Received: 20 October 2022 | Accepted: 20 December 2022

DOI: 10.1111/1467-9566.13620

SOCIOLOGY OF HEALTH & ILLNESS

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Digital community assets: Investigating the impact of online engagement with arts and peer support groups on mental health during COVID-19

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Funding information
UK Research and Innovation; MARCH mental health network +

Abstract

The digitisation of mental health support has accelerated since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study investigated the impact of digital engagement with *community assets* on mental health during COVID-19. Digital engagement is typically not location-bound, but the restricted movement enforced during 'lockdowns' meant that people were primarily accessing digital community assets from their home environments. We report findings from a study utilising two creative workshops and semi-structured interviews to investigate how support operates in and through three *digital community assets*; an online peer support forum, a social enterprise running regular creative challenges nationally via social media and a local in-person creative arts support group. The concept of 'more or less digital' captures the ways that people's experiences of digital community assets extend beyond the platforms to incorporate settings of use. The analysis identifies how support is diluted through digital engagement, the value of minimal and muted forms of engagement and user-led designs for future hybrid forms of support. The article concludes by emphasising the importance of

analysing digital community asset engagement in the settings of use and how such knowledge is vital for planning support in a future under continual pressure to be increasingly digital.

KEYWORDS
art therapy, community assets, COVID-19, digital health, online mental health, peer support

INTRODUCTION

A digitisation of mental health has been underway for several years (Birk et al., 2021; Boucher et al., 2021; Torous et al., 2020). The introduction of digital forms of mental health support has featured across the landscape of mental health care; including online access to general and specialist health professionals; accessing formal advice and guidance; downloading and using mental health-focussed mobile apps; engaging with online forums and engaging with automated agents such as chatbots (Fortuna et al., 2020; Mehrotra & Tripathi, 2018; Wilson, 2022). The digitisation of mental health cannot be simply defined or categorised, as it covers a huge range of activity and areas of support (Fullagar & Small, 2019; Hollis et al., 2018; Torous et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the use of digital forms of support, as repeated 'lockdowns' across the globe severely limited engagement with in-person forms of support (Liberati et al., 2022; Vadivel et al., 2021). This catalysed the use of digital platforms—making it a priority for research to develop significant insight as to the impact of their use on mental health (Banerjee & Rai, 2020; Costa et al., 2020). The current article focuses on the use of digital platforms by existing mental health-focussed arts and peer support communities, specifically video calling workshops and online forums. The article provides insight regarding the impact on mental health of accessing such groups via digital platforms.

Digitising practices of support

Arts, nature and peer support-focussed groups and communities have been conceptualised as 'community assets', in terms of being resources that can support mental health and potentially alleviate negative mental health experiences in non-medical ways (Estevao et al., 2021; Fancourt, 2017). So-called community assets include groups such as creative arts, choirs, gardening, walking, running and general peer support. Most are local and in-person. Digital platforms are being used to create 'digital community assets', which are not necessarily geographically specific but have the potential to support mental health through arts and peer support activities organised and engaged with online (e.g. via online forums, online workshops, and social media).

Developing insight regarding the impact of digital community assets involves conceptualising such platforms as technologies that mediate experience and activity. Rather than adopt an approach to considering platforms as solely interfaces or conduits for information, framing them as mediators directs attention to their power to shape practices of support. The notion

of 'platform-as-agent' captures the agential role that platforms as mediators play in life (Eli et al., 2018), which the media theorist, Grant Bollmer, captures in stating:

> This means that our bodies, and the relations we have with others, are fundamentally informed by the technologies we use, and technologies do not so much "mediate" as they provide the grounds for any experience of our own selves and relations with others.
>
> Bollmer (2018, p. 146)

Location has always been an important factor in relation to the shape of mental health support from institution-based care that dominated until the second half of the 20th century through to community-based services in the present day (McGrath & Reavey, 2015; Parr, 2008; Smith & Tucker, 2015). Digital community assets introduce additional layers to consider regarding location, as they can typically be used in multiple settings, disconnecting or weakening the link between location and formal support practices.

The key here is to avoid a bifurcation of online-offline as fundamentally distinct realms of being and activity. An abundance of literature exists conceptualising activity 'online', for example, how people present themselves and interact 'on' social media platforms—often considered in terms of a pressure for positivity—presented through a multiplicity of relationships and rich social life (Bollmer, 2018; Gibson & Trnka, 2020). In such literature, the focus is primarily on online communication, rather than how such activity is grounded in people's everyday environments. It is important to avoid polarising offline and online but rather to develop a conceptual approach that captures the integrated and relational nature of people's digital engagement with mental health-focussed arts and peer support communities—which as we will see was heavily skewed towards home spaces during COVID-19 lockdowns.

'More or less digital' environments

'Digital spaces' are often presented as distinct arenas that people can 'enter' and interact within. This is a locationist argument, which imbues digital platforms with a terrain and landscape upon which people can connect and communicate (Ellis & Tucker, 2020). A platform such as Twitter lends itself to this kind of framing, as the affective possibilities that emerge relate to communication *on* the platform, with limited (if any) focus on the environments in which people engage with the platform. The problem with an approach that frames platforms as 'spaces' is that it isolates online communication through making the context of use invisible and furthermore, creates a false binary between offline and online. This combines with the changing sense of space and place brought about by COVID-19 in relation to digital platform use, with people's homes being the main environment of use. Spaces felt to be personal and private suddenly became open to others through the screen of people's digital devices.

People's everyday environments therefore become one dimension of how they engage with the digital platform. The notion of 'more or less digital' is taken from Merrill et al. (2020) as a valuable way to frame digital/non-digital relations on a continuum, rather than in terms of artificial and oft-used dichotomies such as offline-online, virtual-real. The notion of 'more or less digital' will be used to highlight how digital community assets operate in ways that involve digital and non-digital dimensions, with the digital element operating to a greater or lesser extent. Merrill et al. (2020) offer the concept to frame public spaces as 'involving the interplay of digital

and non-digital elements' (p. 562), to the extent that neatly distinguishing between the two is analytically unhelpful. Here, we extend the use of the concept to include digital platform use in people's everyday environments (primarily home spaces during COVID-19 lockdowns). The value of the concept of 'more or less digital' is that it provides significant insight as to people's multi-layered experiences of engaging with arts and peer support communities via digital platforms during COVID-19 lockdown, the latter having created very specific temporal and spatial realities for people.

Conceptualising engagement with digital community assets via digital platforms as 'more or less digital' imbues them with a temporal form, for example, offering an immediacy of access. Furthermore, as Zeavin (2021) notes, 'screens, too, are part of human relations. Anything can and will travel across them; violence and trust; empathy, however slight or temporary; connection and disconnection; presence and absence' (pp. 231–32). Screens that are the interface with which people engage with community assets do not exist 'outside' of human relations, but rather become part of them. They may distort, slow, shape, re-configure, enhance and/or obstruct the flows of emotion and affect but this does not mean they erode them completely—despite adding a digital layer to existing and new relations.

The conceptual approach of the current article aims to add to the significant insight regarding health-related care and support practices gleaned through attending to the multiple ways that such practices hinge on relations between human bodies and non-human objects (Lupton, 2018; Lupton & Lewis, 2022). Much research of digital forms of support concentrates on the platforms themselves—commonly referred to as their affordances (Mota, 2020: Weltevrede & Borra, 2016)—and does not consider how digital platform use is grounded in specific in-person settings (e.g. people's homes, work places, public transport) and how the experience of engaging with digital platforms operates by connecting users' everyday environments through digital communication. With video calling, such communication is not just textual but also embodied. Moreover, material practices of support involve tangible and intangible dimensions, for example, physical objects such as laptops/tablets/phones, alongside the emotions and affects that constitute embodied experience (Buse et al., 2018). The current article contributes specifically to emerging literature regarding the 'digitised home environment' (Watson et al., 2021) during COVID-19, with reference to engaging with digital community assets. The approach in this article aligns with those emphasising that experiences of mental health and distress are not solely an individual concern, but are shaped by a range of social, technological and environmental factors (Winter & Lavis, 2022). This extends insight gained through recent work on the *hybridisation* of in-person and digital clinical services, and how emerging hybridised clinical engagements facilitate new forms of interactivity and co-presence (Campos-Castillo & Hitlin, 2013). For instance, Marent & Henwood's (2021) work on new forms of digital interactions in doctor-patient HIV consultations, conceptualising digital interactions as forms of *scopic media*. The contribution of the current article to this area is the inclusion of the interaction between online support and setting of use, along with the focus on community mental health support, rather than engagement with formal clinical services.

This article draws on empirical material from a project investigating the impact of accessing arts and peer support communities via digital platforms—which we are conceptualising as 'digital community assets'. The study focussed on the impact of engaging with three community assets, which pre-existed COVID-19, on mental health. The key here was that engagement was fully digital during COVID-19 lockdowns, with the study investigating how this impacted support and mental health.

METHODS

Design

The project involved two creative workshops and semi-structured interviews. The workshops involved participants engaging with creative activities (free writing exercise, drawing maps of their lives during lockdowns and writing recipe cards for the design and operation of future community assets), along with space for shared reflection and discussion. The current article focuses on insight gained from detailed semi-structured interviews and reflective discussions in workshops regarding participants' experiences before and during COVID-19.

The study was designed to provide insight regarding the impact of digitising support, with the COVID-19 lockdowns providing a unique opportunity to highlight how support operates along a continuum of digitality. The workshops provided a space for reflection, as well as a 'more or less digital' environment that could be experienced as a mechanism for support in and of itself. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with participants to add further reflective insight regarding experiences of digital community assets during COVID-19. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

Participants

Research participants were recruited through three community assets. The first was an online peer support community run by a leading UK mental health charity; the second was a social enterprise that runs UK-wide 'creative challenges' via social media to support mental health; the third was a small charity that runs arts and community groups in a North London borough. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the groups operated online-only, a hybrid of online and in-person and in-person only, respectively. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, all three groups operated fully online, including via an online forum, social media platforms and video-calling platforms. The following pseudonyms will be used in this article for the three communities, respectively; (1) Peer Support Together; (2) Creative Communities; (3) Arts for Life.

Participants were recruited via online posting on their forum for the first group, an email invitation for the second and direct recruitment by organisation staff for the third group. Research participants had all been accessing their respective community regularly during lockdown, with 60% having initially engaged prior to COVID-19. Fourteen participants were recruited to the project, with 13 interviewed (undertaken by two of the authors and lasting between 30 and 60 min); 14 in Workshop One and 10 in Workshop Two. Ethical approval for the project was granted by University of East London Research Ethics Committee.

Analysis

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The workshop and interview materials were subject to a systematic coding process, informed by the research questions regarding the impact of digital platforms on support, with specific reference to the embedding of digital engagement in participants' everyday environments. Through the coding phase, initial themes were identified, which were subject to a 'thematic decomposition' approach (Stenner, 1993; Ussher & Perz, 2018). This facilitated significant insight regarding the forms of support that emerged

through digital engagement with community assets—with specific reference to the ways that different parts of participants' lives intersected in the manifestation of support and associated experiences of distress. The thematic decomposition involved several common stages, namely 'immersion' in the data through multiple readings, coding, theme generation and repeated oscillating between data and themes to verify the latter. The verification stage involved a process of re-visiting initial codes when themes did not align closely enough with data. This was an iterative process. Initial coding was undertaken independently by the first and third authors, with subsequent theme verification undertaken in discussion across the authorial team. The analytic approach was hybrid in terms of being theoretically informed via the concept of 'more or less digital', but also inductive in terms of providing significant insight regarding the impact of digital engagement with community assets. This hybrid approach was designed to provide maximum conceptual and empirical insight.

RESULTS

In the following section, key analytic themes are discussed in relation to participants' experiences of accessing community assets via digital platforms. The analysis focuses on:

- community assets as mechanisms for support
- digital platforms facilitating diluted forms of intimacy
- the emergence of minimal and muted forms of engagement
- using digital platforms to 'archive and review' feelings
- user design of future support

The central focus is on gaining insight into the ways people attempted to navigate the 'constraints and possibilities' (Boyd, 2011, p. 55) of digital-mediated environments constituted by engaging with arts and peer support communities via digital platforms. Furthermore, analysis demonstrates how people's experiences of using community assets are 'simultaneously digitally and non-digitally constituted to some degree' (Merrill et al., 2020, p. 550).

Digital community assets as mechanisms for support

In this first analytic section, the value of arts groups to support mental health during COVID emerges in several ways, demonstrating that support is not singularised through one pattern of operation. The following extracts provide insight regarding the impacts of creative activities on participants' experiences:

> ***Patricia*:** Yeah I mean when I was doing the art, like if I felt like, you, with ADHD you get overwhelmed and then it can make you depressed, definitely does me, so I feel useless and bored... and doing the art helped distract me. So with me anything to distract me and sort of like anything creative, or purposeful, really helps me, it changes my mood. So yeah it really helped me a lot I must say.
>
> (Arts for Life)

In this extract, Patricia highlights how creative activities can alleviate symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and associated feelings of depression. The support

Patricia experiences from undertaking the creative activities emanates from its potential for distraction, to draw in her attention, away from feelings associated with her distress. This is a positive experience and Patricia explicitly states that creating art 'changes her mood'. A similar positive response to online provision of group activities can be seen in the following extract with Miriam, in which she responds to questions regarding her experience of engaging with community assets online:

> ***Interviewer***: And you found them all helpful then, did you?
> ***Miriam***: Yes, yes
> ***Interviewer***: What was it, do you think, that you found... can you think about were there particular things that were helpful or was it just the...?
> ***Miriam***: Take away the boredom and the loneliness and the isolation the most. Keeps you going really. Something to look forward to, because I met some of these people beforehand.... And suddenly there was no connection any more through the lockdown, so it was really sad
> (Arts for Life)

Miriam's account is somewhat more generic than Patricia's, as it highlights benefits of online access in terms of reducing boredom and helping to lessen feelings of loneliness and isolation more broadly. Miriam has previously attended Arts for Life in person, and as such, had developed social connections with others engaging with the groups, which ceased suddenly at the start of the March 2020 lockdown. Only by transitioning groups online were the positive benefits able to be re-enacted. This is not to say that transitioning support online is a straightforward process, and that in-person accessibility is able to be mirrored online:

> ***Interviewer***: did it not necessarily matter what you were doing online but just the fact that you were there, you had something to do, you had a kind of purpose...?
> ***Miriam***: Oh, no, no, it did matter actually. I chose the ones I wanted to. There were so many. There were like packed programs... and I chose the ones I wanted to do that looked appealing to me because I felt like let's say, for example, I'll give you an example, there's one to do, for example, of hearing your voice... I couldn't exactly sit here and belt out my vocals: I would feel too self-conscious if I did that in my own home, to music, to singing and all that. I'd feel more like if I go there, to the place, it would be better. But here I feel like too self-conscious with neighbours and stuff and so on... So I chose the ones which I felt fitted with my environment.
> (Arts for Life)

Miriam here highlights some specificity regarding the experience of transitioning creative activities online. Miriam had previously mentioned engaging with a crochet and embroidery class online—which helped her to feel part of the group and consequently to lessen feelings of isolation. Therefore, the type of creative activity was an important determinant of Miriam's engagement. For instance, one of the online workshops was a singing group, which Miriam was not comfortable to undertake. Her reluctance was not about the nature of the activity itself, that is, singing, but the fact that it did not 'fit with my environment'. Miriam did not want to be singing in her home space, as this may have been heard by her neighbours—she would have attended the group had it been in-person. This demonstrates one of the ways in which experiences of arts and peer support communities need to be understood not only in terms of the specificity of the online activity, but how they connect with people's everyday environment. A specific 'more or less digital' environment was experienced at the time, involving the digital element of group

singing workshop, and the physical space of her home. The balance between more and less digital can create challenges in terms of engagement, and in this case, Miriam did not feel comfortable singing in her home space given the proximity of neighbours, so did not proceed with that group.

Digital platforms facilitate diluted forms of intimacy

Research on digital support has shown how emotional connection and associated feelings of support can emerge and operate through text-based online communities (Giles & Newbold, 2011). Anonymity and asynchronicity are key features of such communities, facilitating supportive connections with others through providing 'intimacy at a distance' (Zeavin, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic catalysed an expansion of the forms and operation of online communities. In addition to the long-standing text-based communities such as online forums, video calling platforms (e.g. Zoom) have facilitated a rapid growth in synchronous participatory groups. Such platforms present the opportunity for people to be 'live' in the moment, visibly communicating with others through video and audio. Synchronous platforms operate distinctly from text-based communities, with anonymity less common, and while forms of asynchronicity are possible (e.g. through recording online meetings) they largely operate live. This section provides insight of the extent of support that can be felt through digital engagement with art and peer support communities—and how this impacts feelings of isolation and loneliness:

> ***Patricia*:** Well, I'm going to be honest, nothing can take away loneliness and isolation easily. It helped, that's what I can say, because it's been difficult. The pandemic has been difficult on me. I suffered in all sorts of ways. I got sick in the middle as well, twice and it's been hard, so I live alone it's not easy. But it helped. But it can't take away completely what happened. But it helped, it helped a lot. I come back to it. I find myself pushing myself to come back so I can just, you know, just like keeping myself going.
>
> (Arts for Life)

Of interest in this extract is that key to Patricia's experience is a sense of movement between 'more' and 'less' digital, in the form of spending time using the platform or not. For Patricia, digital engagement cannot entirely remove feelings of 'loneliness and isolation easily' but 'it helped'. This sense of nuance is an important feature of the experience of support enacted when engaging with the platform. This manifests through 'tacking' between greater and lesser engagement with the platform—with this movement central to the experience, rather than support being reducible to either accessing the community or not. It was the broader environment of engagement through which experience and support operated. This diluted sense of community connection is seen in the following extract:

> ***Aleena*:** [Online activities are] not really harder [to create a community at] but I don't know the people as intimately, but I do still feel connected to them... online ... there are many more people anyway it's not like in an evening class where there are perhaps 20 people and you've got to know them.
>
> (Creative Communities)

Aleena demonstrates how interacting with digital platforms can elicit feelings of connection and intimacy, albeit not felt as strongly as if meeting in person. This provides an important

distinction between in-person and digital platform support, but one that identifies intimacy as felt to be on a continuum, rather than as absolute in terms of being felt in full, or not at all. A form of 'diluted intimacy' develops through time spent undertaking creative activities via the digital platform. This is not felt immediately, but takes time, and emerges as one's sense of how to successfully navigate the platform activities developed. The sense of community and support felt can depend on the strength of connections made possible by community assets. With online peer support, this can depend on both the quantity and quality of connections made:

> ***Jodie*:** Sometimes you're going down the feed and you can see like if someone's got more friends on Peer Support Together like they're all commenting and helping you out. But if you don't have that many friends or connections that you've made, you'll just get reactions. So like someone will post something really serious and that you'll just get like, oh, thinking of you, or a thumbs up or something. It really differs who you are and if you have connections on Peer Support Together. Yeah.
>
> (Peer Support Together)

Jodie's extract highlights how support online is contingent on the specific configuration of connections formed and maintained via Peer Support Together. Support on the platform is made visible in such a way that people can compare their interactions and engagement with other people using the platform. Jodie's witnessing of other people's networks of connection leads to a negative comparison for herself, as others have higher numbers of 'friends' on the platform providing support ('they're all commenting and helping you out'). By comparison, Josie notices how other people's networks are smaller, which she associates with less quality support ('just get like, oh, thinking of you, or a thumbs up or something'). Support on dedicated peer support platforms therefore depends on the nature of friendships and connections developed. Furthermore, barriers to forming online friendships exist:

> ***Michael*:** It does depend on who you get connected with on there and who you build relationships with. And I guess sometimes some of us don't really have that energy to build those relationships.
>
> (Peer Support Together)

Developing friendships on platforms requires being proactive. With Peer Support Together, the responsibility is on people who use the platform to engage in a way that facilitates the building of relationships. For Michael, this is not as straightforward as might be desired, as it requires engagement and effort, which acts as an obstacle for some people who 'don't really have that energy'. This can create something of a conundrum of needing to feel well enough to have sufficient energy to develop supportive friendships online, but the need for support can emerge during periods of struggling with mental health, when people may not have the energy needed.

Digital platforms do not offer only one form of intimacy, but temporally specific forms that can fluctuate and are dependent on the specific patterns of use at a given time. Of importance is to not fall into the trap of comparing in-person and online but embracing the more nuanced account that demonstrates how intimacy can be felt across a range, and therefore, even if digital platforms do not offer the same level of intimacy as in-person groups, the diluted level they can offer is important and valuable. While online access can limit feelings of connection of support due to the distance of digital communication, there are forms of flexibility facilitated by engaging with arts and peer support communities digitally, which can impact feelings of safety and security.

Using digital platforms to 'archive and review' feelings

While being designed to facilitate peer support, one of benefits of Peer Support Together as a dedicated digital platform was the way it can be used to externalise one's feelings:

> ***Kemi*:** But the thing about Peer Support Together is that it was like a sounding board. There wasn't someone to physically speak to, but I could throw the negativity on there and get it out of my system and I knew that there was an outlet for it... It was kind of like a counsellor that doesn't say anything, just throw it on there. And then I'd read back through my post and think, okay, well, this is what's been happening. But also because you can read back, I could see, well, three days ago I was okay, three days ago I was doing better. And then it helps me to visualise and see that I'm not always... If my mood was fluctuating. I'm not always going to be feeling bad. It was like a visual diary kind of thing, which I found useful.
>
> (Peer Support Together)

Online platforms such as Peer Support Together provide a mechanism for externalising and 'storing' one's feelings, which can then be presented back to oneself through operating like a visual diary. One can track and review one's activity on the platform and link feelings, past and present. This provides a way to manage one's feelings, in terms of comparing past and present, that is, 'three days ago I was doing better'. This is not a social form of support but a way of relating to one's own feelings in the present by relating to feelings recorded on the platform in the past. This point is emphasised in the quote that the platform is 'like a counsellor that doesn't say anything'. The fact that the platform is always available is deemed particularly valuable:

> ***Michael*:** Because when I'm in that void I completely forget that I've even been out of it. It's like I completely don't remember what it's like to be well. But reading back and seeing the posts and seeing the support from other people reminds me, number one, I'm not alone, but also number two, that I'm not always in the void, and that's going to have an end point.
>
> (Peer Support Together)

Peer Support Together provides a visualisation of people's journeys with their mental health—through the ability to review previous posts and comments. For Michael, the value of this visualisation of past activity is twofold. Firstly, it elicits a feeling of support in the present through seeing the support provided by others in the past—which helps Michael to feel that he is 'not alone'. Secondly, it reminds that a period of acute distress (being in 'that void') has been experienced and passed through in the past, facilitating a feeling that such periods will pass his mood will improve.

The emergence of minimal and muted forms of engagement

This section highlights how engaging with digital community assets via video calling platforms operated through forms of spatial and temporal flexibility that worked to facilitate access in way that in-person engagement would not:

> ***Angela*:** And also the thing of the location of it. It was not something that I would have found easy to go to all the time and my own sense of insecurity about it. And the other thing about my own pace, about everybody else, it's one thing being behind my own screen and doing my

own things slowly as I can when one is with other people who are moving at their rhythm as well, then it's much more intimidating and it's much more difficult to feel at ease in that.

***Int*:** No, that's really interesting. So actually it being online is part of the reason why you were able to participate in it.

***Angela*:** It's why I joined in the first place and why I was able to do it and why I most definitely continued. I think that is an important factor

.....: "And also the location, the practicality of it, of going to a place as opposed to being in the comfort or relative comfort of my home, that sense of security that comes from there, that sense of privacy that comes from there and that sense of ease also that if I can't cope then I am safe, as opposed to if I go there, I can't cope for whatever reason, be it emotional or practical, then what? What do I do? Do I need to force myself to stay until the end?"

(Arts for Life)

One of the dimensions of online communication that is used to differentiate it from in-person communication is the notion of asynchronicity, for example, online forums operate through posts and comments responded to at different times. With video calls, asynchronicity is not a feature of communication, as the calls are live, but operates in ways that can elicit different forms of temporal engagement for people. Angela's extract demonstrates the contrasting rhythms of group creative activities when meeting in person and via a digital platform. For Angela, engaging from her home space via the screen provided a distance that facilitated a slower rhythm. Angela states that had she attended the group in person (as it operated pre-COVID 19 lockdowns), a sense of intimidation would have been felt as she was not confident in her drawing ability and therefore would have felt concerned about 'keeping up with' other group members who Angela believes to be more proficient. Engaging remotely from 'behind my own screen' allowed her to do 'my own things slowly'. This was central to Angela's experience and facilitated her continued engagement with the group. Engaging from the space of her own home allowed Angela to shield her creative activities, items that she was not confident with and hence not keen to share with other members of the group. This provides valuable insight regarding existing understanding of the positive effects of engaging with art, namely that for Angela it was in fact quite anxiety provoking to do so in-person, as what she perceived to be her lower proficiency would be visible to others. Engaging online allowed a distance behind which she could 'hide' her art, which was an important factor in her participation. The key to Angela's experience here was the movement between the 'more or less digital', in that her 'less' digital home space facilitated continued engagement with the 'more' digital interaction with the group workshops online.

Furthermore, building confidence in accessing the group online elicits a sense of safety; that 'I am safe that whatever else happens, if I don't—it's okay, I'm right here. I don't need to travel back'. The feeling of safety is grounded in experience of being in one's home, a safe space for Angela. Should she find engaging in the workshop challenging, leading to increased distress, there is not a risk that she will feel trapped in a physical space away from her home—a feeling that could exacerbate a feeling of distress emerging in the workshop itself. Accessing the group online from home provides an emotional insurance against a feeling of anxiety at the prospect of become distressed in a physical space away from home. For Angela, this was a personal example of inclusivity in practice in relation to accessing community arts groups, which was of significant value given the challenges faced in terms of potential isolation during COVID-19 lockdowns. Furthermore, the key issue here is not just that the group was online (i.e. via Zoom), but that she was able to access it from the 'safe space' of her home. Accessing online in a different location would not by definition elicit the same rhythm and pace over which Angela felt control. The

temporal inclusivity facilitated by online engagement can operate in multiple ways. In the next section, this is seen in the form of a minimal/muted level of engagement:

> ***Angela*:** Yeah, so I think that gave me also the peace and rhythm, being online, because one time I remember I felt so, so tired and Rachel said something about, "Oh, just rest if you need to," and I did. And I fell asleep and at the end I woke up when they said, "Oh, it was a lovely session," and I had no idea what happened in the last hour and I just – you know the feeling, I'm sure... so therefore something like that would have been impossible to do had we been around the table.
>
> (Arts for Life)

In this extract, Angela discusses attending an arts workshop in which the facilitator invited participants to rest if they would like, which Angela did, to the extent she fell asleep, waking later in the workshop. Of note is that this did not create a complete break or exit from the workshop, instead Angela could remain part of the group while resting. The feeling of having a sense of agency over engagement with workshops was related to a temporal flexibility in the form of being able to engage at one's own pace. This temporal flexibility was vital in maintaining Angela's attendance and engagement with the group, as without it, she would have ceased attending. These elements contribute to feelings of safety and security, not just in terms of physicality but also emotionally. This is a significant example of the role of digital platforms in changing norms. For instance, it would be considered inappropriate to attend an in-person workshop and fall asleep but accessing an online workshop from home can create a hybrid 'setting' where certain home-based behaviours become more acceptable. This changes workshop norms in ways which makes this more accessible to those with mental or physical issues that make engaging fully more difficult.

The notion of more or less digital helpfully frames how Angela was able to remain connected, while resting. The 'screen' can be considered to operate as the interface at which the 'more' digital online workshop connects with the 'less' digital space of Angela's home—in such a way that facilitates a connection and flow of affect (e.g. positive feeling of connection and participation) but without either being subsumed within the other. Had the workshop taken place in person (as it would pre-COVID-19), the absence of feelings of safety and security the home space provides would have acted as an obstacle to Angela attending the workshop. The 'touching' of online and in-person via the interface of the screen facilitated an experience for Angela of being part of both. This can be conceptualised as a form of 'minimal presence', which is nevertheless felt to be valuable. A related form of 'muted' engagement has also emerged through engaging via digital platforms, and was raised in one of the second project workshops:

> ***Rachel (Workshop Facilitator)*:** It's interesting, because Hannah, I can see in the chat there that you've put you're going to have to get used to not being able to use the mute button in real life"
> ***Hannah*:** "this feels a lot safer because you can turn your video off, you can mute yourself, and there's a lot of things that make it feel safe"
>
> (Peer Support Together)

These extracts shine a spotlight on a feature of online video meetings that has become increasingly familiar since the acceleration of video calling brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. The 'mute button' is a central feature of online meetings—demonstrated by the common mishap

of forgetting to unmute when talking ('you're on mute'). In the online groups, this can facilitate a form of minimal presence—where one can be seen to be partaking in a video call but doing so passively. This can become a tactic for being present in online meetings without feeling as if the same level of engagement is required as in-person meetings. The quote above highlights how the realisation that one cannot attend in-person meetings in 'muted form' is one part of the anticipation of life post-lockdown/s. Muted presence does not necessarily have to be activated—but the knowledge that 'you can turn your video off, you can mute yourself' is valued—it can feel like a less pressured mode of engagement, without losing connection completely. This is important for an ongoing sense of connection, as the knowledge once can 'minimally attend' if needed is reassuring when anticipating future workshops. The key here is that although 'muted presence' is minimal, it is still considered of value. The next section highlights how the feelings elicited by connection online and home atmospheres can spread into other areas of people's lives, which demonstrates a broader reach.

User design of future support

The final activity of the second project workshop was to develop some 'recipe cards' for user design of the operation of future community assets. These tended to focus on the specific groups the participants attended, but key insight was gained in terms of how the future was being anticipated:

> Aleena (Workshop 2) "The method is basically combine the administrators and inspiring artists in weekly/daily challenges. Add the seasoning, being the inspiration and controversy in small amounts, add a tablespoon of inclusivity and diversity. Allow it to rise, become something. Make sure that the final cake or pie is proportionally cut up. So yeah, 60% goes to individuals at home. 30% can be enjoyed on a Zoom chat. And the last 10% can be cut up into small canapé pieces to give out at a social event at the end of the journey".
>
> (Creative Communities)

Future post-COVID-19 lockdown services are imagined in a specific way here. The key is retaining online dimensions that have been so important during the pandemic. A hybrid service is imagined (in this case with specific reference to Creative Communities), which would incorporate a collective engagement in artistic challenges by 'administrators and inspiring artists'. The task of imagining future community assets in the form of recipe cards was valuable as it allowed participants to visualise services in terms of defined entities that can be proportioned accordingly. Aleena presents her recipe card as a 'cake or pie', which acts as a visual metaphor of a service that is 'cut up' into 60% focussed on individuals in their home environment, 30% engaged with online and 10% remaining for a 'final' social event that marks the completion of a given artistic challenge. The hybridity is valued as it facilitates online and in-person engagement—a 'more or less digital' functionality is desired. The value of hybridity is also seen in the following extract:

> Hannah (Workshop 2) "I've put I'd like 75% online and 25% face to face. Because mostly I want online because online is accessible 24/7 wherever I am, I've got it on my phone. But then I want a bit of face to face because I want to be out in the world, I want to meet people and do things, despite my anxiety about doing it, I know that

> I kind of need to do it. And part of being human, as I said in the chat earlier, is that we all need that human contact, no matter how little it is, but it's just got to be at our own pace. So that's my little recipe".
>
> (Peer Support Together)

This extract very much speaks to the feeling at the time of the workshop, which was shortly before a lessening of legal COVID-19 restrictions. Here, future community assets, whether they are creative arts groups, or something else, are desired that offer multiple forms of engagement, including online and in-person. The latter is included, despite it being something that Hannah can feel anxious about. One value of a hybrid approach is that it delivers a level of temporal flexibility (as was seen earlier), enabling people to 'work at our own pace'. This temporal flexibility was significant when anticipating how future community groups might work. Indeed, part of this is about managing one's concerns in the present, for example, evaluating how one might cope in the future, as well as imagining oneself actually engaged with groups and services post COVID-19 lockdowns.

DISCUSSION

COVID-19 has catalysed the use of digital forms of support. Arts and peer support communities are well known to be of therapeutic benefit, but questions remain as to whether such benefits translate into digital environments. The findings from this study demonstrate that benefits can translate into digital engagement, but in transformed ways. New forms of support are created that operate differently to 'in-person' community assets. The findings align with existing research on the value of digital forms of mental health support (e.g. online peer support communities) and in-person arts and creative assets (Fancourt, 2017; Tucker & Goodings, 2017; Tucker & Lavis, 2019). The original contribution of the current article is the insight the findings provide regarding the context and setting of engaging with digital community assets, which broadens existing knowledge that concentrates solely on the operation of digital platforms themselves, ignoring the settings of use. Digital community assets are used by people in their everyday spaces, which during COVID-19 lockdowns was primarily people's homes. The impact of engaging with digital community assets depends on both the nature of the activity the platform facilitates (e.g. arts, peer support) and the setting of engagement. The findings demonstrated how engagement depends on feelings of comfort and safety that digital engagement facilitates. For instance, the 'screen' in an online workshop provides a distance 'behind' which participants could 'hide' their artwork, thereby reducing the potential to feel embarrassed presenting it to other participants deemed to be more proficient artists. Digital community assets can therefore increase inclusivity by facilitating access in ways that make participation feel safe and secure. This was also the case in terms of supporting engagement for those suffering from anxiety for whom attending in person feels to intimidating and anxiety provoking.

Our findings identify though that increased inclusivity comes as at a cost of strength of support and intimacy, for example, relationships developed via digital engagement can feel less intimate than those maintained in person. This is a key finding, which is important to consider when designing and delivering future community assets. One of the aspects of digital engagement that can lead to diluted forms of intimacy is the facility for muted and minimal presence, which specifically relates to digital community assets operating via video calls. Muted and minimal presence constitutes a broader range of level of engagement facilitated by digital platforms.

Our findings demonstrated the value of feeling present, but in a more distant way than would be possible if attending in-person. This can lead to weaker ties being developed with other users but can deliver a feeling of engagement that is beneficial and is potentially 'better than nothing'—with no engagement a real possibility if digital engagement was not possible. This is important as it helps to overcome binary thinking that simply compares 'digital' versus 'in person'. It is not a question of which is better or worse, but rather about understanding their inter-relatedness. This is a research priority identified in digital health literature (Lupton, 2018), which the current article provides valuable insight and expands to include digital mental health. It also adds to growing literature on the 'digitised home environment' (Watson et al., 2021).

COVID-19 provided a unique spotlight on digital engagement with arts and peer support communities through accelerating the use of digital platforms. Furthermore, it provided a test bed for focussing on the settings within which people engage with digital community assets. This has been very important in terms of emphasising the need to broaden the unit of analysis when researching digital forms of mental health support to incorporate setting and location, along with functionality and user experience. As COVID-19 related restrictions on movement have lessened, we know that settings of use will broaden to include the range of spaces through which people move on a daily basis (e.g. workplaces, transport, and leisure). Understanding how this broader range of settings shapes engagement with digital community assets is an important current and future research priority. The concept of 'more or less digital' is valuable for capturing a non-binary and non-determinist approach to understanding digital engagement with community support. Focus is often on the digital forms of support themselves, assessed in a vacuum that does not capture settings of use. People's digital engagement is always within a setting, which shapes experience and activity. To develop holistic knowledge of the impact of digital community assets, research needs to incorporate settings of use. This is vital for designing future digital community assets.

CONCLUSION

The push to digital mental health will continue. The key to this movement is to understand how support is transformed when delivered via digital platforms. This article has provided significant insight regarding the impacts of digital engagement with peer support and creative arts groups. Digital access was important in many ways, particularly during COVID-19 lockdowns. Digital community assets provided invaluable peer support at a time when many were feeling isolated. However, support does not transition wholesale when operating via digital platforms. Support is re-configured, providing new forms of spatial and temporal experience through transforming existing rhythms of support and experiences of everyday environments. It is vital to expand the unit of analysis beyond platforms themselves to include settings of use, and the concept of 'more or less digital' was of significant theoretical benefit in this article in framing a *continuum of digitality*. The findings identified hybrid forms of support as beneficial because they can facilitate greater inclusivity in terms of access and engagement, digital engagement for those for whom in-person participation can be difficult (e.g. due to anxiety) and flexible opportunities for in-person access to provide the strength of empathic connection that face-to-face support can bring. We recommend that community assets continue to be offered in hybrid ways, but with a full understanding of how support changes through digital engagement. There is a need for a specificity of understanding across the wide range of community assets of what kinds of 'more or less digital' environments work for different groups. This can significantly increase

the success of future community assets to support mental health. Finally, while this article has focussed on community assets, we argue that the findings are relevant to other forms of mental health support, for example, formal health services, in terms of their current and future provision of support digitally.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Ian Tucker: Conceptualization (lead); Formal analysis (equal); Funding acquisition (lead); Writing—original draft (lead). **Katherine Easton**: Formal analysis (equal); Writing—review & editing (lead). **Rebecca Prestwood**: Formal analysis (equal); Investigation (lead).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the three partner organisations who supported participant recruitment, Eve Loren (Workshop Facilitator), Li Williams (Visual Artist), Jacob Diggle (Mind) and Chris Rolls (64 Million Artists)—who provided valuable insight in the planning of the project and to participants of the MARCH Network Digital Community Assets Sandpit in March 2020.

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: The author(s) received funding from the UKRI MARCH Network+ to support this research (www.marchnetwork.org).

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Authors elect to not share data. The ethical approval for this project did not include informed consent for data to be made available on a public repository. This is because it contains audio and video recordings of workshops and interviews with participants that include sight of their homes.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This project received approval from the University of East London's Research Ethics Committee.

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How to cite this article: Tucker, I., Easton, K., & Prestwood, R. (2023). Digital community assets: Investigating the impact of online engagement with arts and peer support groups on mental health during COVID-19. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, *45*(3), 666–683. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.13620