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Repairing online spaces for “safe” outreach with older adults

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ABSTRACT

Despite the widely recognized importance in the museum sector of cultivating safe, welcoming spaces for projects that work towards social change, few studies consider how feelings of safety can be cultivated online. To provide insight for future museum practices, this study focuses on a series of collaborative sessions facilitated by a museum outreach institution and a social enterprise to provide online engagement activities for older adults during COVID-19. Employing a social media ethnography, this study reveals how staff can create feelings of safety online through repair processes that work around, with, and against the unethical and contradictory bounds of online infrastructures.

KEYWORDS

Older adults; COVID-19; safe spaces; repair; infrastructure; museum

Introduction

The need to cultivate safe welcoming spaces online for participants who are at risk of social exclusion is a timely issue in the museum sector. With the onset of COVID-19, older adults became at high risk for catching the deadly disease and consequently, many chose to reduce their social contacts and thus, faced the negative effects of loneliness (Fryer, 2020). Cultural heritage and health organizations were challenged to create new virtual ways of engaging these users which require navigating issues of access, digital literacies, unethical business models of online platforms, and the focus of this paper – feelings of safety in online outreach sessions (Lo Presti, 2021). Drawing on a series of online discos for older adults facilitated by an outreach institution – the Open Museum (Glasgow) – and a social enterprise during COVID-19, this paper argues that staff can create safe spaces for participants through practices of repair that navigate and draw together different social relations and technical affordances.

Safe spaces within which participants can enter and leave “without feeling threatened in any way” (Hartig, 2018, n.p.) and feel comfortable enough to share and connect, have long been valued in museum outreach and participatory initiatives (e.g. Museopunks, 2018). How safe spaces can be created using online platforms within the context of museum outreach, despite an increased need for these spaces during COVID-19, has remained relatively unclear (Wong, 2012). However, previous research has highlighted the complexity and messiness of “safety” in relation to the intersecting social and technical

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structures that constitute outreach spaces. Silverman (2010), echoing others, suggests that safety within participation and outreach, tend to be associated with the museum as a “relatively safe, trustworthy, respected, and even esteemed environment” (p. 145), though this perspective is fraught with contradictory experiences of marginalized individuals and groups (Chynoweth et al., 2020; Ng et al., 2017). In analog outreach sessions that call for the active engagement of participants, Morse (2020) observes that museums are not inherently “non-stigmatizing” but rather, staff cultivate feelings of safety by creating a welcoming social atmosphere within which participants can express themselves without fear of reprisal and feel valued.

Social media and online communication platforms add another layer to this consideration of “safety” as it is widely recognized that these platforms can act as a double-edged sword when it comes to progressing social initiatives, perpetuating both dystopian and utopian perspectives (Geismar, 2018). This is due, on the one hand, to the social web’s negative dimensions associated with its foundation on a corporate monopoly of data mining, algorithms that may perpetuate racism and abuse, and divisions in access (McIlwain, 2017). On the other hand, the social web has been idealized due to its positive affordances in enabling marginalized users to connect with like-minded people, trying out different identities, and escaping to a safe haven (Schmitz et al., 2020). Thus, social media and online communication platforms which are not necessarily ready-made for outreach add further complexity to the work of museum staff attempting to create safe spaces for their participants.

Building on this understanding of safety and recent museum literature that positions museum staff in active “design” roles (Dziekan & Proctor, 2018), this paper reveals how staff might actively construct the conditions that enable feelings of safety in online outreach sessions. To do so, I employ a social media ethnography, paying close attention to staff practices across online platforms in the creation of a series of virtual discos for older adults during COVID-19. As Dindler (2014) points out, increasingly, studies on museum technology are no longer focused on one “tech,” interface, or digital object but rather on the interrelations or connections between them. As recently expanded upon by other cultural heritage researchers (e.g. Galani & Kidd, 2020), these interrelations include both the social aspects such as museum practice and the interaction with users, and their entanglement with the technological or material aspects such as platform affordances (here, understood as the technical characteristics of social media platforms that encompass both limits and potentials for use)¹ and museum objects.

To understand these socio-technical relations and how staff create safe spaces online, I apply an infrastructural lens (Erickson & Sawyer, 2019) underpinned by a perspective of repair (Nemer & Chirumamilla, 2019). This frame, which is described further in the following sections, highlights how staff repair online spaces which can be perceived as unsafe, pulling together social and technical facets to create a safe environment for their participants to share and connect. An infrastructural lens, according to Erickson and Sawyer (2019), positions technologies, social practices, policies, and norms as networks of relations that can sustain everyday work, in this case, outreach. Complimenting this lens, a perspective of repair enables the researcher to be attuned to how staff engage with infrastructural conditions – including social and or technical facets associated with online platforms that are not always optimal for everyday life or outreach work, and how staff manage them on a “contingent” and “ongoing basis” (Nemer & Chirumamilla, 2019, p. 221).

By drawing on observations of the Open Museum and their partner organization's practices, I argue that facilitators can draw together different social and technical structures of online platforms into (re)combinations, working around, against, and expanding them, to create feelings of safety and comfort for their participants. In the following analysis, this is observable through three processes of repair, namely "planting seeds," "opening and closing boundaries," and "catering to user interests and needs." These processes and the resulting user experiences provide important insights for other cultural heritage organizations working to "repair" existing online platforms to create a sense of safety for their participants to share and connect.

The paper is split into a brief literature review that discusses safety online, drawing on studies within and outside of the cultural heritage sector that are concerned with social connections amongst people at risk of social exclusion. In turn, due to safe spaces being a messy and relational concept at the intersection of different social and technical facets, I justify the need for an infrastructural lens underpinned by a perspective of repair. Following this justification, I outline the methods used, and delve into the analysis – which describes the three processes of repair observed, providing a foundation for the discussion on how staff practices can inform understanding of technology in outreach, museum practices, and user engagement. Finally, the paper concludes with some key takeaways for future museum outreach work and research.

Safe spaces at the intersection of social and technical structures

As some academics have pointed out, feelings of safety are fluid, dynamic, and importantly, are dependent on the technical and social structures that intersect and constitute a space, and what this space enables users to do (Brownlie, 2018; Clark-Parsons, 2017). As discussed in this section and highlighted through the analysis, feelings of safety are impacted by the social relations in a space which are entangled with the technical affordances of online platforms. Clark-Parsons (2017) points out that safe spaces for marginalized users can take on different forms. For example, this might be an arena within which alternative discourse and identities can be cultivated. This speaks in similar ways to safety as described in association with museum participatory initiatives, albeit in analog venues – for instance, as non-stigmatizing environments that enable participants at risk of social exclusion feel that their perspectives are valued (Morse, 2020; Parsa et al., 2010). These perspectives suggest that for participants to feel valued and share without fear of reprisal, staff must consider social relations and how those included in the space are expected to respond.

As suggested by Morse (2020), museum professionals as part of these social relations can create welcomeness and a sense of safety by listening, being friendly, and valuing user contributions. Similarly, in Brownlie's (2018) study on expressing emotional distress on Twitter, users' ability to express and share is based on feelings of trust in their existing online relationships and listeners, although this was intertwined with their perception of a "close-knit" group of users. Further, in museum settings, the ability of participants to connect relates not only to who is present and how they are expected to respond, but also to the presence of material ice-breakers or social objects – museum collections (Dodd & Jones, 2014; Simon, 2010). Museum collections in analog contexts are perceived as contributing to comfortable environments

for social connections by taking pressure off older participants to prompt discussion (Dodd & Jones, 2014).

These perspectives highlight that safe spaces are connected to social relations, namely, who is included in the space and participants' comfort level in being able to share and connect with one another. These social relations, however, are potentially entangled with the more technical affordances of social media platforms. Different social media platforms, such as Facebook groups, pages, Messenger, and other platform affordances can demarcate boundaries associated with who is included or excluded in a "space" and simultaneously, enable or hinder users to cultivate social connections. For instance, social media as a semi-public space and as connected to a broad and sometimes anonymous public can make it both a challenging platform for safety and a safe haven for individuals and communities who may be considered marginalized to connect with similar users (Borkert et al., 2018; Patterson & Leurs, 2019; Schmitz et al., 2020; Wei & Gao, 2017).

Further, online spaces and their relation to feelings of safety may also be impacted by fear or discomfort associated with using new technologies and associated digital literacies. As Helsper (2017) suggests, digital inequality is a complex multi-faceted concept, and adults, although not in any way a homogenous group, often have different communication, emotional and cognitive needs and abilities (Pisoni, 2020). This brings us to two important facets of safety online, firstly, it is social – it is about relationships, trust, and the response of other users and secondly, it is also shaped by the technical affordances of social media and online platforms.

Previous research has tended to focus on questions of digital literacies and user benefits rather than feelings of safety. However, their findings are relevant as they suggest that museum staff take on an active role, leveraging social and technical or material structures to cultivate social connections and the wellbeing of their participants (Fryer, 2020; Lo Presti, 2021; Pisoni, 2020). Similarly, in relation to the social web, museum staff have been called on to be social curators (Stuedahl, 2018), programmers (Dziekan & Proctor, 2018), and hosts and facilitators (Spruce & Leaf, 2017), which draws attention to their role in creating the conditions for user engagement online. Hull and Scott (2013) take this perspective on the active role of museum staff one step further by suggesting they create whole new interfaces to engage users. Comparatively, intervening in existing structures to create feelings of safety, as I argue in this paper, require processes of repair that are constantly engaging with existing conditions associated with social media by working with and against the structures that staff have on hand or available to use (Nemer & Chirumamilla, 2019).

Creating safe spaces online through processes of "repair"

Due to the relational nature of safety and its positioning at the intersection of various social and technical facets, in this paper, I apply an infrastructural lens grounded in a perspective of repair. As Erickson and Sawyer (2019) suggest, infrastructures can be created through every day processes of drawing together social and technical affordances to create ad-hoc arrangements that sustain everyday work. Thus, an infrastructural lens in opposition to idealizing a single technology allows the exploration of how different technologies, social practices, policies, and norms form a network of relations that can sustain everyday outreach work. Similarly, repair serves as a call "... to see technologies not as

dazzling sparks that shoot off into the lived world, but as fragile achievements constantly needing repair” (Gillespie et al., 2014, pp. 15-16). Building off the work of Nemer and Chirumamilla (2019), I understand “repair” as practices of “sustained encounters” with infrastructural conditions such as those associated with online platforms that are not always optimal for everyday life – or outreach work – and are managed on a “contingent” and “ongoing basis” (p. 221).

Considering repair through an infrastructural lens draws attention to ongoing staff processes of working with, around, and against existing social and technical structures to repair online spaces which, simultaneously, can create ad-hoc infrastructures that enable participants to feel welcome and safe (Nemer & Chirumamilla, 2019). As discussed in the following analysis, safety in this specific case is connected to the creation of boundaries that demarcate who is included or excluded in the space, social connections, and the ability of staff to be flexible and adapt to changing user interests and needs. Cultivating these aspects of safety requires staff to draw on technical affordances but also social structures during online sessions, subsequently enabling social connections. In the following analysis, I identify three processes of “repair” and the associated structures that staff worked with and against for this project and how these processes enabled users’ comfort and willingness to connect online: this includes “planting seeds,” “opening and closing boundaries,” and “catering to user interests and needs.”

Methodology

This paper stems from a small part of my thesis research, and as such, is a snippet of a longer research placement that took place from September 2019 to September 2020 at a museum outreach institution – the Open Museum (Glasgow) – and across its social media platforms. The online or “virtual” disco outreach sessions which are the focus of this paper, took place during my fieldwork in Glasgow in the context of several COVID-19 lockdowns from March 2020 to September 2020. Prior to the pandemic these discos had taken place in a local pub but were moved online as of April 2022, and are still ongoing. The discos were created and headed by a social enterprise organization who partnered with the Open Museum, among other institutions, to facilitate them before and during the pandemic. The online discos typically last about an hour, with 15 min for check-in, 15–20 min for a museum or other activity, and then dancing to music shared through video chats. The Open Museum was originally chosen for my thesis research as they are working at the forefront of social inclusion and participatory initiatives, taking collections out to different community groups to achieve social interests and satisfy social needs. While my thesis research investigates the intersection between museum social media practices and social inclusion work, during COVID-19 the need to understand how staff can cultivate feelings of comfort and safety online for their users became paramount, and a significant concern of staff at my field site. As such, this paper addresses two central questions:

- (1) What aspects of the online discos enable users to feel comfortable and safe in connecting with their peers?
- (2) How do staff from the museum and social enterprise attempt to create a sense of safety in online spaces to enable users to connect with their peers?

A social media ethnography allowed the pursuit of these questions as it aimed to understand practices in relation to the technical and social context of social media, crossing different online platforms and offline contexts (Postill & Pink, 2012). It moved the study of technology away from perceptions of it as a finished piece, to instead, an ongoing process entangled with various structures. This method, through close attention to practice, enabled the investigation of the infrastructural conditions that supported participants' feelings of safety online and the resulting ability of participants to connect with one another. The social media ethnography entailed participant observations of staff, analysis of session materials, personal reflections of the researcher, and semi-structured interviews with museum staff, the social enterprise facilitator, and five participants.

Semi-structured interviews with participants aimed to further understand their experiences within the discos, and in terms of staff, their motivation and reasoning behind different practices in facilitating the online discos. Ethics approval for this study was reviewed by the University of Glasgow College of Arts Ethics Committee, and staff and interviewees were informed of the research project, its purposes, and the use and storage of their data using a detailed information sheet, giving them a chance to reflect and ask questions prior to giving consent. The quotes used in the following analysis are anonymized personal reflections from staff and participants. The diverse forms of data from this study were analyzed and coded in MAXQDA analysis software using thematic analysis as proposed by Vaismoradi et al. (2016) which required multiple iterations of coding until broader themes across the data could be formed. The following analysis critically examines the social and technical structures that staff leveraged and worked against to cultivate users' feelings of safety in taking part in the sessions.

Analysis

"Planting seeds"

According to theorists who study infrastructures, infrastructures also have a social component or can themselves be sustained by whole other "social" infrastructures (Dindler, 2014). This puts different forms of technology squarely in social processes and relations, and as discussed in this section, these social relations can be pivotal in creating feelings of safety online. In suddenly switching the discos from offline to online platforms due to COVID-19, the head disco facilitator initially encountered some inertia on the part of participants. They attributed users' inertia in engaging with online platforms as due to their own perceived digital literacies and ability to join the online sessions. As the facilitator commented, "lots of hesitancy, there still are! There's a whole load of people who have tablets and things but there is no way they are doing video conferencing." As one participant admitted, "it's hard to – to sometimes jump onto something that you have [technologies] which is the unknown." Indeed, in the first few weeks of the virtual disco sessions there was a concern, or perhaps even some anxiety on the part of the facilitator and museum staff regarding how many participants would attend and if it was worth continuing the sessions, resulting in the recording of attendance numbers.

To counter user inertia, the facilitator emphasized the importance of "planting seeds," a social process of creating feelings of safety and comfort in using video chats by bolstering users' courage and awareness of the social benefits of attending. The facilitator suggested

that “... it’s raising their potential and thinking oh I can actually do this.” In this process, the facilitator used an analogy of a disco session that took place offline in a local pub. She stated,

We noticed that in the disco anyways for example, we had a gentleman at our real life disco and he came in like every week, for like three months and everyone tried to get him up – “oh come on over let’s have a wee dance” and he was like “no, no, no” then all of sudden out of the blue, out of nowhere he stood up and started dancing, what a dancer!

Here, the facilitator suggests that the willingness of the gentleman to join in on the dancing relied on letting him take his own time while enabling his awareness of the experiences of his peers. As evident in this quote, the gentleman’s engagement and awareness of his peers’ experiences relied on the encouragement of other attendees. Similarly, regarding the online disco sessions, enabling users to overcome inertia involved peers as “initiators” to provide encouragement to potential participants and expose the social benefits of overcoming discomfort in using and joining the video platforms. To do so, this involved using a range of online platforms for the disco program, gaining exposure, and connecting existing users and potential participants. For instance, the organization ran a Facebook and Twitter page, but also a Facebook Messenger and a WhatsApp chat. As the facilitator observed, these platforms and the peer-to-peer support they enabled were essential in providing a foundation for users to feel safe and motivated to join the online dance sessions:

They [participants] are supporting each other through the chat and then they are also inspiring people who are not on video conferencing to say listen you know “if we can do it, you can do it and you got nothing to lose during lockdown” ...

The facilitator also emphasized that using platforms such as Facebook allowed people to observe from the background and engage with posts, until they felt comfortable with taking a step further: “Facebook has been really good for participants and it’s again ‘planting the seeds’ stage, and in the background just observing, they don’t need to take part – they can take part in any level [or] way they wish, by liking.” Accordingly, participants describe how overcoming the inertia in using video chat platforms was initiated by the perceived benefits of the discos. As several disco interviewees described, the biggest benefit and motivating factor in joining the discos was the human and social connection it enabled: “Because I’m not near to my family ... So you just have to get on with your day to day living and [the discos] has been a lifesaver in that.” Another participant emphasized the value in overcoming their inertia, “[i]t’s frightening, it’s scary to take that wee step but then if you take that wee step – it’s the best thing.” Similarly, one participant described her gratitude in being brave to join the online sessions comparing it to the experiences of other older adults who might not challenge these fears:

Just, I mean, I’ve seen adverts on TV about older people. I don’t know if you’ve seen this advert, and it’s a man and a lady and they’re so lonely because they don’t have this like [disco programme] we’ve got, you know, and it was my sister’s birthday on Tuesday. That was her 70th. And I think she’s too scared to even try the internet or anything ... So, I feel very, very lucky, very blessed.

As another user suggested in joining the disco, “[w]ell it’s only since that [facilitator] put it on for us that I’ve connected through these things [social media platforms], otherwise, I

don't think I would have bothered." Thus, planting the seeds was a process of enabling user bravery and confidence in participants' ability to use these platforms and exposure to the potential social benefits. Part of this process of planting seeds was thus, intricately intertwined with the experiences and encouragement of participants' peers and their ability to remain connected with the group and the organization until they were confident to join the video chats. As the facilitator explained, "... the seeds might take a long time to mature." As discussed in the following section, motivating participants to feel comfortable joining the discos using chat-based technology was, as touched upon here, intricately intertwined with the facilitators' ability to leverage not only social relations but also technical affordances of online platforms, opening-up and closing boundaries around spaces of engagement.

Closing and opening boundaries

Creating feelings of safety in terms, of enabling first, users' confidence in the use of video chat platforms and second, their willingness to share and connect with each other was reliant on creating boundaries between who could join where and when, but also boundaries demarcating different disco activities. As discussed in the previous section, the facilitator helped plant seeds of motivation for users to join the disco sessions and leveraged the organization's public Facebook and Twitter pages, and chat functions, to enable potential participants to feel supported by their peers and stay in contact with the organization until they were comfortable to fully join the live virtual discos. Additionally, creating a sense of safety during the disco sessions was associated by attendees with the sessions' more private nature, allowing the creation of a "close-knit" group to form through the repetition of users. While anyone over 50 years old could join the discos, interested users had to email the organization, and the sessions were held using more private affordances of online platforms such as the video chat functions of Facebook or WhatsApp, Skype, and Zoom.

As a result of drawing on the more private affordances, a semi-private group with repeat users that could link in almost every day was created. Participants suggested that this privacy cultivated a sense of trust in who was present at the discos. The facilitator similarly explained:

Yeah, certainly we've had a few people come out of no-where and they've really embraced it and the bond seems quite strong between them. That's just because we are linking in almost every day – a lot of people are on every day; we've got core people on or every other day.

This comfort or trust was pivotal during the challenging time of COVID-19 which was associated with the need to share negative feelings. As one participant recounted, "[p]eople are opening up a wee bit about their true feelings in there and you know it will not go any further. And it's like a safe haven for people." While another explained echoing others, "[t]here has been a caring attitude from most members, and it has been uplifting when occasionally I have felt down ... It has felt like a safe environment for sharing thoughts." Both participants suggest that the space cultivated by the disco was associated with the potential to share, as a safe "space" or "haven" with trust in attendees' responses that it will not "go further." As such, this sense of safety was founded both on a social network of repeat participants and the affordances of the

platforms used to enable a sense of privacy, creating a boundary from a broader ambiguous public.

However, the ability to share and connect was enabled not only by this semi-private space but also by the demarcation of time during the sessions for sharing, which enabled participants to connect and value other participants' perspectives and in turn, feel valued. During each session, the first 15 min were used for a round of "checking in" and to see how each participant was doing, giving them a chance to hear and share with each other. After the check-ins, the museum or other partner organizations facilitated more active informal sessions around collections or other activities. As a participant described,

When we get together at first, it's fun listening to other people's stories, what's happened in their day – some are quite funny and some are quite boring as mine can be too, I suppose. And just listening to people's everyday happenings like I say, and I enjoy telling, if I've had anything interesting that day, I like to tell them too, I like to try and give them a wee laugh.

As this participant recounts, they valued the time to check-in, looking forward to hearing about other participants' days but also being valued by bringing cheer and joy to their peers. As another participant suggested, "it just gets you in touch with people you know, you are just talking to people you're in communication" and for some, the check-in was a significant highlight.

After the check-in, there was typically an activity, often facilitated in partnership with museum staff. In this part of the disco sessions, museum staff and volunteers share images of objects, sometimes with prompts, sounds, or an invitation to take an action. While museum objects in analog contexts have been valued for enabling a sense of comfort in sharing and thus, connections across participants, in this case, they were seen to bring participants together in novel ways. In doing so, the objects and paintings accompanied by prompts such as "imagine you are in this seascape," and/or "has anyone owned one of these?" inspired participants to share their memories and even some home objects related to such topics as travel or nutrition.

One participant shared their fascination during an interview:

I'm just amazed I mean I think you can paint, and I think you can sing, I think it's a natural thing and it just amazes me, I can hardly draw a straight line, so it just amazes me and some of the things are just so old!

The facilitator, in turn, suggested that having the collections, reminiscence, and quizzes/prompts around the collections kept bringing participants together, keeping the conversation going:

... it makes such a difference – a picture tells thousand stories as you know. It also keeps it dynamic and interesting; people are tuning in more, they're focused more. Sometimes you can talk forever, and things are not being processed so if it is a visual thing – it brings everyone to focus on that one thing – with their thoughts.

This was echoed by the museum staff who argued that collaborations between the museum and other partners kept users motivated to engage with each other:

So, I think that's one of the things that is coming back, is that people are quite grateful that they're not, that they are getting someone else coming in to facilitate that to keep it fresh and interesting. So, people aren't getting bored, and people keep coming back and engaging.

Thus, on the one hand, the boundaries of the discos as somewhat private enabled users to feel safe and trust their peers who were repeat users. On the other hand, boundaries in terms of demarcating time for acts of sharing both as “check-in” processes and as prompted by museum staff and other partnerships, motivated users to share, creating a sense of connection and of being all in the same boat. Therefore, staff created boundaries by pulling on the private affordances of the social web to enable a sense of trust in repeat users, while also demarcating time for different forms of sharing and connection. Furthermore, the facilitator also leveraged the public aspects of social media platforms to keep potential participants connected/supported. However, beyond planting seeds and opening and closing boundaries, the importance of catering to user interests and needs during the discos was paramount to maintaining the purpose and function of the safe spaces – the ability of users to connect.

Catering to user needs and interests

According to Karasti and Baker (2004), it is important to consider the key elements that enable the “designing of infrastructures” or “infrastructuring” to maintain work practices. Similarly, Erickson and Sawyer (2019) argue that the ability to design infrastructures or, “[t]he ability to engage in infrastructuring is the ability to engage in thinking infrastructures into action” (p. 325). Despite these academics’ focus on design, the key factors that enable infrastructuring have relevance for how staff in this study committed to processes of repair by intervening in different aspects of existing socio-technological structures associated with social platforms. In doing so, museum staff and the partner organization demonstrate how these key elements are important for maintaining and repairing online platforms to create “safe” spaces. In particular, Karasti and Baker (2004) suggest that the key to creating infrastructures is to blur the “borders between use and design” which might involve constant “ongoing changes, ease of maintenance, and tailoring of flexible and adaptable systems” (p. 9). Therefore, creating useful infrastructures is a process that is centered on the needs of intended users and must be open to assessment, flexibility, and adaptability.

While staff in this study “open and closed boundaries” and “planted seeds” of motivation by drawing on different affordances of the socio-technical structures on hand, they were also responsive to changing participant interests and needs. For example, this was reflected in the partner organization and museum staff’s willingness to change platforms and alter their activities. As the discos progressed, different video chat-based platforms were tried out for their accessibility and usability by participants, including WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Zoom, and Skype. As the partner organization facilitator commented on the disco:

There has been the alternative of having WhatsApp, but then not everybody uses WhatsApp, so everybody’s got their own individual likes and dislikes and we as a service have to be flexible towards that and have a range of different things going, just to keep the communication and the connectivity.

From this quote, we see the facilitator emphasizing the importance of flexibility in offering different ways for users to feel confident and comfortable to engage. Similarly, this approach was also reflected in the content and activities of the disco sessions. For instance, the museum staff described the process of creating the sessions as:

... doing a couple pilots and then going back to [the facilitator], going is this working, what's working, what's not working? [...] It's not us developing stuff and putting it out there and hoping people will engage, it is about talking to people asking what do you want from us, what can we do for you?

This was evident by staff's reactivity to users' situations, with museum staff altering the activities offered, in accordance with timely discussions such as keeping active in lockdown and "arm-chair traveling." As a result, the discos helped challenge feelings of isolation, as one participant explained, "[w]ell, it just seemed like good fun and good exercise as well, you know, and it stopped me feeling so isolated because I live alone, and it's been really, really, good." Thus, by taking on an adaptive approach in their service to participants, staff attempted to constantly repair spaces for participants in which they felt comfortable and motivated to connect with each other.

Discussion

According to Nemer and Chirumamilla (2019), repair refers to sustained encounters with infrastructures and associated practices which are provisional, responsive, and "ongoing" (p. 221). They suggest that these practices are not necessarily improving existing infrastructures but are attempts to maintain everyday life in less than optimal conditions. Similarly, while conditions of social media and online communication platforms are not inherently optimal for outreach, staff leveraged different platforms and affordances and worked around others to try and create feelings of safety for their participants. In doing so the facilitators in this study are not necessarily changing social and online platforms themselves but creating ad-hoc infrastructures by drawing on social and technical facets that intersect and surround these platforms to sustain their outreach work. As suggested through the analysis, and further discussed here, staff practices and the formation of these ad-hoc infrastructures indicate the importance of approaching online outreach by focusing not just on the platforms and technologies themselves, but how they are entangled with social relations.

In particular, staff practices highlight the importance of less active forms of user participation for overcoming inertia in the use of new technologies, consideration of who is included and excluded by leveraging public and private affordances, and finally, staff flexibility to continuously adapt. To actively create feelings of a safe or non-stigmatizing environment, staff participated in three processes of "repair." Firstly, they leveraged social networks of participants to cultivate their motivation and interest in joining the discos, secondly, the private affordances of social media and online communications platforms to sustain a "close-knit" group, and finally, they drew on a variety of platforms, activities, and museum material in response to participants' changing interests and needs. In participating in these three repair processes staff created infrastructures at the intersection of these different social and technical facets that sustained participants' feelings of safety during the discos (Erickson & Sawyer, 2019). Such practices highlight that creating feelings of safety is not only about the technical attributes of social media and online communication platforms but, building on Dindler (2014), how they are enmeshed with social relations.

Staff's practices of repair included "planting seeds of motivation" which entailed leveraging the social networks of participant "initiators" to expose to potential participants the benefits of the video chat sessions and support them in overcoming fears regarding the

use of these technologies. As pointed out by McCallie et al. (2007), feelings of safety in relation to being able to share and connect around cultural heritage are related to multiple factors, including emotional and social facets of acceptance which connections to peers can provide. However, “planting seeds” was also dependent upon the second more technical process of opening and closing the boundaries of online spaces. Opening the discos to the broader publics through public social media platforms and more private chat groups allowed potential disco participants to keep in contact with the organization and larger group until they were ready to take the next step to join the live sessions online.

This background or passive form of social contact would typically be perceived as a “less active” form of participation and perhaps less valued in museum discourse (Russo & Peacock, 2009; Wong, 2015). However, as revealed by user experiences and staff’s processes of repair, the passive connection was a significant factor in the trajectory of participants’ experiences which echoes other researchers’ observations (Adams et al., 2021) and calls for museums to value less visible forms of participation online (Dudareva, 2013; Wong, 2015). Thus, this repair practice also highlights a useful understanding of passive participation and social connections for cultivating safe spaces and user engagement online.

Further, closing boundaries in keeping the online disco video sessions as somewhat private was further entangled with social processes by allowing a routine group to form with repeat attendees. By creating closed boundaries and ultimately defining who was included and excluded, staff cultivated feelings of familiarity, comfort, and trust across participants. In addition, the process of creating boundaries within the session, by demarcating time for different activities which were focused on sharing and listening through checking-in and prompting discussion around museum collections, also motivated participants to share and further cultivate a “close-knit” group. Finally, tailoring content and the format of the disco sessions to participants’ interests and needs, was perceived as keeping-up the function of the space by maintaining participants’ comfort and engagement. Such a practice highlights the need for staff to not only commit to repair processes once, but to be continuously creative or “bricolagers” in finding “infrastructural solutions” to create and sustain safe spaces (Erickson & Sawyer, 2019, p. 324).

Thus, staff indicate the importance of being responsive to users, adapting their practices and the structures they rely upon, considering not only technical affordances but how they are entangled with social structures and not just once, but repeatedly. This ability to be flexible, responsive, and adapt by intervening in the social and technical structures of online platforms, however, as pointed out by previous studies, may require contending with other larger organizational contexts and limitations (Kist, 2021). In this way, repair processes may not only work with and against social and technical structures associated with social media and online communication platforms, but also additional facets of museum culture and governance.

Conclusion

From this study, it is clear that technologies such as social media are not inherently usable as places for outreach work. Instead, they must be tweaked through leveraging or working around existing social relations and technical affordances that surround their use, while centering on the interests and needs of intended user groups. Although the research informing this paper took place during unique circumstances, it provides insight into what factors

shape users' perceptions of safe spaces online and the active processes of staff that might contribute to feelings of comfort and safety. It places significance on considering both social relations and how they are intertwined with technical structures and in doing so, provides insight into the importance of less active participation for overcoming inertia in the use of new technologies, consideration of who is included and excluded by leveraging public and private affordances and finally, staff flexibility in order to continuously adapt, thus, enabling participants to connect. While this study mainly focused on staff's practices, future research is needed to consider from a user-centered perspective, how older adults themselves actively construct a sense of safety online to connect with others and how this feeling of safety may be intertwined with actual and perceived digital literacies.

Note

1. While I use affordances in this paper to refer to the "technical" characteristics and structures that are engrained in the design of social media platforms, affordances are also social in the sense that users' perception and needs will influence how they approach, perceive, and enact the structures of social media platforms (Orlikowski, 2000).

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