A gendered therapeutic learning landscape: Responding creatively to a pandemic

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Crafting has occupied the hands and minds of women over many centuries providing vital connections with cultural skills and with community. While the COVID-19 pandemic has isolated women in their homes, it has also provided opportunities for women to reconnect to crafting through virtual spaces. This paper draws on a thematic analysis of a focus group interview examining the experiences of regional women participating in a crafting group and identifies the ways in which they used craft to support their wellbeing. Drawing on the concept of therapeutic landscapes, the paper highlights that connection in a virtual craft group supports lifelong learning and wellbeing, brings women together in support through a community of women's practice and facilitates opportunities for producing meaningful and commemorative quilting projects This finding has implications for a society experiencing unprecedented levels of stress, mental illness and anxiety about the future.

Keywords: *crafting, therapeutic landscapes, women, COVID-19, virtual spaces, lifelong learning, wellbeing*

Introduction

Research into the relationship between leisure activities such as arts and craft activities and links to wellbeing particularly in older people has gained traction over several decades (Burt & Atkinson, 2012; Collier & Wayment, 2018; Corkhill et al., 2014; Gandolfo & Grace, 2010, Pöllänen, 2015a, 2015b; Riley et al., 2013). The association between wellbeing and craft activities points to a complex interplay of factors, such as the all-encompassing aspects of crafting, learning materials and techniques and the sense of accomplishment and recognition by others that is gained through creating objects (Gandolfo & Grace, 2010).

Several ways of conceptualizing wellbeing stemming from crafting have emerged from existing research, with Maidment and Macfarlane (2009) describing how a person "having interests and being interested in craft as a leisure activity has been described as comprising both an emotional benefit and a disposition, which creates flow-on effects to other experiences of well-being" (p. 17). For Pöllänen and Weissman-Hanski (2020), crafting as a long-term pursuit links to wellbeing through the benefits of giving meaning in people's lives.

A notion of community or collective wellbeing has been explored by researchers including Riley (2008), who reported how being a guild member cultivates a collective sense of self, which contributes to quality of life, and perceptions of health and wellbeing. Participating in a crafting group may promote engagement with a community of people who share similar characteristics and values, opening up opportunities for positive social interactions and the benefits of belonging (Riley, Corkhill & Morris, 2013). Court's (2020) research describes how valuable social connections can be forged via knitting circles: "Making friends is not necessarily easy but social knitting, as an accessible and creative activity with regular meeting times, may make it easier to do so" (p. 287). Specifically, leisure activities such as craft are positively associated with mental wellbeing in the elderly with benefits including personal growth, mastery, confidence and social connectedness as well as confidence and personal development (Burt & Atkinson, 2012).

This paper draws on the concept of therapeutic learning landscapes (Gesler, 1992) where community members come together in communities of practice to share skills, learn life skills, develop friendships and in doing so derive health and wellbeing benefits. The community space that is discussed in this paper is deliberately gendered and is located in regional Victoria. Using the concept of therapeutic landscapes as a framework, the paper examines the benefit for women of gendered community spaces and argues that therapeutic learning landscapes can be embodied in and outside of fixed physical locations.

Background

There has been a plethora of research about the importance of community based, situated informal and lifelong learning (Foley & Golding, 2014; Golding, Brown, Foley & Harvey et al., 2007; Golding, Mark & Foley, 2014) for health and wellbeing benefits. Voluntary organisations, community groups, and other informal learning settings have been shown to engage older learners, widen community participation across community activities, benefit individual health and wellbeing, alleviate loneliness, and provide enjoyment and social connections (Burt & Atkinson, 2011; Liddle, Parkinson & Sibbritt, 2013). There has also been substantial research on links between community participation and social capital (Wilson,2006). Traditionally, crafting is viewed as a leisure activity for women, without due attention to its role in their lifelong learning, career development or economic wellbeing (Malema & Naidoo, 2017).

Lifelong learning

Lifelong learning has been researched extensively since the 1970s and evokes significant debate as stakeholders contend with the evolving nature of learning across the lifespan. The recognition that lifelong learning is the development of human potential through a continuously supportive process across a lifespan (Longworth & Davies, 1996, p. 22) provides a challenge to rural communities as the population ages and social isolation which is known to be related to poor physical and mental health prevails. Learning is a continuous process for humans (Billet, 2010). It is generally accepted that lifelong learning can only take place if there is a desire and a willingness to learn and incorporates both formal and informal learning. We also know that learning is integral to our everyday lives to enable us

to carry out everyday tasks (Billet, 2010). It can occur in a multitude of locations and can be planned or unplanned or even 'incidental' (Marsick & Watkins, 1990). It is well understood that there exists a need for reflexive forms of adult education (Bowl, 2017; Walters & Waters, 2017; Bjursell, 2019) thus the need to be inclusive of opportunities to access both formal and informal learning activities in a variety of settings that are age and ability-friendly (Keating, Eales & Phillips, 2013, p. 319). Moreover, greater participation in everyday activities is linked to successful ageing and a greater sense of wellbeing (Menec, 2003).

Older people living in rural areas can be vulnerable to reduced opportunities and tend to have less access to social networks (Wedgeworth, et al. 2017) thus rendering them more vulnerable to learning barriers. Whilst it is acknowledged that learning takes place continually throughout life as a matter of survival (Billett, 2010), for some the opportunity to access learning to engage with others is hindered by a lack of self-efficacy. Sloane-Seale and Kops (2008) suggested that participation in learning activities fosters positive outcomes but hastened to draw attention to the barriers that many older people experience in accessing such activities, including dispositional barriers of low self-esteem, lack of confidence and lack of emotional support and financial and geographical issues. Such issues are exacerbated in rural areas where accessibility to activities often requires access to public transport (which is not as available in rural areas) or dependence on another person.

Learning and wellbeing

A growing body of research indicates that participation in education, both formal and informal, is associated with greater wellbeing for older adults (Hammond & Feinstein,2006; Jenkins, 2011; Aberg, 2016). Wellbeing is intrinsically connected with success for all learners and is a result of enjoyment, self-satisfaction, and a sense of being part of a greater purpose or identity. Life satisfaction and wellbeing (Tam & Chui, 2016) are key aspects for people as they age, as is the joy of learning with others (Schoultz, Öhman & Quennerstedt, 2020) and it is plausible to reason those older learners become more confident in their ability to acquire new skills and knowledge in a supportive ecosystem of learners (Narushima; 2008; Withnall, 2009). Wellbeing is an enabler of learning, it is associated with increased confidence, a greater sense of self-efficacy and a greater sense of belonging to a learning community.

Learning in communities

Involvement in a community provides a sense of social identity (Haslam et al., 2020), especially in rural areas where the process of ageing occurs within neighbourhoods and communities (Phillips, et. al, 2000). The learning environment in organised groups is attractive to older learners as it provides the bonus of a social experience as well as skill and knowledge development (Sloane-Seale & Kops, 2008). Organised community learning enables older people to interact and to develop skills that are of interest to them.

The setting in which our research interview was based, a women's community-based crafting group, can provide an important avenue for lifelong learning, that has benefits for social health, wellbeing, and learning needs (Merriam & Kee, 2015). Engagement with craft is seen to foster connections within society (Jefferies, 2016) and has been described as providing an avenue for developing personal skills as well as a sense of active citizenship (MacEachern, 2005). In their study, Maidment and MacFarlane (2009) found that women participating in a crafting group identified learning new skills as a critical aspect of their participation in such groups, and this learning was intimately connected to their own sense of wellbeing. Producing artifacts was identified as meaningful when women do crafting activities together, but the process of belonging and "… contributing to the craft group was a major source of personal support for these older women, where reciprocity, friendship, learning and empowerment were derived from being part of the collective" (Maidment & MacFarlane, 2009, p.23).

Therapeutic landscapes: A theoretical framework

Therapeutic landscapes were originally developed by drawing from theories in cultural ecology, pioneered by William Gesler in 1992. They were described as healing places "where the physical and built environments, social conditions and human perceptions combine to produce an atmosphere which is conducive to healing" (Gesler, 1992, p. 96). The concept was further developed to recognise the potential for deep relationality between people and place as a core basis of therapeutic landscapes, in response to the assumption that certain places were somehow therapeutic in and of themselves (Bell et al., 2018). In this vein, Conradson (2005) put forward the argument that therapeutic landscapes emerge through transactions between people in a broader social and environmental setting.

Therapeutic landscapes are said to include landscapes such as coastal locations, rivers, green spaces, parklands and recreation spaces. Other therapeutic landscape healing places include hospitals, health spas, clinics, community settings, and the home space. Therapeutic landscapes are also recognised to include nonphysical, symbolic, spiritual and online spaces (Bignante, 2015; Winchester & McGrath, 2017; Bell, et al.,2018). Cox et al. (2020) argue that researchers have drawn on therapeutic landscapes as a framework to reveal connections between wellness and place. The concept of therapeutic landscapes is also explored by Doughty (2013), who emphasises that therapeutic landscapes are "embodied and fluid" (p. 141) and arise through a interactivity of health and place occurring within "therapeutic geographies... [comprising] the greater landscape of walking and talking" (p. 141). In this paper, we draw on these concepts of therapeutic landscapes as a framework in order to understand the multiple and fluid ways in which engagement of, and through, community of practice spaces both virtual and face-to-face can be understood in the context of a women's crafting group in regional Victoria.

Context of the study

This study took place during the COVID-19 global pandemic and while the focus of the research was on crafting and learning, the impact of COVID-19 was reflected in the design of the research questions and in the methods of data collection. While the research team intended to conduct a face-to-face interview with the participants, the impact of COVID-19 restrictions meant that data collection occurred via virtual means.

As a research team, we acknowledge that gender does not exist on a binary and we acknowledge that people other than women engage in crafting activities. For the purposes of this research, however, we were seeking to understand the experiences of those who identify as women and their experiences and perceptions of crafting. In particular, this study seeks to uncover the interplay of personal and social processes as women pursue craft making in a group setting, including the factors which motivate them to participate. The notion of craft as gendered, with the act of crafting long-held as 'women's work' (Minahan & Cox, 2007), underscores a rich cultural history of women's crafting; and yet the world of women's craft has all too often been viewed as comprising activities that are simply "'time-fillers', frivolous, and of little intrinsic

value" (Gandolfo & Grace, 2010, p. 30). As such, the role of gender in women's crafting groups, particularly as these groups are increasingly popularised in online settings in recent years, has been viewed by some as an important aspect of a resistance movement: in essence, women's craft is moving away from its traditional setting in which it is pursued out-of-view in the privacy of the home, and into an open and shared space (either online or in public settings) as an explicit conduit to connect and learn with other women (Minahan & Cox, 2007). More recent research has also demonstrated how everyday engagement with crafting can be instrumental in the forming of a 'creative identity' for women, which in turn can promote health and the empowerment of women in a collective sense (Elisondo & Vargas, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a period of social ferment which has impacted people's lives in profound ways, and likewise, this ubiquitous contextual factor has shaped this research significantly. With older people experiencing marked levels of social isolation during the pandemic (Armitage & Nellums, 2020), the contextual basis of this study builds upon recent calls for an examination and reframing of the 'technological grey divide' as part of a focus on increasing the digital connectivity of older people during COVID-19 (Weil et al., 2021). In response to stay at home orders and social distancing restrictions which have impacted many of our day-to-day social interactions, a transition to digital platforms – nothing short of a widespread 'migration to digital life' (Weil et al., 2021, p. 644) – has occurred across society to maintain social connectedness. However, with older people utilising these technologies at disproportionately lower rates than the general population prior to the pandemic (Cosco et al., 2021), barriers to uptake have presented a huge challenge for many. Almost overnight, older individuals have faced the reality that these digital platforms are now more critical than ever, in particular for maintaining meaningful connections which may help to counter the rising tide of depression or anxiety due to increased social isolation (Newman & Zainal, 2020).

During this period, many crafting groups have transitioned to a diverse array of online formats to maintain regular connections with members; however, access for older adults within such online spaces is not necessarily a straightforward transition. It is important to understand how older people who are largely marginalised in a digital sense, may be able to successfully harness social support networks as they develop the

tools needed to actively engage with technology. Within this framing, the role of craft groups as gendered spaces is of particular interest to this study, as such groups may serve as a demonstration of networks of belonging which blend tangible and virtual learning spaces and which act as newly emerging 'models of virtual relationship' (Chatterjee & Yatnatti, 2020, p. 1395). As older people take active steps to access social learning opportunities online through avenues such as crafting groups, they may also be carving out new possibilities for critical forms of digital literacy to help them stay connected during the COVID-19 crisis and beyond.

Method

Our paper emerged from a larger mixed methods study combining a Qualtrics survey and a focus group interview of seven women aged between 50 to 70 years of age and based in regional Victoria, Australia. The current paper reports on the qualitative focus group component of the study. The focus group interview questions explored the women's participation and experiences of quilting during a COVID-19 lockdown. The focus group questions were designed to examine what motivates the women to do crafting and any benefits they experience as a consequence of crafting together. The study was also interested in examining the benefits of crafting together during the lockdown. As noted above, due to COVID-19 restrictions the focus group interview was conducted via Zoom. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the participants involved in the study.

We adopted an approach based on thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which involves searching across the data set to identify, analyse and report repeated patterns or themes (Baun & Clarke, 2006). According to Braun and Clarke, (2006), a theme is a "patterned response or meaning derived from the data that informs the research question (p.82)". The thematic analysis process was employed consisting of 6 steps: (1) Familiarising ourselves with the data, (2) Generating initial codes (3) Searching for themes (4) Reviewing themes (5) Defining and naming themes, and (6) Producing the report/manuscript (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The data was sorted manually which included "a process of sorting and defining the transcripts and defining and sorting of collected data … applicable to the research" (Glesne, 2006, p. 21). The sorting process consisted of reading and rereading the transcripts to identify re-occurring words, ideas, patterns and themes generated from the data. The transcripts were read and reread, and themes were highlighted. Within each transcript,

concepts and ideas emerged through re-occurring words, messages and meanings. Corresponding codes were used to identify themes and from this, three categories in the data were identified each with corresponding themes.

The study was approved by the Human Ethics Committee of Federation University Australia (Approval number B20-123).

Findings

As indicated, common themes which referred to important points in the study relating to participants' perceptions, beliefs and attitudes about participation in a crafting group were identified in the data (Ely et al., 1997). These themes were categorised into three themes each involving subthemes (Table 1).

Table 1: Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme
Motivation	• Isolated • Alone • Being Creative • Sharing Ideas • Mental stimulation • Common Bond
Benefits	• Social/friendship • Being connected • Like-minded
Women's Group	• Freer to speak • Likeminded • Comfortable
Commemorative Quilting	• Quilt those feelings • Memories • Traumatic times
Virtual Spaces	• Stayed close • Connection • Covid inspired craft • Learnt new technology

Motivation

Motivation was a key finding in the data. When asked about motivation of joining a craft quilting group, some women suggested motivators included the opportunity to alleviate loneliness and gave the opportunity to fill in their spare time made available to them through retirement.

For Liz feeling 'alone and isolated' was the catalyst to join the group. It happened when 'a neighbour invited me to her little sewing group ... and I found it really lonely, and I was looking for some way of getting out and doing something'. Jane explained that she was not as mobile as she once was and a consequence had to give up work so was looking for something to do that she enjoyed and to meet some women, 'I had some trouble with my hips, and I had to give up work, I was sort of forced into early retirement.'

For others like Sue, the motivation was driven through her interest in creativity. 'I guess I enjoy the creative side of things, I love seeing what other people are doing, just the ideas, the sharing of ideas, techniques, and skills and the chat that goes on alongside it.'. Similarly, Pam was motivated by the mental stimulation that craft provides, describing 'that's probably why I got started in it and probably why I'll continue to do it with groups because that's kind of the connectivity and for me it's an artistic outlet'. Karen also commented on the mental stimulation through the need for concentration and what she described as the arithmetic involved with quilting:

> *[It] engages the kind of arithmetic side of it and the abstract notion that thinking through a pattern engages you mentally. Because even though you might have chosen the colours and things, you still have to think through - in our case, patchwork, because it's American based it's inches and everything you buy is metric, so you're constantly thinking through that kind of conversion of, how big is something? that's five-foot square or three inches square.*

Benefits

Friendship was the most common response when asked about the benefits of crafting together. The importance of friendships and social connections along with the common bond and 'like mindedness' they

shared through crafting together was of significant importance to the women in the group.

Mental stimulation and the social aspect of the crafting group were described by Pam as an important mix for her. Sue described the mix of mental stimulation and socialising with her 'quilting friends' as both being beneficial to her:

> *So, there's that kind of mental occupation and then the other thing is social. I would say that my quilting friends are probably the ones who will be at my funeral and my social people that I met through work.*

Similarly, for Ann, friendships were key to her involvement in the group. For her, the combination of making friends and enjoying making something together '… benefits me greatly because I feel connected. I'm working on something that is beautiful.' Ann made it clear, however, that the friendships were the most beneficial part of being in the group:

But basically, it's the connection with the people because if we didn't connect, I'm sure the group would fail. But we've got a thing that links us. I also think, because we're all similar age stages in life, so that's another connection.

Having a common bond was mentioned by Sue as an important way to bring the women together:

> *I am probably one of the oldest people at work and yet I think there's a bit of a bond with everybody because there's a common thread through it and everybody is interested in seeing and sharing ideas and that's terrific to see the creative side coming through, that common thread.*

Women's Group

Part of the common bond spoken about by Sue was the fact that the group was all women. When asked about the group being all women and whether that was an important aspect of the group, the women all agreed that having men in the group would 'change the dynamic.'

They agreed that the group worked well because it was comprised of all women: 'it's definitely an all women group'. For Ann, being able to speak

openly about personal things was important: 'We're just freer to speak about personal things, relationships, and I guess we respect the opinion of other women'. Jane was also in agreement with the membership of the group being all women describing it as being more comfortable and being with women who were more 'likeminded'.

There was general agreement by all of the group with Jane's view and articulated by Sue who suggested that:

> *I think I agree with what you guys said too, I guess it's a likeminded-ness there, some sort of shared experience, I'm more comfortable. But it would be different, the things that you'd discuss, or the - as you said Ann, how men respond and relationships, their point of view, it's different.*

Commemorative Quilting

Several of the women mentioned the importance for them of the commemorative nature of crafting, where the act of making a quilt occurred during times of loss or trauma. This was clearly expressed by Ann when she talked about her father's funeral:

Can I just say, on that point, often if you've been stitching through a traumatic period of your life, when you pick up that quilt those feelings come back, those memories often come back, I find. You think, oh yes, I took this up for dad's funeral, this is what I was stitching.

The State of Victoria where the women were living at the time of the study had not only been challenged by the current pandemic and subsequent lockdown but had previously been impacted by the Black Summer Bushfires in 2019 and a protracted drought that impacted on regional communities across the State. For Sue, crafting and making quilts:

> *[K]ept my hands busy, particularly during the first lockdown when you really had no idea whether you'd get through it. But also, when you get through this I've got something to show for it. I don't know how many - after the big bushfires there were any number of exhibitions and quilt shows and things that were all inspired by bushfire quilts. I don't know how many things for the next 20 years are going to be COVID inspired. But I'm certainly - I mean I haven't produced a lot but the quilt I have done has all been handstitched and I'm pleased with it.*

Karen also mentioned commemorative quilting where she makes quilts during significant and challenging times, 'Many of us have actually made quilts at times - I've got one that I made after the Black Saturday bushfires in all reds and golds, so it brings that memory back'. This was echoed by Jane who also had made a quilt during the drought 'all in water colours'.

Virtual Spaces

As noted in the context section, at the time of the interview the state of Victoria was in a COVID-19 lockdown. The capital city Melbourne had been in a stringent lockdown and regional Victoria, where the women were located (except for one woman who was living in Melbourne in full lockdown) had been subject to less severe regulations, allowing restricted numbers to attend cafés and restaurants. Some of the women had been meeting in a group for a few weeks at a local café for coffee together and all of the women were regularly meeting via Zoom for their craft meetings.

When asked how the lockdown and restrictions had impacted on the group, the women were generally positive and agreed that being able to continue to meet virtually via Zoom was a bonus which allowed them to keep in touch. Sue described how social media had allowed 'people to share and connect and learn things. It's actually come at a good time, really, COVID-19, technologically.' Similarly, Liz also agreed that technology had maintained their bond despite not being physically together:

> *It's certainly different, and we have done Zoom, but we don't feel that our bond has lessened any because we haven't physically been together. We're just looking forward to when we can all get back together, so that's been really good.*

Some of the group members indicated their amazement that they were now relying on an online platform such as Zoom to meet with one another, with one participant commenting 'Who would have thought this time last year we'd even be doing this?' and another admitting she had 'Never heard of [Zoom]' until the lockdowns. Having the opportunity to continue with the group and keep in touch through the technology and work on their crafting projects together was seen by all of the women as important, with Ann describing this as being 'meaningful' and helping to relieve their 'lockdown boredom'.

Discussion: crafting groups as a therapeutic landscape

This research aimed to examine what motivates the women in the study to do crafting and what benefits, if any, they experience as a consequence of crafting together. The study was also interested in examining the benefits of crafting together during a COVID-19 lockdown in Regional Victoria in 2020.

For the women in the craft group, friendships and the social benefits and sharing in a women's group were identified as important. Studies of informal craft groups and other informal groups have identified the social benefits and the sharing of skills as being of significant importance (Flood & Blair, 2013; Johnson & Wilson, 2005; Maidment & MacFarlane, 2009).

Little research to date has been done on the very recent impact of COVID-19 on community groups in Australia. For participants in this study, there were some key findings related to a lockdown they were experiencing in September 2020. For the women in the study, technology such as Zoom allowed them to continue to meet together and share their crafting projects. For the women, despite not being able to share a physical space together, their connection and 'bond' was maintained through a virtual space which facilitated 'meaningful' connections.

Therapeutic landscapes have been conceptualised as sites in which environmental, individual and societal factors come together to enhance the healing or therapeutic process (Gesler, 1992). There has been a broad and comprehensive account of the therapeutic landscape through the notion of blue space (Foley, *et al.*,2019), and green spaces, (Lea, 2008) spas, domestic spaces, schools and playgrounds (Spray, 2020; Harris *et al.*, 2010; Dunkley, 2009), virtual therapeutic landscapes (Trnka, 2021) and indeed for this study the women's virtual craft group. The women who participated in the gendered community of practice described their social connections and friendships as being as important as the activities occurring in the craft group. Indeed, when faced with COVID-19 and separation from the physical locations, that of the crafting home shared space, a separate and arguably equally as therapeutic (in a time of great stress during COVID-19 lockdown) in the form of a virtual space was taken up by the participants.

Involvement in a community of practice provides a sense of social identity (Haslam *et al.*, 2020) especially in rural areas, where the process of ageing occurs within neighbourhoods and communities (Phillips, Bernard & Phillipson, 2000). For the women who participated in the craft activities they felt a need to connect in many instances for their wellbeing. Social networks and community ties are important for wellbeing (Looker, 2014) for both the individual and the society in which they reside. Such networks can provide health support as stories and experiences are shared.

The women in this study, due to COVID-19 lockdown, were forced, in many ways, to unify their community physical spaces with an embodied, fluid and dynamic gendered space. Maintaining the group's connections via social media enabled the women to maintain therapeutically meaningful virtual opportunities that in turn supported and even strengthened their relationships with one another during a time when being in the same physical space together was not a possibility. These alternative and fluid therapeutic landscapes provided an opportunity for different ways to connect and communicate and facilitated the continued 'bond' and friendships and kept the friendships going at a time of unprecedented change and upheaval. In addition, the craft group participants' experience of learning to navigate a new virtual platform with its own set of norms and functions, which had been largely unfamiliar before lockdown, illuminates how older people were able to develop a greater sense of agency and resilience through enhanced digital connectivity during the COVID-19 pandemic (Weil et al., 2021).

Some of the group members indicated their amazement that they were now relying on an online platform such as Zoom to meet with one another and feeling they had learnt how to manage the online system allowing enough to facilitate them to continue with the group and keep in touch and work on their crafting projects together was seen by all of the women as important, with Ann describing this as being 'meaningful' and helping to relieve their 'lockdown boredom'.

Conclusion

This small but significant study provided an opportunity to reconceptualise the benefits of social participation facilitated through virtual connection. A therapeutic landscape, physical or virtual, that provides opportunity

for connection, friendship, the sharing of ideas and learning new skills, *matters*. Indeed, for Gesler and Kearns (2002), whether spaces are digital or real-life when it comes to health and wellbeing what is important is the continued connections that allow for social contact.

There is little doubt that COVID-19 has impacted on these social groups, in some cases permanently. Certainly, there has been the uptake of virtual spaces and communication opportunities more broadly across the globe since the pandemic began. There will arguably be many community spaces such as community craft groups, where people have not been able to connect virtually. Many older and less technologically literate or networked people in Australia and globally have little or no access to virtual spaces due to lack of knowledge about the technology or lack of opportunity to own and fund the technology (Weil et al., 2021). Either way, governments will need to consider the importance of availability for all to access, make use of, and navigate virtual therapeutic landscapes to cater for future potential unprecedented events that again force lockdowns and the separating of community groups from face-to-face, real-life opportunities.

Loneliness and isolation from community group activity through a lack of digital literacy and lack of resources has potentially devastating consequences. Older people during the COVID-19 pandemic have been recognised as being particularly at risk of being left behind and left out (Weil et al., 2021), with significant potential flow-on affects in terms of mental health outcomes for this demographic (Armitage & Nellums, 2020; Newman & Zainal, 2020). Social isolation and loneliness are linked to mental illness, dementia, suicide, poor health behaviours and physical inactivity (Holt-Lunstad et al. 2015) and can cause premature death particularly for older people. The need for further research attention in this area is required.

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