Title of the presentation:

Far Apart but close at heart: creative strategies to overcome digital poverty under the covid-19 pandemic in Latin America.

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Introduction

The Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic on mental health has increased levels of mental distress in young people, creating a global demand for more support for young people's mental health. According to the WHO European framework for action on mental health 2021-2025[1], just in 2021, more than 150 million people in the WHO European region live with a mental health condition, and only 1 in 3 people living with depression receive the care they need. In parallel, UNICEF's 2021 state of the world's children report[2], noted that in Latin America and the Caribbean, 15% of children and adolescents are living with a diagnosed mental health disorder.

For decades, community-based arts organisations have been enabling young people in vulnerable territories to explore and express problems and social realities through creativity and specific art forms, playing a significant role in promoting young people's wellbeing in the global south. The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting social distancing measures have forced these organisations to move their activities online to ensure that they continue to support vulnerable young people through this time of crisis.

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[1] Regional technical consultation on implementation of the WHO European Framework for Action on Mental Health 2021–2025 through the Pan-European Mental Health Coalition: virtual meeting, 15–16 February 2022. Link: https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/353412. Accessed on October 21, 2022.
[2] The State of the World's Children 2021: On My Mind--Promoting, Protecting and Caring for Children's Mental Health. Link: https://www.unicef.org/lac/en/six-effects-pandemic-mental-health-adolescents-and-young-people. Accessed on October 21, 2022.

This way, 'Far Apart but Close at Heart Latin America' was a research project which aimed at exploring how five arts organisations used online platforms to support the mental health of young people during a global pandemic, and how young people and arts workers experience this change. In this paper, we will explore what were the strategies, creative actions and methodologies applied by these organisations to tackle one specific challenge: digital poverty.

This research project is a collaborative research project led by the Unit for Social and Community Psychiatry (QMUL) and a cooperation between People's Palace Projects (QMUL) in partnership with Crear Vale La Pena (Buenos Aires, Argentina), Redes da Maré (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), Fundación Nacional Batuta (Bogotá, Colombia), La Familia Ayara (Bogotá, Colombia) and Teatro La Plaza (Lima, Peru). All of these organisations work with young people based in deprived areas.

In this paper, we explore findings from semi-structured interviews conducted with 239 young participants and 43 art workers, as well as from an online survey applied with young people that joined online activities being offered during the pandemic. All data was collected between June 2020 and March 2021. The research approach used to analyse the subsequent data collected, was the thematic analysis method, which finds repeated patterns of meaning (themes) through a process of searching across the data for initial codes capable of identifying and expressing meaningful features of the data; collating codes into potential themes; reviewing themes concerning the coded extracts and the entire data set; and refining themes in a way they provide a map which tells the data story (Braun; Clarke, 2013).

A coding frame was constructed using NVivo[3] (a software program used for qualitative and mixed-methods research) to identify trends and themes in the data, and later to classify those codes into overarching themes. It is this methodology which produced a comparison and contrast of testimonies through different themes or subtopics, using the verbatim data from the interviews to guide the generation of the codes as well as the questions from the topic guide.

Findings

Based on initial thematic and statistical analysis conducted on this data, we propose a closer look to reflect on key challenges related to young people's lack of internet access and the strategies adopted by arts organisations to overcome this issue. According to the thematic analysis of the data collected in the young people's and staff interviews, (3) themes could be identified as predominant challenges faced and strategies conducted by them: i) practical problems needed to be overcome; ii) staff had to learn new ways of working to adapt to virtuality; and ii) on going staff support was essential.

i. Practical problems needed to be overcome

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[3] More information on: https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo-qualitative-data-analysis-software/home. Accessed on October 24, 2022.

Young people described various practical problems they faced when joining online activities, most of them related to already existing social inequalities aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, Peru, Argentina and Colombia. The most notable difficulty was related to digital poverty, mainly in terms of people lacking internet connection, such as mobile data to join the remote activities and how it negatively affected the participants' experience as a whole.

"The problem is always the connection, sometimes I don't have mobile data to connect, so these things interfere with the classes that are live, which are more interactive than the others." (10 10 5 – Batuta – Female)

Also, participants reported on their lack of appropriate devices to join the online activities. Most of them did not have a personal computer to use during the arts activities and had to use mobile phones, often borrowed from a family member. And yet, due to the pandemic and the significant growth of internet usage, an increase in the download of multiple mobile applications caused an overload on their cell phone storages, creating different technical limitations that impacted the young people's access to the online activities.

Young people also mentioned they didn't have an appropriate place to watch and engage with the interactive online activities when they were at home.

"My house doesn't have wifi anymore. I use my aunt's. [...] the internet that sometimes got bad. I did everything I could to stay in the classes. I used to do it on the slab, it made a lot of noise, my aunt complained and asked me to stop jumping because it was making a lot of noise in her house." (04 04 04 – Redes da Maré – Female)

In addition to poor infrastructure, a lack of privacy was also referred to, and a common difficulty faced by those lacking proper spaces were the multiple sources of distractions found in their homes. This prevented them from fully concentrating in the activities as they would if they were participating in person. However, young people also reported that parents were understanding and played an important role in trying to solve such an issue, by allowing them to use larger house spaces for the digital performances created during the project.

ii. Staff had to learn new ways of working to adapt to going online

The transition from in-person to online activities required creating new approaches and pedagogical methodologies, significantly impacting staff's daily routine. Even though not all artistic activities could be converted to virtuality due to digital poverty related difficulties, the art workers dove into distinct tools, contents and methods, aiming to create ways of successfully reaching and engaging the young people. They mainly had to learn how to properly film and edit videos that could be properly seen on mobile phones, start using images and music to inspire the participants' creativity, and to convert daily objects into arts tools, among others.

"Let's just say that I had to change a lot, a lot of the tools and the ways in which I was teaching. I had to invent games, I had to invent new forms to explore, yes? Like, I don't know, how to use a painting, or to use something that you have every day, that you normally have at home, yes? Like a painting, like a chair, huh?." (S03 03 002 – Ayara – Male)

Therefore, the art workers shaped their teaching methods into the social reality of the young people from each territory, making their art classes accessible according to the possibilities available. This strategy required a creative and flexible methodology, which was conceived taking into account the spaces which young people were already inhabiting online, such as video platforms and social media.

iii. On going staff support was essential

The arts organisations' staff were essential during the transition from in-person to online activities as they were responsible for continuing the previous safe and supportive environment to online platforms. One of their most used strategies to keep the participants engaged in the online activities despite all of the social and technical issues brought by virtuality, was by constantly reaching and motivating them through social media and instant messaging applications.

"I feel like we are more connected, because now they call us more, they ask us if we understood things, then if I didn't understand, I can tell them and they explain again, it feels like they have more patience." (05 11 21 – Batuta – female)

It is relevant to note that the efforts put by the art workers in keeping a close contact with the young people was key not only to keep participants interested in the arts activities, but also to strengthen emotional ties between them. According to the interviews, many participants found comfort and emotional support during the pandemic while they were actively involved in arts activities, which expanded their bonds with the facilitators and teachers.

"I also really liked the attitude of each one of them, the commitment they have had with each one of us, sincerely supporting us from below, believing in us and in our strength, in our talent. It is what has motivated me the most and it has called my attention to continue [joining activities from Ayara]." (01 01 05 – Familia Ayara – Female)

Conclusion

In overall, the respective art organisations from the global south faced multiple challenges in order to overcome the technical and social issues raised with the Covid-19 pandemic, such as the adaptation from in person to online activities and the technological difficulties generated by digital poverty. The thematic data analysis concluded that practical problems had to be overcome in order for art workers to continue reaching the young people during the lockdown period, by adapting and reinventing their art activities. Thus, creative solutions were formulated by the staff, where the use of the most accessible technological and empirical tools together with new earned skills, became the key action to continue to reach participants.

At the same time, art workers deepened their bonds with the young people as a strategy, aiming to continue to engage them in activities and also become a source of assistance and comfort during a global pandemic.

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