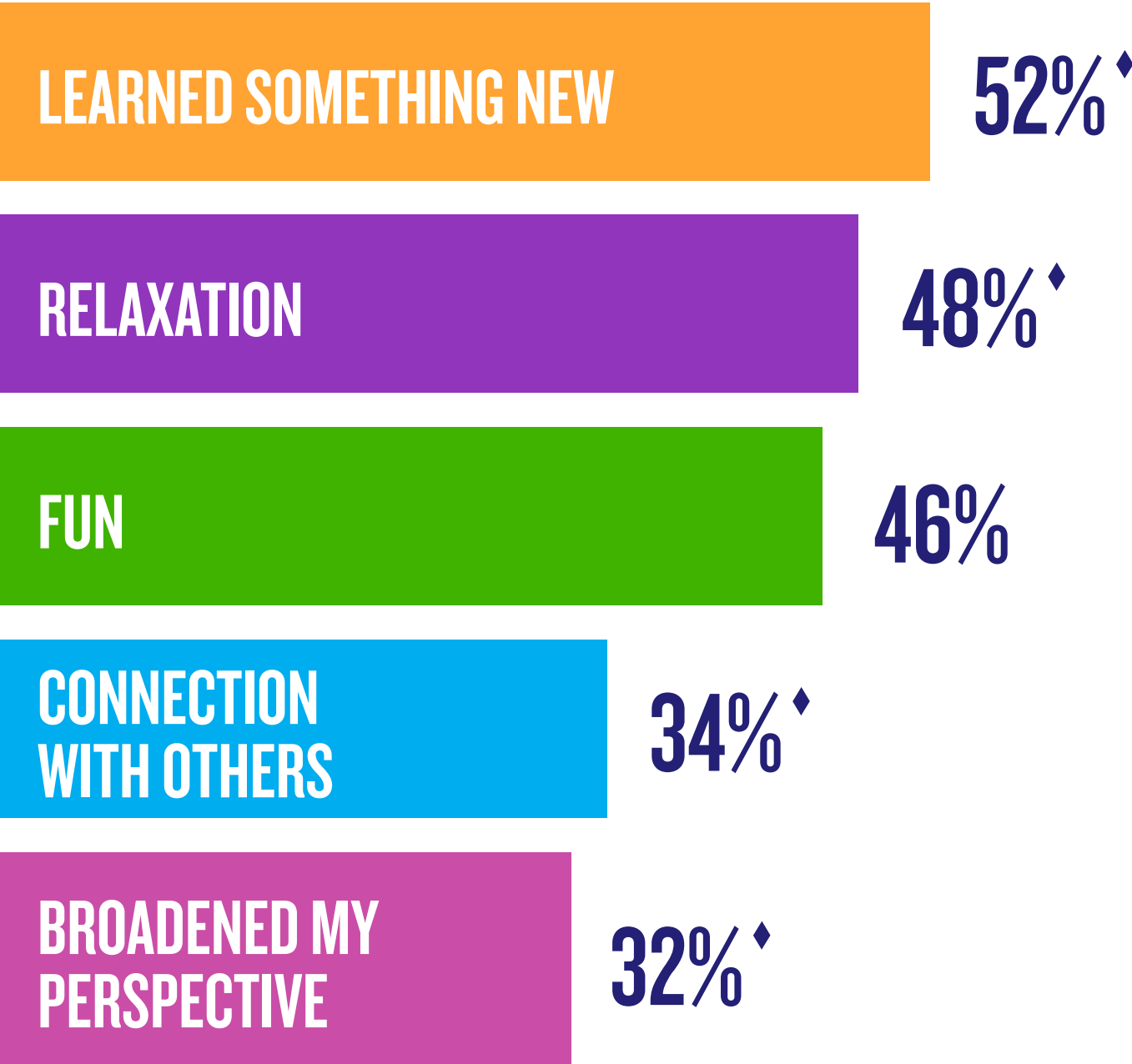
# Online Benefits

Older adults gained more overall from digital arts activities than younger respondents, citing social and emotional benefits like learning and relaxation that align with what they need and want more of in their lives.

Q

What (if anything) did you get out of doing those online arts or culture activities?  
Please select up to FIVE.

## TOP 5 (55 +)



## TOP 5 (<55)



<sup>♦</sup>Data is statistically significant.  
Respondents could select from 14 responses, top 5 for each group shown. 2% of all respondents selected "None of these."

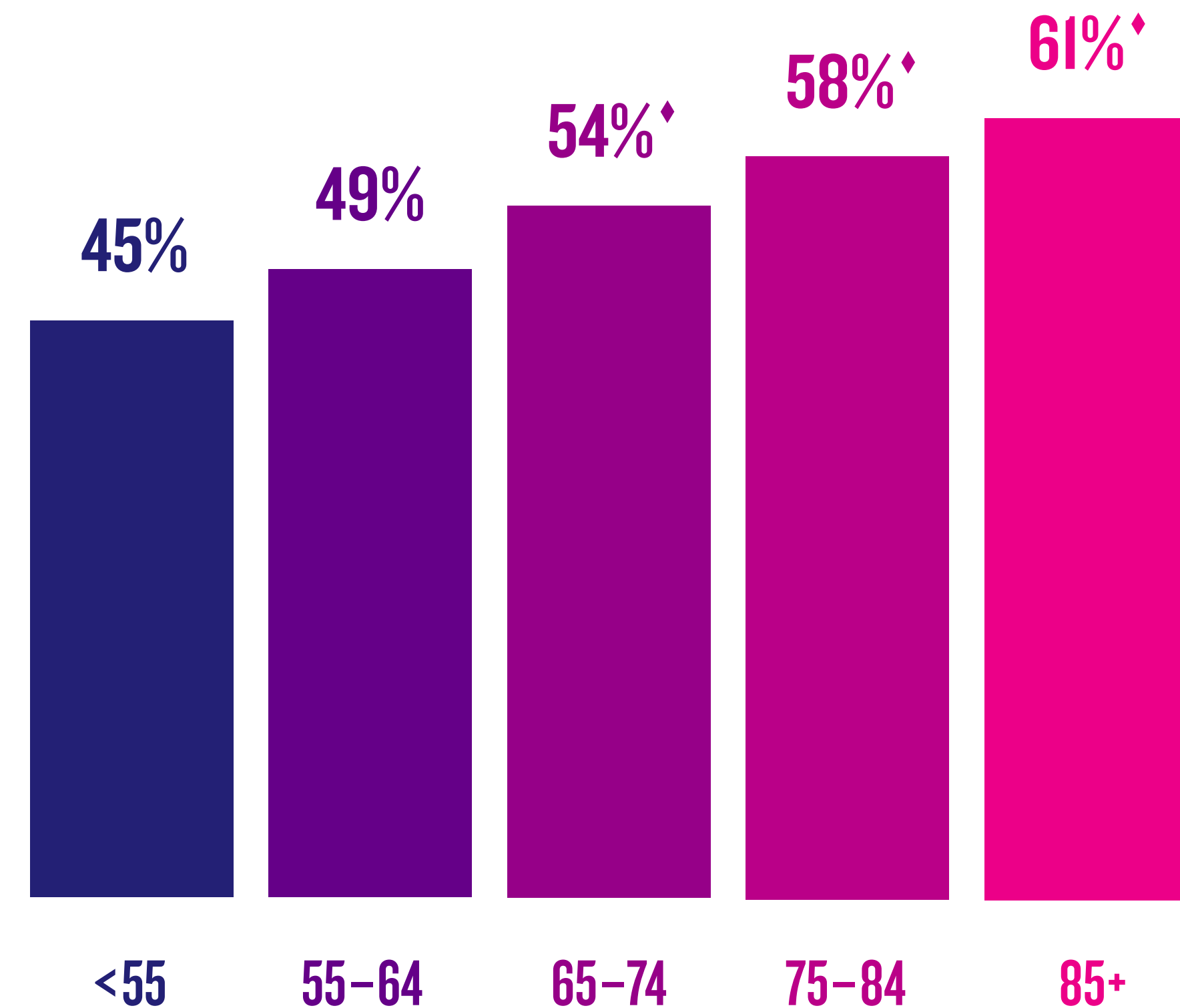
# Lifelong Learners

Encountering new ideas and experiences was the leading benefit older adults gained through digital arts offerings, and the educational value of these activities increases with age.

Q

What (if anything) did you get out of doing those online arts or culture activities? Please select ALL that apply.

## A: LEARNED SOMETHING NEW



\*Data is statistically significant.

# Activating the Digital Realm

These three areas can help arts organizations energize digital engagement and expand digital participation among older adults.

*Five-point scale. Percent selecting a top-two-box indicating they feel this is "important" or "very important."*

Q

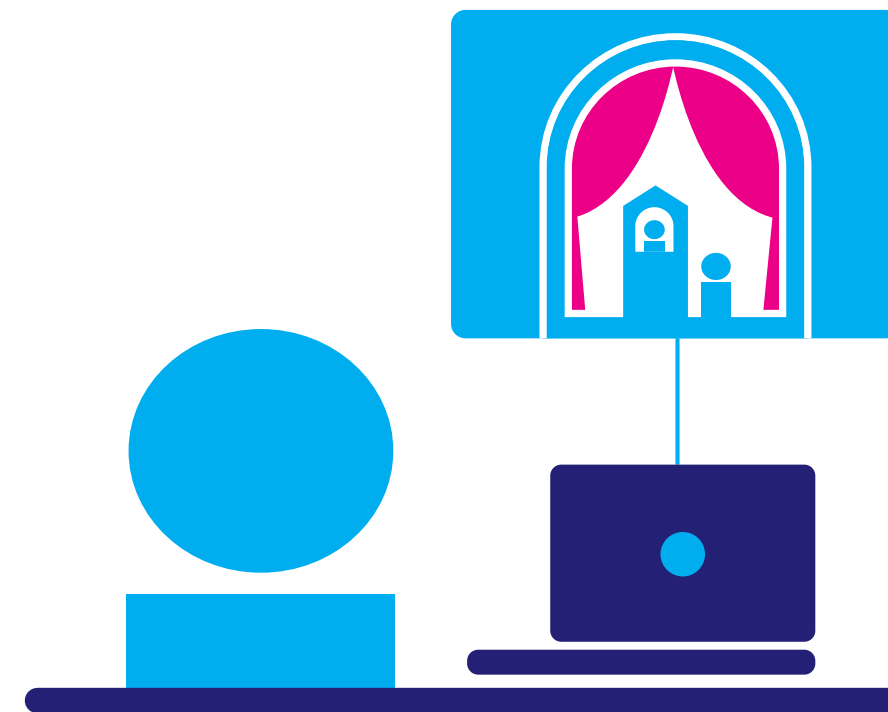
Thinking about the kinds of online arts or culture activities that you've done, how important are the following qualities?



## FREE ACCESS

**70%** of older adults believe it's important that digital activities are free (no cost to access online).

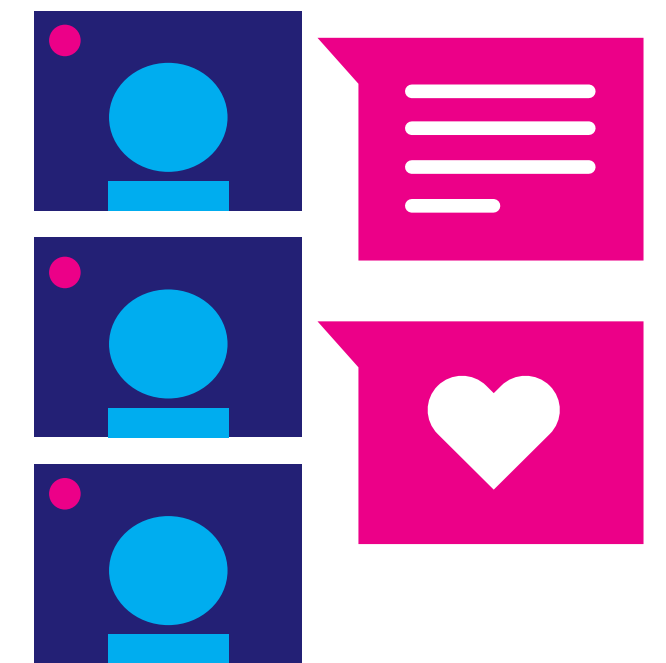
*67% for younger adults.*



## GLOBAL ACCESS

**68%** of older adults believe it's important that digital activities give access to organizations or artists located in other places.

*59% for younger adults.*



## SOCIAL ACCESS

**44%** of older adults believe it's important that online activities include a social component to connect with other participants.

*45% for younger adults.*



# The Value of Digital for Older Adults

**“I have been able to attend so many online events across the globe that I otherwise would never be able to attend in-person. [Even] locally there are places I don’t have transportation to attend to [but having a virtual option allows me to] see things I otherwise wouldn’t have. **There is much less wasted time and expense.**”**

*Q: Would you share more about why you prefer doing arts or culture activities online over in-person events?*

**“Art is meant to be live, [...] we’re hungry for in-person. The only reason I’d do online is to watch something I can’t get there to see live. That’s a lovely use of online. To transport us to the rest of the world.”**

*Q: Would you share more about why you prefer in-person arts or culture events over online activities?*

**“I’ve found that I am able to attend many more workshops and events that interest me, because [COVID-19] has caused an explosion of relevant, cultural, online offerings.”**

**“After a year of online work and learning I crave in-person experiences and do not want more screen, even though I have appreciated the convenience of digital programs.”**



# Calls for Change

Assumptions about a generational divide on social issues need to be reconsidered: whether young or old, audiences see a vital role for cultural organizations in tackling the biggest questions of our time, and expect organizations to embody positive change by becoming more accessible, welcoming, and relevant to more people.





# What Matters Most

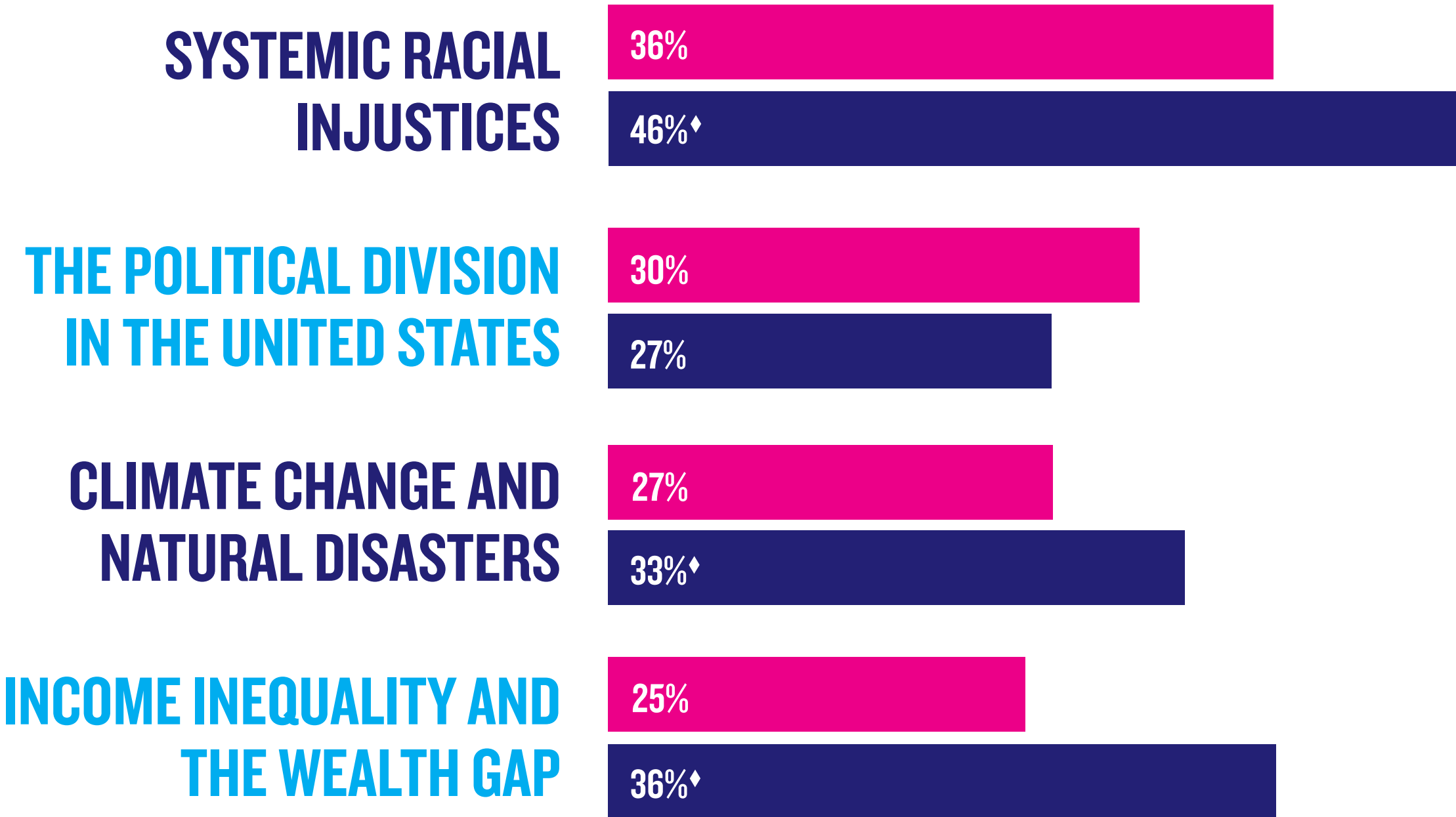
Q

Which of the following social issues (if any) do you think arts or culture organizations should address?

55+  
<55

Three-quarters of all adults believe arts organizations have a responsibility to confront social issues, with systemic racism being the top priority for all ages. Older adults also saw a greater role for arts and culture to play in bridging political divisions in the U.S.

76% of all respondents identified at least one social issue they believe arts organizations should address



♦ Data is statistically significant. Respondents could select from 9 responses, only the top 4 responses from the 55+ population are shown in order.

33% of older adults respondents said "None of these."

# Perceptions of Systemic Racism

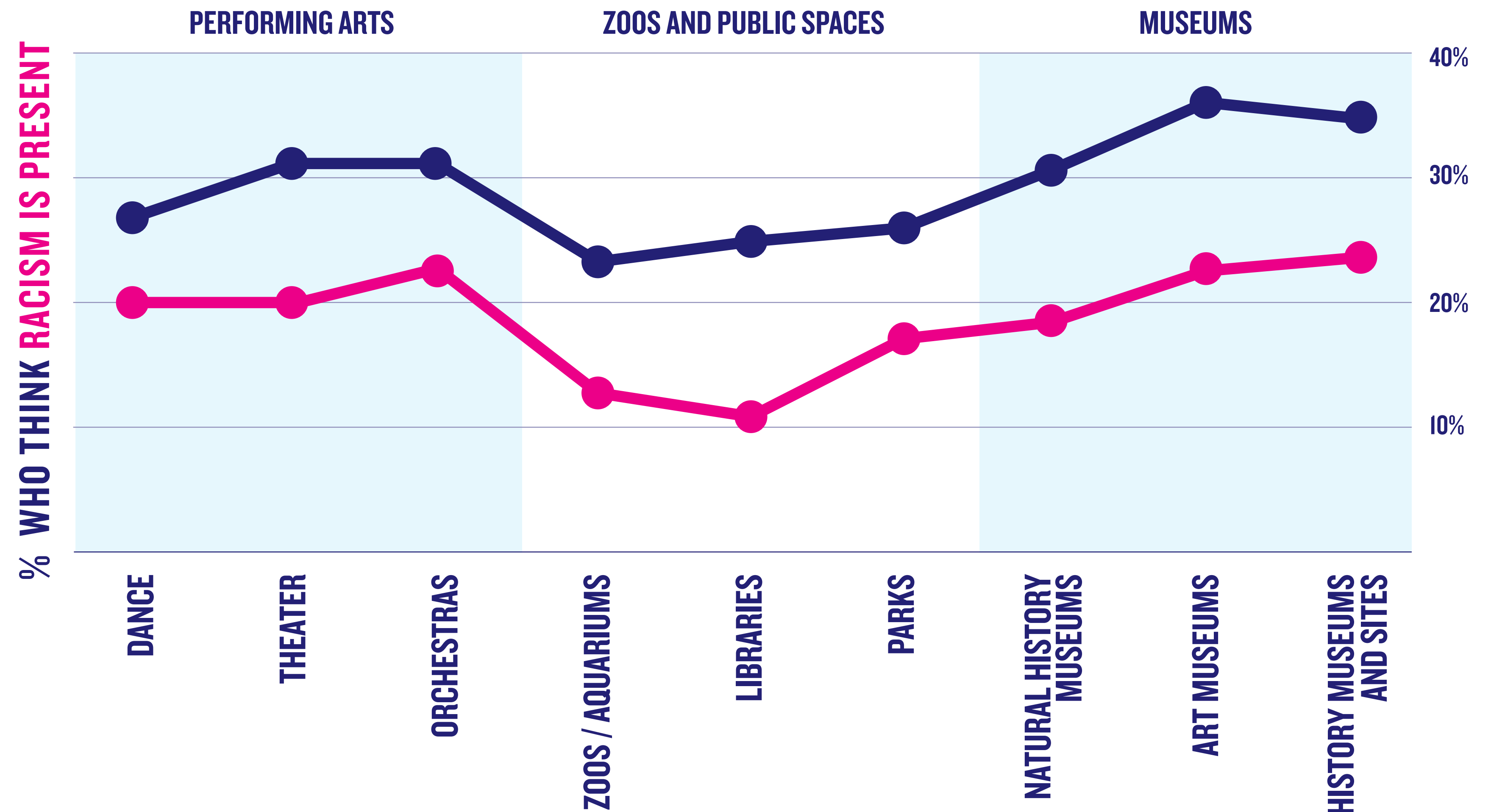
Q

Based on what you've seen or heard, do you think systemic racism is present in each of the types of organizations below?

55+  
<55

Older and younger adults agree that arts organizations should address racial injustices. However, older adults—who are more predominantly white than younger adults—are less likely to perceive structural racism within arts organizations.

15 different types of organizations were included in our survey; recipients were randomly given four organizations to respond to.  
Five-point scale, top two responses are combined.



# Values in Action

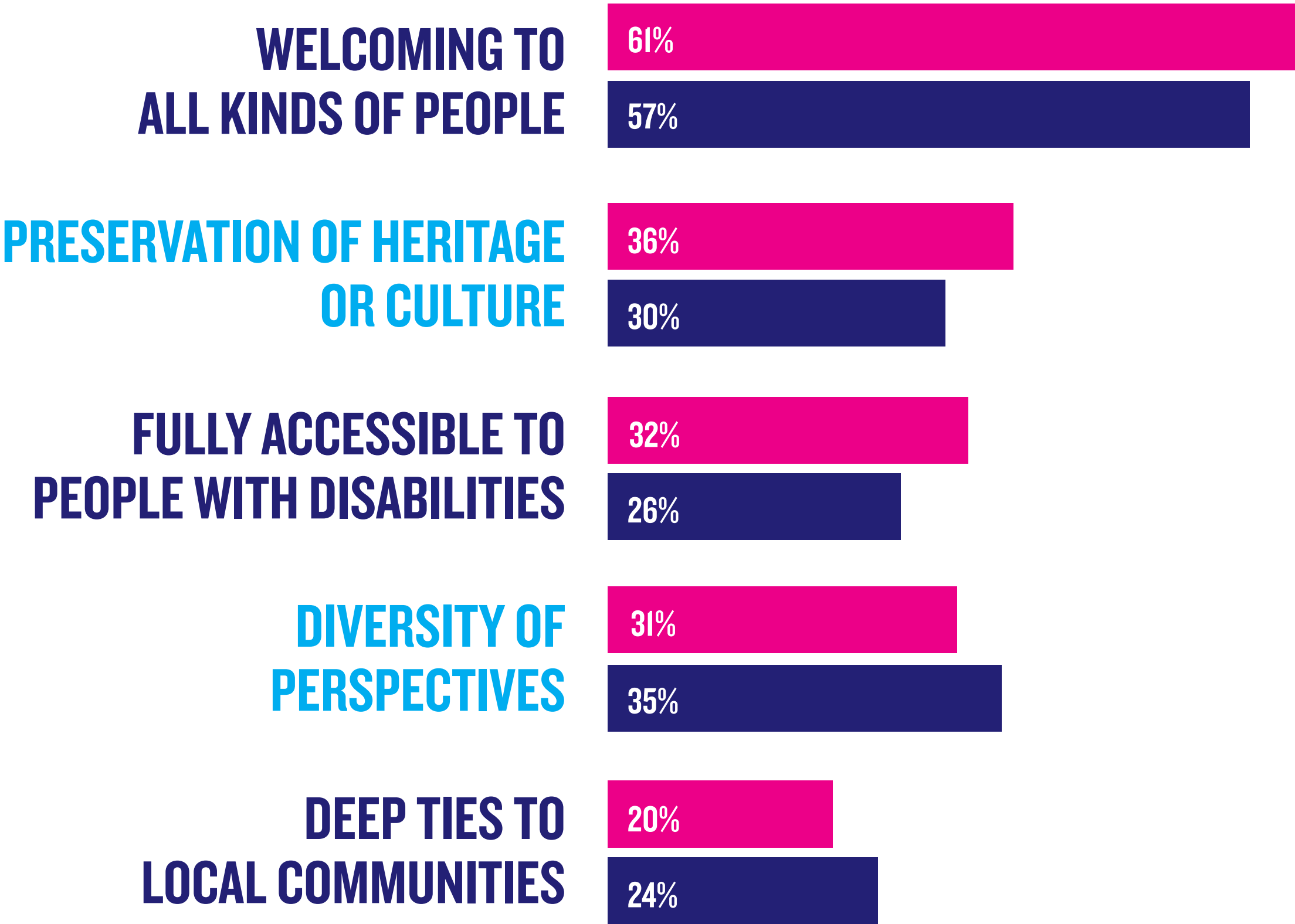
Older and younger adults largely agree on the values and qualities they want to see arts organizations uphold, emphasizing welcome, accessibility, and inclusivity.

Respondents could select from 18 responses. Only responses that are statistically significant between the two groups are shown. Values are listed in descending order of 55+ preferences.

Q

What qualities or values are most important to you in an arts or culture organization? Please select up to FIVE.

55+  
<55





# Co-Creating Change

Older and younger adults believe arts organizations have work to do to better serve and relate to diverse audiences. Partnering with communities to design new programs is an essential step in building greater relevance and impact.

Q

How much do you personally agree or disagree with the following statements?

■ 55+  
■ <55

53%

I hope arts and culture organizations change after the pandemic to be more relevant to more people.

53% for younger adults.

63%

Arts or culture organizations should involve their communities and collaborate with them to create programs.

61% for younger adults.

Five-point scale. Percent selecting a top-two-box indicating they "agree" or "strongly agree."

# Mandates for Transformation

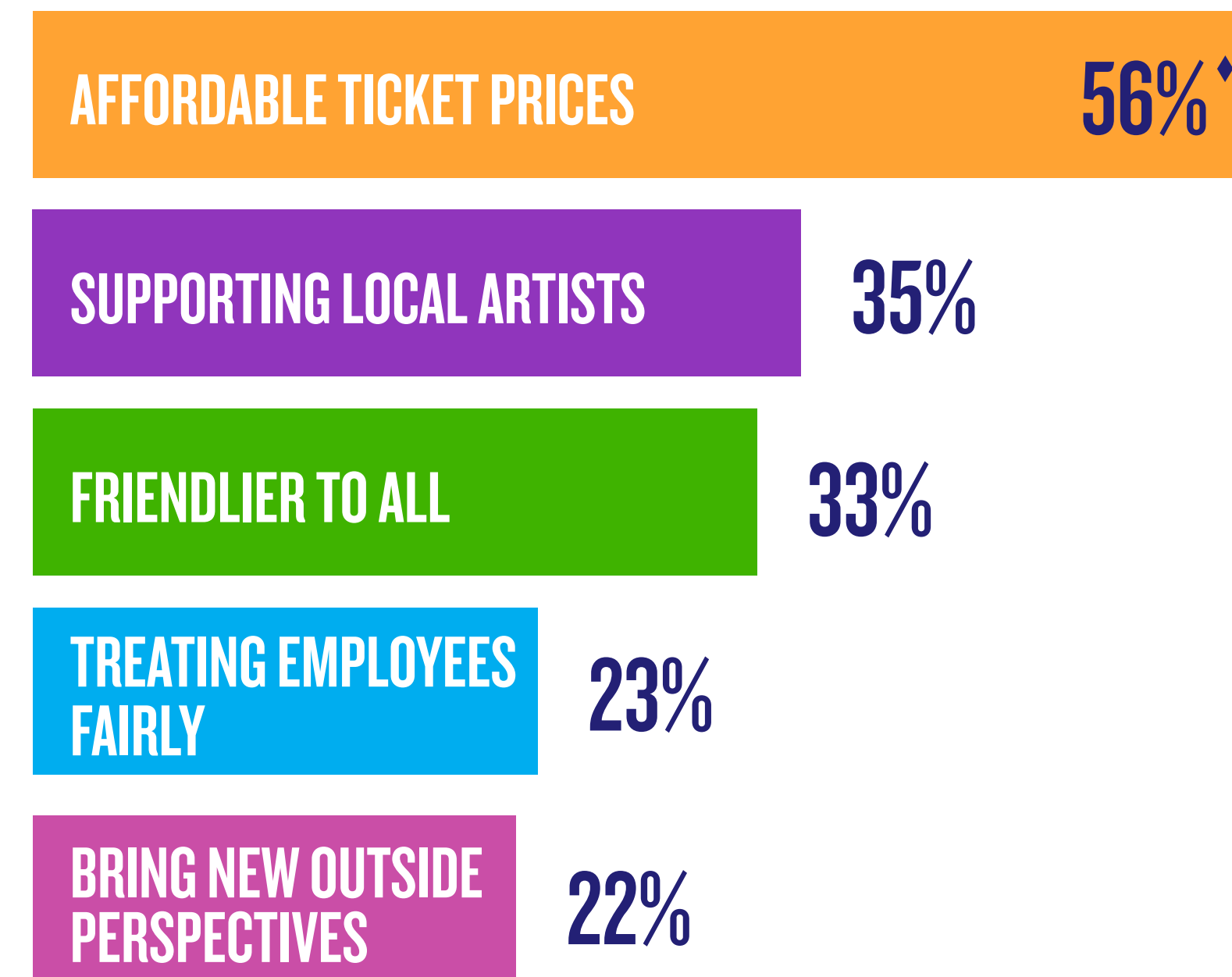
Older and younger adults agree on many of the ways they hope that arts organizations will evolve, urging greater affordability, stronger local connections, and more welcoming spaces.

**89%** of all respondents identified at least one way they believe arts organizations should change

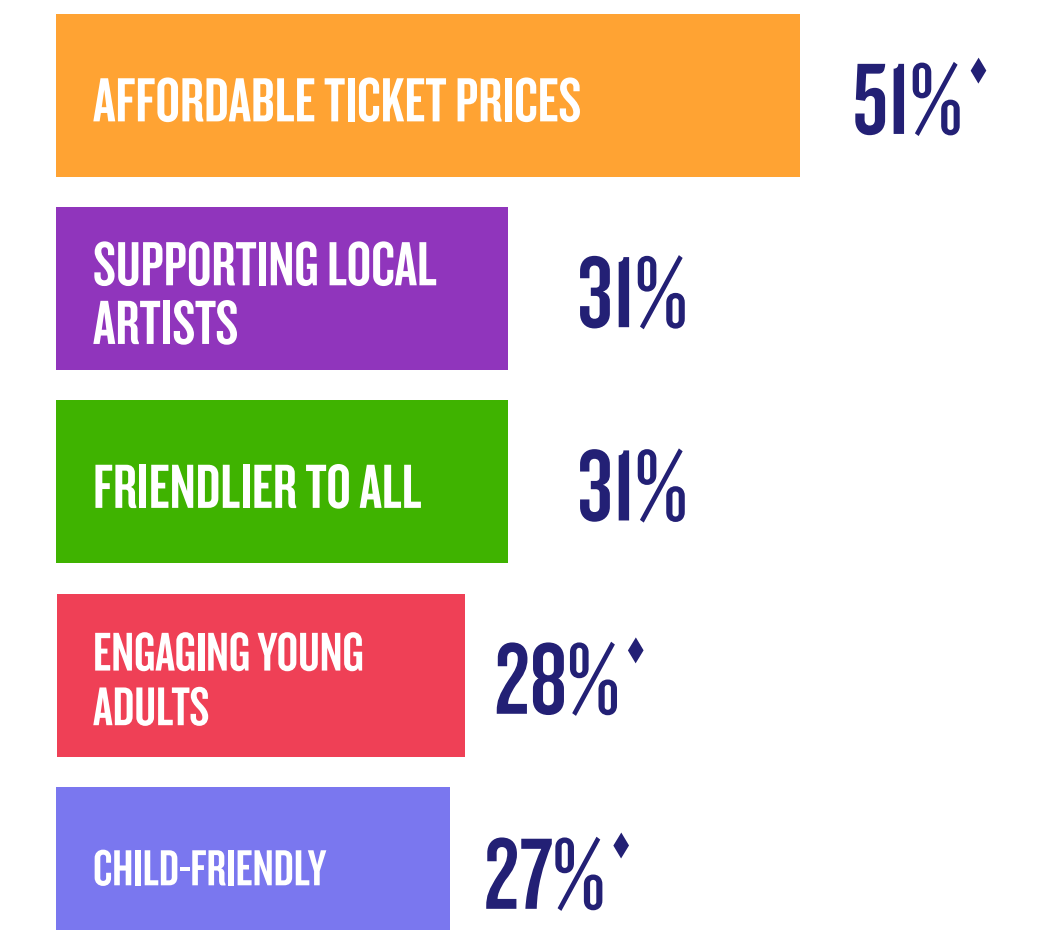
Q

Would any of these types of changes make arts and culture organizations better for you in the future? Please select ALL that apply.

## TOP 5 (55 +)



## TOP 5 (<55)



\* Data is statistically significant. Respondents could select from 18 responses, top 5 for each group shown. 11% of all respondents selected "Nothing - I don't think organizations need to change."

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# In Conclusion

**Our sector must make a commitment to better understand the wants and needs of all cultural audiences, and our research advocates for closing accessibility and equity gaps in the culture sector across many facets of diversity—including age.**

**Not enough attention has been given to the benefits of creative engagement in the later seasons of adulthood, even as older adults make up a growing percentage of cultural audiences, subscribers, and donors. It is our hope that this study sparks reflection, dialogue,**

**and transformed approaches to understanding and serving these audiences.**

**The cultural sector has the power to not only build greater empathy for the needs and nuanced motivations of older adults, but to help society reimagine the experience of aging today. From fostering intergenerational dialogue, to designing accessible and enriching digital programs, to modeling greater welcome and inclusion, arts and cultural institutions can provide older adults with the affirming and inspiring experiences they desire and deserve.**



# THANK YOU

to the arts and culture organizations,  
advisors, and thousands of  
respondents who gave their voices,  
time, and effort to shape the  
insights of this study.

**CULTURE +  
COMMUNITY**

IN A TIME OF  
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