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'Keep the Music Going': How the Isolation Tour 2020 Maintained Community and Cultural Connectedness during the 2020 COVID-19 Lockdown in Western Australia

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent social isolation measures had a profound impact on communities worldwide. In regional and remote Western Australia, the use of online platforms has become increasingly important for maintaining social and emotional well-being. This article examines the role of 'The Isolation Tour 2020' Facebook page in providing a lifeline for its mostly Aboriginal audience to stay connected with culture, Country, and one another during the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown in Western Australia. The authors conducted an in-depth interview with one of the administrators of the page and supplemented this with a thematic analysis of publicly available Facebook data. Data were analysed using NVivo qualitative analysis software and common themes were identified. The findings show that 'The Isolation Tour 2020' provided an effective virtual platform for people to interact with loved ones and feel a sense of belonging and comfort in the uncertainty of the pandemic. This research highlights the importance of online spaces for supporting social and emotional well-being during extended periods of social isolation and offers insights into how similar initiatives can be supported in future.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19; social isolation; Facebook; social and emotional well-being; live music

Introduction

Hey guys ... welcome to the Isolation tour. Lets keep the music going... any artists who would like to join our Live events let us know and we'll put on a concert from our lounge/bath/toilet/roof/bed ... wherever u want lol. (The Isolation Tour Facebook page, post 5, 'Hey guys ... welcome to the Isolation tour,' 21 March 2020)¹

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¹ Original spelling and punctuation have been retained throughout all quotations from posts on The Isolation Tour Facebook page.

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Each weekend during the strictest social isolation period in Western Australia, the 'Isolation Tour 2020'² Facebook page (hereafter 'the Tour' and 'the Tour page') hosted a virtual music tour for a socially isolated, mostly Aboriginal audience. During this six-week period, artists and musicians on the Tour page produced more than fifty-three hours of live video footage, which garnered thousands of live comments, thousands of shares, and tens of thousands of views. This article explores the process and impact of organizing, hosting, and managing the Tour as an important cultural event during the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, we focus on the way that the Tour page became a lifeline for Indigenous communities to stay connected with culture, Country,³ and one another during this extended period of social isolation. We situate this within a broader context of grassroots initiatives in the arts to develop and maintain creative communities amid calls for greater funding and government support (Boland 2020a, 2020b; Terzon 2020; Burke 2022; Freeland and Reich 2022; Morris 2022; Eltham 2022).

Studies conducted since the beginning of the pandemic indicate that the psychosocial effects of social isolation measures disproportionately impacted minority communities, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Newby et al. 2020; Bennett, Uink, and Cross 2020). For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the relationship between cultural and community connectedness and social and emotional well-being is well established in the literature (Gee et al. 2014; Dudgeon et al. 2017; Farnbach et al. 2018). Thus, maintaining a sense of connectedness is especially critical for these groups during the pandemic and any future crises. In a study of online social connection at the height of major restrictions in Australia, Stuart et al. (2021, 524) found that 'using potentially compensatory forms of online social connection can be beneficial (or at least, alleviate negative outcomes) for those who may be the most at-risk (highly health anxious and isolated).' Studies show that digital technologies and social media platforms such as Facebook effectively support social and emotional well-being for Indigenous peoples, as they afford means of staying connected with family, friends, culture, and Country (Healy 2013; Lumby 2010; Vaarzon-Morel 2014; Hensel et al. 2019). For this reason, Walker et al. (2021) argue that tailored online and social media strategies are urgently needed during extended periods of social isolation, distress, and anxiety, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, to promote positive social and emotional well-being and resilience among Indigenous peoples. We argue that the Isolation Tour 2020 afforded community and cultural connectedness during the strictest social restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic in Western Australia.

Following a methodological description of our study, we proceed in part one to outline the conditions of social isolation in Western Australia that led two administrators (hereafter 'admins') to start the Tour page. Part two discusses the challenges admins faced as the audience grew into the thousands, including managing their workload, technological demands, and encouraging more women to participate as

² The Tour page was initially labelled '2020' but was renamed '2021' the following year to maintain relevance and as the page admins organized live, in-person music tours throughout Western Australia. It remains 'The Isolation Tour 2021' at the time of writing. Subsequent citations of text from the page will be to 'The Isolation Tour.'

³ Capitalized in Aboriginal contexts, Country is 'nourishing terrain,' alive and intertwined with Indigenous identities and knowledge systems (Rose 1996, 1).

performers, and how they addressed these challenges. Part three explores how the Tour community transformed the admins' original vision and became a beloved meeting place for artists and audiences to stay connected to community, Country, and culture during lockdown, and showcases this process through a small case study of a virtual tribute show hosted on the Tour page.

Background

Both admins of the page are Western Australian Aboriginal singer-songwriters who experienced significant downturn in public performance engagements because of government-imposed public health restrictions. As such, the two admins took it upon themselves to create opportunities for themselves and their peers despite a lack of support from the government and institutions. Before establishing the Tour page, neither had prior experience in facilitating online performances. Our interviewee, one of the two admins of the page, is a well-known member of the Noongar community, the largest Aboriginal cultural bloc in Western Australia, covering its southwest corner including the capital city of Perth and comprising upwards of 30,000 people. The Noongar region was the first area in Western Australia to face British colonization in the early nineteenth century and is dominated by urban and agricultural development today. Despite being subjected to many decades of cultural assimilation policies and practices, Noongar have sustained strong and distinctive cultural identities through the maintenance of kin relationships, and involvement in activism and performance (Kickett-Tucker and Hansen 2016; Haebich 2018; Bracknell et al. 2021).

Methods

To understand the process and impact of hosting a virtual online Tour for Aboriginal performing artists, we conducted a qualitative in-depth interview with one of the two admins of the Tour page to understand their motivations for creating and managing the page, as well as the various challenges they faced managing the expectations of the emergent community surrounding the Tour page. Written consent to participate was obtained before the recorded interview commenced.

We supplemented the interview with interactive and public Facebook data. We found that the live videos, which are still available at the time of writing,⁴ best captured artists' and admins' sentiments about the function and value of the page, expressed in real time and with familiarity and candour despite the public, visible platform of the Tour page. The full dataset included the following:

- metadata for all admin posts to the page from the inception of the page (21 March 2020) to the end of the Tour (2 May 2020); all posts within this time frame were numbered chronologically from '1' to '281' and categorized (e.g., 'text post' or 'live video'), including time and date of posts, and reaction data such as number of comments and likes (as of June 2021);

⁴ Now renamed "The Isolation Tour 2021," the Facebook live videos are viewable online. Accessed 29 July 2023. <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100064033173683&sk=videos>.

- metadata from live videos such as real-time comments and reaction data from other users;
- transcripts of all live videos on the first official day of the Tour, including corresponding real-time comments from viewers;
- a transcript of the final two-hour ‘Last Hurrah’ video by the admins, including corresponding real-time comments from viewers;
- all real-time comments from the most viewed live video of the Tour, a tribute show for a prominent Noongar performer and artist who passed away during the Tour period;
- all real-time comments from the second-last video of the Tour; and
- all text post data posted by the admins during the Tour period and corresponding comments from users.

All transcriptions were completed by the first author. The first author analysed data using NVivo12 qualitative analysis software and identified prevalent themes using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). All authors met regularly to cross-check and discuss themes arising to ensure the validity of the findings.

Part One: Increased Social Isolation

In 2020, the Western Australia’s McGowan government outlined its plan to eliminate—rather than suppress—community transmission of COVID-19. Central to this approach were stay-at-home orders that restricted social interaction between households. In Western Australia, the strictest ‘Stage 1’ of these restrictions was widely referred to as a ‘lockdown’ and lasted between 23 March and 27 April 2020 (McNeill 2020). During this period, all gatherings of more than two people and all non-essential trips outside the home were banned, with no indication of how long the bans would last. The Isolation Tour 2020 ran during this period, from 21 March until the week after Stage 1 restrictions lifted. After 27 April, the Western Australia’s McGowan government brought in Stage 2 of easing trips outside the home (Pilat and Hastie 2020). Most other restrictions were eased by 6 June 2020.

Usher et al. (2020) warn of the potential mental health impacts of social distancing and isolation among Indigenous peoples in Australia (2020), and an Australia-wide study into acute mental health responses at the peak of the national COVID-19 lockdown (Newby et al. 2020) found that Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander status correlated with higher levels of anxiety and distress during this time. Perrin et al. (2009) stress minority groups’ heightened susceptibility to psychological harm during periods of crisis prior to the coronavirus pandemic. Considering the elevated risks to Indigenous mental health due to the pandemic, digital technologies and social media platforms provided a crucial lifeline for these communities to maintain a sense of connection to family, culture, and community networks (Walker et al. 2021; Healy 2013; Lumby 2010; Vaarzon-Morel 2014).

Musicians and artists Australia-wide also experienced significant financial challenges throughout the COVID-19 lockdown periods, as concerts, tours, and gigs were

summarily cancelled without remuneration. For one of the Tour admins, a musician, this resulted in significant psychological distress:

My experience was at first really sad because I had a whole ... WA tour locked in and I lost a whole lot, which I pre-sold every show, so, it was gonna be a huge year for us ... after finding out that, you know, feeling down, depressed, you know, anxiety started kicking in and things like that. (Admin 1 interview, 14 October 2020)

The Tour thus became an important platform for musicians, as it allowed them to maintain a sense of purpose and ad-hoc income throughout the lockdown. Artists would sometimes post weblinks for audiences to donate money directly to them or to purchase their merchandise. The arts and creative industries were among the most affected by lockdown measures, yet federal government aid programmes such as JobKeeper were either not offered to arts workers or, in the case of the arts-industry-specific RISE grant scheme,⁵ not rolled out until November 2020, well and truly after the strictest lockdown measures had passed (Pennington and Eltham 2021, 32). The social, cultural, and financial impact of excluding arts workers from government emergency stimulus programmes in Australia has been documented elsewhere (Flore, Hendry, and Gaylor 2023; Flew and Kirkwood 2021). Among Tour artists, however, this impact was exacerbated by pervasive racism and discrimination in the music industry (Shehadie et al. 2022) and fewer opportunities for Indigenous performers (especially in regional areas) outside NAIDOC and National Reconciliation Weeks (Sunderland et al. 2023).⁶

The admins predominantly utilized the Facebook live video feature, initially on their own personal accounts, and then coming together on the dedicated Isolation Tour Facebook page. As both admins indicated in early live videos to viewers:

Instead of having to chase the different artists around we can bring 'em all to one page and go from there. Keep the music going. (The Isolation Tour, transcript of live video [Admin 2], post 8, 21 March 2020)

So yeh let's keep this going, let's share the love, because there was people performing all over Western Australia here tonight and we had it all here you know, sittin' back. (The Isolation Tour, transcript of live video [Admin 1], post 10, 21 March 2020)

The Tour community (measured through 'page likes,' which directly correlate with 'followers' of the page) quickly grew to 1000 page likes on 23 March, two days after the page's inception, reached 3000 the following weekend, and steadily climbed to 5600 by the final night. This rapid growth in interest in and interaction with the page became overwhelming for the two admins, as we discuss in the following section.

Part Two: Barriers to Participation in the Isolation Tour 2020

Admins, artists, and audiences faced several challenges to participating fully in the Isolation Tour 2020. First and foremost were the administrative, technological, and

⁵ The Restart Investment and Sustain and Expand (RISE) was a federal government 'emergency' stimulus response targeted to the arts industry programmes and producers (see Pennington and Eltham 2021, 32).

⁶ NAIDOC (National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee) week is held in the first week of July, and National Reconciliation Week is held between 27 May and 3 June each year (see <https://www.naidoc.org.au> and <https://www.reconciliation.org.au>).

logistical complexities that the admins faced in managing the page. The two admins provided technical support to artists ‘going live’ on the page, and as the page increased in popularity, their workload became unmanageable, with an ever-increasing number of contributors—including solo singer/guitarists, rappers, duos, and people singing karaoke to backing tracks—requiring advice and assistance. To try to limit this workload, they decided to raise the bar for artists to perform as part of the Tour and divert the karaoke-style performers to a separate page. An unintended consequence of this decision was a decline in women participating in the Tour as artists, as women’s primary mode of participating until that point was through the medium of karaoke. Another significant barrier to access was the digital literacy required to utilize the live video feature, which initially inhibited some artists from participating. Poor Internet connectivity also required some audiences to rely on expensive mobile data. We explore these challenges below.

Even though both admins had some prior experience going live from their own personal music pages on Facebook, they faced challenges hosting the ongoing online performances, due to technological difficulties and the time intensity of setting up and monitoring each live video performance. Prior to the Tour, Admin 1 had used the live video feature ‘just for updates and things like this’ (Admin 1 interview, 14 October 2020), not for a large-scale music event. As such, Admin 1 struggled with the technological demands of the Tour, particularly during the lockdown. When asked ‘how did you go about navigating the technological side of things?’ he responded:

Horrible ... we Googled a lot of things ‘what’s the best way to plug it in to your computer via your mixing desk,’ and ‘what microphones are best to use’ so [Admin 2] and I both ‘invested’ [laughs] ... we was both going out to the shops and trying this and trying that until we got it, and then we started to—with other people that was coming online and playing and that, you know—we just made suggestions to them, you know, so ‘you should set this up, that up,’ and quite a few of them did, as well. (Admin 1 interview, 14 October 2020)

As the page grew, the demands of setting up and monitoring performances became too time intensive for Admin 1, and began to take time away from his home responsibilities:

It was very, very exhausting and, you know, the first few times [Admin 2] and I was going back and forth tryin’ to do it, but you’re sitting there sometimes for five hours, but what about our kids? You know? It was our families as well, and we’re in lockdown, so we was trying to balance that side of things. (Admin 1 interview, 14 October 2020)

Admin 1 ended up deferring to Admin 2 to manage the page:

Without [Admin 2] stepping up to the plate like that, there’s no way I could have kept up with it, but he ... you gotta have that team, you know? You gotta have a team, whether it’s one or two of you or five or seven of you. But [Admin 2], yeh, he made sure it was punctual, making sure people’s quality was there. (Admin 1 interview, 14 October 2020)

Due to the increasing popularity of the page and the consequent administrative load of managing a demanding schedule of live performances, the Tour page pivoted towards solely hosting professional artists on 26 March. Until then, admins

encouraged everyone to participate in live videos, whether through karaoke videos or accompanied with instruments. On Monday 22 March, for example, admins posted to the Page to encourage women, specifically, to get involved, as girls and women were underrepresented until that point:

Hope you guys enjoyed last night. It was an epic 5 hour show..... only problem it was all blokes.....

So here's a shout out to all our talented and awesome ladies.... like the commercial said ... 'where the bloody hell are ya' 😊😊

We're trying to set up a Sunday sesh for this afternoon.... please tag any of our awesome ladies to participate.....

If anyone is interested just message the page and we'll get it set up.....

We don't care if it's with an instrument or karaoke style ... let's keep the music rolling

Also ... please please share this page to all your friends.... it's costs u nothing ... maybe except some data.... 😊. (The Isolation Tour, post 28, 'Hope you guys enjoyed last night,' 22 March 2020)

At the time of this posting, the page had fewer than 1000 likes. Commenters on the post tagged one another, encouraging their sisters and 'grannies' (grandchildren) to participate, mostly through karaoke:

[Name tag] wanna join tonight? I will come record u from karaoke? (5 replies)

[3 name tags] cmon ladies join the tour, loves it!! (3 likes)

[Name tag] kareoke style (1 laugh react, 2 replies)

[Name tag] gone sis (2 likes)

[Name tag] your grannies? (2 likes). (The Isolation Tour, comments, post 28, 'Hope you guys enjoyed last night,' 22 March 2020)

Women and girls began participating in live video performances after this post, constituting almost half (eleven out of twenty-four) of artists featured over the following five days, with karaoke increasing in popularity as a means of participating in the Tour. However, as the week progressed and the page following doubled again, admins faced a tough decision to make their workload manageable. On Friday 26 March that same week, admins posted that they were going to change the format of the page to return to its initial intention of supporting artists:

Good morning awesome people.

So we're going to change the format of the page just to get back in line of what is was created for. To support artists who have lost all of their opportunities to perform publicly during these hard times.

*Starting next week we will only be doing shows from artists who want to perform live starting—

Thursday—8–10pm

Friday & Saturday—8pm–Midnight

*Sunday Session—4–6pm

Unfortunately we won't be doing karaoke live but happy to upload videos for a short period.

Sorry if this causes any inconvenience. We'll test this new format from next week and see how it goes. Happy for you to provide feedback.

Hope you're enjoying your day and keep the music going. (The Isolation Tour, post 87, 'Good morning awesome people,' 26 March 2020)

Karaoke videos were subsequently filtered onto a separate Facebook page title ‘Isolation Tour,’ which did not attract a large following or sustain the interest of the Isolation Tour community. After a huge weekend of music from those who identified more explicitly as artists, the page reached 3000 likes by the following Monday 29 March. Despite the exclusion of amateur, often female, singers by limiting karaoke on the page, the page attracted consistent participation from several female singer-songwriters. Although female participation never matched male participation in the Tour, the reasons for this are beyond the scope of this article.⁷ Future research could investigate the role of karaoke in providing an alternative mode of music participation for Aboriginal women in Western Australia.

Participants’ reliance on public digital infrastructure such as the National Broadband Network (NBN) revealed shortcomings of the NBN throughout the lifespan of the Tour. Some users had to rely on expensive mobile data to participate in the Tour, as one commenter noted:

You guys have been amazing. But can you sing im running out off credit. (The Isolation Tour, comment on live video, post 281, ‘The Last Hurrah,’ 2 May 2020)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples already face ‘inequities in affordable access to digital technologies’ (Walker et al. 2021, 2141), despite being more avid users of social media than the general population (Callinan 2014). Given the social connectivity that digital technologies afford, audience dependence on cellular data rather than a reliable public broadband network demonstrates one way the uneven NBN rollout continues to compound existing health inequity (Schram et al. 2018). Broadband network connectivity is also adversely impacted by ongoing issues associated with the accessibility, supply, and affordability of permanent homes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families (Walter 2008; Rennie et al. 2010; Nelson et al. 2016).

A key barrier to participation for older artists was the level of digital literacy required to utilize the Facebook live feature. Digital literacy is generally lower among older adults (Hargittai and Dobransky 2017), and this exacerbates feelings of social isolation and disconnection from others for this age group. This was initially a hurdle for a much-loved elder musician who was hesitant to engage due to his self-perception as technologically incapable. When he was tagged in the live video comments by family and friends encouraging him to also go live and perform, he replied with ‘I’m enjoying kicking back and listening plus I wouldn’t know how get on, technically challenged’ (The Isolation Tour, comment on live video, post 12, ‘Kenny Rogers tribute,’ 21 March 2020). Family and friends replied to his comment, promising to help him set up his sound and video equipment. He went on to become a regular headliner of the Tour and his videos proved to be some of the most popular of the entire Tour, demonstrating how the Tour community addressed apparent needs through utilizing their own networks and resources.

⁷ The reasons for women participating more often through karaoke than as instrumentalists reflect broader (national, global) trends whereby instrumental music is male dominated, thus limiting women’s access to these modes of music participation (Barney 2007; Doubleday 2008).

Part Three: How the Tour Created Community and Cultural Connectedness

As the Tour page grew and as admins and users of the page addressed and overcame challenges to access, the page became meaningful to audiences and artists in ways that the admins did not anticipate when they originally set out to provide a platform to ‘keep the music going.’ Moreover, ‘keep the music going’ took on additional meanings as audiences embraced the page as a place to come together and keep spirits lifted during social isolation, especially when the Tour community lost a prominent musician from the south-west live music scene in April.

Showcasing Local Aboriginal Talent

Admins and commenters reflected on some unexpected outcomes of The Isolation Tour in their ‘Last Hurrah’ video, posted on the final night of the Tour, 2 May 2020. These outcomes included the platforming of new and unique artists, and how this exposure cultivated senses of community pride. For audiences, artists, and admins, the page provided a platform to showcase Western Australian talent that had previously flown under the radar:

The page allowed me to find out more about the awesome talent out there that I haven’t even heard of ... and to get to see you all a little more one to one ... Cheers to all of you.. 🍷 🍌 😊. (The Isolation Tour, comment on live video, post 281, ‘The Last Hurrah,’ 2 May 2020)

This has been so great showcasing all this fantastic Aboriginal talent—good on you [names of admins] for your initiative to showcase this 👍 . (The Isolation Tour, comment on live video, post 280, ‘The Last Hurrah,’ 2 May 2020)

Admin 1: That’s been one of the best things about this Isolation Tour is hearing people do songs their way.

Admin 2: Yeh. And it’s cool because a lot of the artists who come on did that. (The Isolation Tour, transcript of live video, post 281, ‘The Last Hurrah,’ 2 May 2020)

For many participants, this showcase of talent cultivated feelings of pride in a shared Aboriginal identity:

Thank you to all the artist who brought us entertainment during this Covid19 lock down, I’m very proud of our Indigenous talent out there. (The Isolation Tour, comment, post 239, ‘*Important Notice*,’ 27 April 2020)

Thanks guys our very own deadly Aboriginal Entertainers 🍌🍌🍌🍌🍌🍌🍌🍌🍌. (The Isolation Tour, comment on live video, post 281, ‘The Last Hurrah,’ 2 May 2020)

Similarly, through the comments and live videos, the Tour provided an important space to acknowledge and celebrate Country, culture, family, and language, which are associated with a sense of a shared cultural and community identity, a known indicator of social and emotional well-being (Gee et al. 2014). While audiences hailed from all over the globe, many acknowledged the different places (including Aboriginal place names) from which they were tuning in throughout the Tour, for example, ‘Wadjuk Noongar boodjar’ (Country around and including Perth), ‘All good from Exmouth,’ and ‘All the way from koonibba mission SA’ (comments made on live videos). Affirming regional Aboriginal cultural affiliations in public forums, including

popular music performance and social media posts, ‘serves to illustrate cultural diversity to non-Indigenous listeners and can simultaneously signal particular relationships with Indigenous listeners as kin, or neighbours’ (Bracknell 2019, 115). Artists and audiences articulated and expressed relationality and familiarity with one another through near-ubiquitous use of familial terms (uncle/unk, aunty, neph, brother/bro, sis, grannies) when addressing and referring to one another in live videos and when tagging one another in the comments. Studies in Perth and elsewhere demonstrate how ‘connection to family and kin’ is key to Aboriginal cultural identity (Kickett-Tucker 2009, 130; Kickett-Tucker and Hansen 2016).

Participants also frequently used Noongar language words and Aboriginal English. A word frequency query of the Tour dataset highlighted words such as ‘moorditj’ (strong, excellent), ‘nyorn’ (expressing sympathy), ‘yorga’ (woman), ‘deadly’ and ‘solid’ (excellent). The prevalence of ‘moorditj,’ ‘solid,’ and ‘deadly’ also demonstrates the audience’s tendency to support and embrace artists who featured on the Tour, rather than to critique or ridicule (comments of this nature were virtually non-existent). The widespread use of Noongar and Aboriginal English on the Tour page reinforces individuals’ sense of a shared cultural and community identity, which contributes to social and emotional well-being (Gee et al. 2014). The importance of providing a positive online space is illustrated by the following comment on one of the final ‘Last Hurrah’ live videos:

This is a unique situation days that connect family n people across our nation that really felt connected. Thank you for your time n effort [names of admins], I’m sure it comes especially from our wa People. So much talent here that’s guys xx well done n will miss isolation tour 2020. (The Isolation Tour, comment on live video, post 281, ‘The Last Hurrah,’ 2 May 2020)

Amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, language is fundamentally connected to identity and Country. As explained by the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples (2011, 2):

Language is central to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. The two are intertwined. Language describes cultural attachment to place, cultural heritage items, and puts meaning within the many cultural activities that people do. Furthermore, language plays a fundamental part in binding communities together as a culture, and individuals to each other in a society.

The use of Aboriginal English and Noongar words on the Tour page can be considered an ‘intimate address’ for people who are part of the cultural group, and simultaneously distinguishes Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants (Fisher 2013).

Cultivating Interactivity through Consistency and Lo-Fi Production Values

Requests constituted a substantial portion of the activity in the comments section for live videos, as demonstrated by the following interaction between an artist and a frequent commenter. During one live video, the male artist, after hearing a notification alarm from a nearby digital device, asks a woman off-camera ‘who’s that?’ The woman off-camera replies ‘it’s a request’ in the comments of the video they are streaming. The artist looks at the device and reads the comment aloud, ‘Sing [the

song] Illusion?,' and turns back to the camera to say 'aw, look out.' A second woman off-camera says of the commenter 'that's Auntie [name].' The artist contemplates playing it for a moment and then says, 'I might sing Illusions next, see how I go' (The Isolation Tour, transcript of live video [Artist 4],⁸ post 25, 21 March 2020).

This example is typical of many interactions between artists and audiences throughout the life of the Tour, and many artists would make a clear effort to keep one eye on the comments of their video as they were streaming live. The comments also provided real-time feedback on any potential audio-visual issues ('sound [is] a little low,' or 'It's working bro'), or to provide support and positive feedback ('Too Deadly Uncle,' 'Perfect bro,' 'Moorditj brother,' 'Beautiful voice beautiful song well done,' or 'Too deadly'). Indeed, 'hyping up' artists like this as they were performing was the predominant theme in comments throughout the whole Tour and contributed to the overall positive atmosphere of the Tour page.



As indicated, the Facebook platform allowed for a high degree of user-to-user interactivity (as opposed to the user-to-system interactivity of the AI-generated news feed), which contributed to high feelings of connectedness to one another:

And I think that what people found comforting as well is that they can talk live to somebody at the same time [in] the live comments, and people was making requests and was having that interaction. (Admin 1 interview, 14 October 2020)

The regularity of the Tour's schedule provided participants, especially audiences, with a sense of routine, consistency, and thus comfort in the uncertainty of the coronavirus pandemic and associated lockdown:

I think people found comfort in it, because, you know, obviously things were up in the air, you didn't know what you could do and what you couldn't do, but they knew that we was on that night, it was on every night ... and I think that's what people found that comfort in and they can rely on it, because at the time, when the world was confused, they knew that we was on live every night and we were singin' songs. ... It wasn't a lot of our best performances or anything like that, but it was something. It was something that people could rely on. ... If we say we're gonna have this artist, and that artist, we make sure we have them. ... It was that ... routine. (Admin 1 interview, 14 October 2020)

Admins' perspectives were validated in real-time comments from audience members:

Sad to hear it's the last night.. This isolation tour was a great thing for all our mob and all over especially when you going through difficult times.. thank you [names of admins] and all the artists. I enjoyed some of the songs with tears, and gave comfort listening through this isolation tour.. thanks for the entertainment..   (The Isolation Tour, comment, post 279, 2 May 2020)

It brought tears and a little comfort to me for my difficult time, listening to this isolation tour. (The Isolation Tour, comment on live video, post 281, 'The Last Hurrah,' 2 May 2020)

Moreover, the lo-fi quality of artists recording from home using whatever technologies were available to them cultivated a sense of intimacy between artists and audiences, as was the intention of the admins from the beginning, when they offered to 'put on a concert from our lounge/bath/toilet/roof/bed ... wherever u want lol' (The

⁸ This numbering system was used to differentiate between unique artists and admins.





Isolation Tour Facebook page, post 5, 'Hey guys ... welcome to the Isolation tour,' 21 March 2020):




If someone's just sitting there with their phone and singing to it like that, they're singing to you, you know, you're not thinking about everyone else that's tuned in, this person is singing to you, because that's your phone you're holding there, and that's where that intimacy comes from and that connection. (Admin 1 interview, 14 October 2020)


Case Study: The Tribute Show


As discussed in part one, the Tour provided a crucial lifeline for these communities to maintain a sense of connection to family, culture, and community networks. This was especially apparent when a well-known Noongar performer and artist passed away about one month into the Stage 1 lockdown restrictions. With permission from her family, the admins hosted a tribute show on the page in her memory the following week, which provided a significant means of maintaining community support, processing grief, and expressing condolences. The last performance of the night by two of her prior bandmates, both favourites of the Tour up until that point, is the most-watched video of the Tour.


As the Noongar performer's friends and family were not allowed to gather for a funeral, this final live video of the tribute show held special significance for viewers. Audiences engaged by tagging family into the comments and sending condolences on behalf of their families from across Australia. The 938 comments expressed a mixture of grief, support for the family, and gratitude to the two performers who hosted the tribute from Quairading, Western Australia, some utilizing both Aboriginal English and Noongar language:



To My Family in Quairading Love you all and thinking of you through this hard time, wish we could be with you, broken hearted feeling empty love [names] in Karratha    

Heartwarming to hear all these songs. Can see her standing right there singing   





Absolutely beautiful tribute  Condolences to all the family at this sad time ...

It's solid to see such a wonderful tribute for a deadly yorga who will be dearly missed 

Loving this, wish I was there with you all 

Means So Much as we can't be with our Loved ones. Watching from Adelaide we appreciate it  

What a wonderful way to share memories

[Name tag] last song    

[reply] beautiful ah darl her fav        . (The Isolation Tour, comments on live video, post 232, [live tribute show], 26 April 2020)

These comments demonstrate how the tribute afforded relatives and friends a virtual shared space to mourn and commemorate with one another. Using social media to participate in various forms of Sorry Business is already a widespread practice among Aboriginal people outside lockdown measures (Carlson and Frazer 2015).⁹ However, without being able to attend funerals in person, the Tour page tribute show

⁹ Aboriginal people throughout Australia use the term 'Sorry Business' to describe various practices related to death, mourning, and funerals.

provided one of a very limited means for mourning and commemoration during the COVID-19 lockdown, and thus held even more significance for viewers and family, as evidenced in these comments.

Artists who performed as part of the Tour agreed that it afforded an innovative way to stay connected and support musicians, as did audiences who tuned in to the live Tour videos:

As mob we kinda live in isolation as it is when we're not with our community. I think this is a really special way for us to stay connected and keep our love and support going through, especially for musicians and artists who still need that support and wanna give back to community as well so, thanks you mob for havin' a listen. (The Isolation Tour, transcript of live video [Artist 3], post 13, 21 March 2020)

Thank you so much for keeping the music alive for so many musicians—and thanks for having us 🙏 (The Isolation Tour, comment, post 239, '*Important Notice*', 27 April 2020)

Oh, that's sad, I really enjoyed listening in to the Isolation Concert, thank you for your time in entertaining us with your music. I would just like to wish all Artist the best for the future. I was introduced to a lot of Indigenous singers whom I've never heard before. 🙏🙏 Thanks again, stay safe and keep those hands washed 🙏👍👍👍 (The Isolation Tour, comment, post 239, '*Important Notice*', 27 April 2020)

These testimonies indicate how the Tour page became meaningful to participants throughout lockdown: as a showcase for local Aboriginal talent and as a place for communities and families to come together virtually. As Artist 3 suggests in the quotation above (post 13, 21 March 2020), the value of Facebook communities such as the Isolation Tour can have a life outside crises, too, as a significant means to establish and maintain connectedness.

Conclusion

The Isolation Tour 2020 helped to maintain community and cultural connectedness by providing an effective virtual platform for people to meet and feel a sense of belonging during the COVID-19 pandemic. The central focus of this virtual meeting place was live music, and the initial goal of the Tour page was to 'keep the music going' for the musicians and artists whose livelihoods were threatened by lockdown measures. 'Keeping the music going' took on additional meanings as the Tour page grew and audiences embraced the page as a positive space to keep their spirits lifted, be changed by new musical experiences, and feel a sense of routine and comfort in the uncertainty of the pandemic. Initiatives such as the Isolation Tour thus provide a model for how online spaces can be utilized to support social and emotional well-being during extended periods of social isolation (Walker et al. 2021).

It is important to note that the Isolation Tour 2020 was Aboriginal-led and owned from its inception. The two Aboriginal singer-songwriters who created and maintained the page for their communities did so despite a lack of government and institutional support. This Aboriginal ownership of the Isolation Tour 2020 made it far more effective in building genuine community connectedness than any external top-down intervention could, as studies have previously shown (see Dudgeon et al. 2012). By the same

reasoning, if the state government was to support similar online music resources in future, this would mean supporting the artists and admins who make it happen.

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Ethics

Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee under approval number 2020-01711-BRACKNELL.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest in the preparation of this article.

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Data Availability Statement

Some data that support the findings of this study are publicly available at the time of writing. These data were derived from the following resources available in the public domain: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100064033173683>.

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