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Curating Wellness during a Pandemic in Singapore: COVID-19, Museums and Digital Imagination

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Abstract

Objectives

COVID-19 pandemic caused unexpected disruption to the operation of many museums. However, the disruption also presents an opportunity for local museums to explore new modes of audience engagement that could also help to mitigate the negative health impact of COVID-19 through the imaginative use of technology. This article provides a snapshot of the various digital initiatives that were developed by museums in Singapore during the most challenging time of COVID-19 to exemplify the expanded role of museums as a public health resource. It will also offer a brief reflection on the challenges and benefits of curating wellbeing with digital technologies.

Study Design

A review of creative responses to COVID-19 by museums in Singapore.

Methods

Scoping Search.

Results

Several local museums have stepped up efforts to support the wellbeing of people by exploring possibilities with digital virtual platforms. Their swift response to develop online contents following an abrupt closure due to the pandemic exemplifies the caring role of museums in offering people a much-needed respite from social isolation by connecting and interacting with others from a safe distance. Moving forward, it is also important for the museums to be mindful of the barriers that digital virtual platforms might present since access to technology differs amongst population groups, as do digital competency and literacy. Museums can benefit from further partnerships with sector experts and organisations to learn about the needs and challenges of different groups in future planning and design. This will help them to gather a holistic overview and help ensure inclusionary strategy and practice.

Conclusions

COVID-19 has challenged museums to adapt their programme and keep the public engaged through virtual programmes on online spaces. Online initiatives have offered opportunities for people to remain socially active and meaningfully engaged despite the stringent measures imposed in response to the viral situation. Post-pandemic, we can continue to anticipate a highly connected and inclusive society brought together by virtual technologies.

Keywords

Museum, Wellbeing, Technology, COVID-19, Singapore

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has left many museums in a difficult position due to the stay-at-home orders and mandatory closures, and museums in Singapore have not been spared. Despite the abrupt halt to the operational routine brought on by the pandemic, the unexpected disruption also presents the local museum sector opportunities to explore new modes of audience engagement that could also help to mitigate the negative health impact of COVID-19 on people, such as isolation and distress.^{1,2} It is especially in this period of the pandemic that health and wellness of individuals are more relevant now than ever. Over the past few months, museums in Singapore have stepped up to promote the role of arts in times of crisis through offering a variety of museum-related programmes and events via virtual platforms to promote social engagement and enhancement of wellbeing.

In recent decades, technological affordance and digitalisation have challenged museums to redefine some of their long-held values and identity, particularly their exclusivity and uniqueness.³ Digital transformation such as digitising of collection for online access, development of digital experiences (e.g., augmented reality, interactive media display) also played a role in overcoming some of the long-standing limitations in the museum sectors such as accessibility and archiving, thereby pressurising museums to embrace the customer-centric ethos.⁴ Not only did the increasing power and affordability of technology-enabled museums reshape their identity and relationship with their audiences, but they have also expanded and complemented the health-promoting capability of museums to enhance physical health⁵, mental health⁶ and individual wellbeing^{7,8,9}, for example through exhibitions to develop health literacy or engagement programmes that offer opportunities for social interactions, self-expression and development.

This article provides a snapshot of the various digital initiatives that were developed by museums in Singapore during the challenging time of COVID-19 to exemplify the expanded role of museums as a public health resource. It will also offer a brief reflection on the challenges and benefits of promoting wellbeing through digital technologies.

Digital Initiatives by Singapore Museums

Museums in Singapore have served communities by providing access to culturally significant artefacts and heritage education. Following the 2019 update of the *Our SG Heritage Plan* by the National Heritage Board of Singapore, museums began to expand beyond their traditional roles to also develop museum-based programmes that enhance the health and wellbeing of participants. With COVID-19 presenting itself as a public health crisis for the island-city state, several local museums have stepped up their effort to support the wellbeing of people by exploring possibilities with digital virtual platforms. Following the implementation of stay-home orders and stricter distancing measures by the Singapore government on 3 April 2020, many museums swiftly transitioned to develop a range of digital contents and programmes to maintain their connection and reach to the public while remaining physically closed. Taking into consideration the diverse background of visitors, programmes were designed to cater to their varying needs and level of experience with the arts. Visitors can independently explore a range of online exhibitions, virtual tours, and online engagement. Additionally, there are guided projects where a facilitator will be present to lead the participants while exploring concepts of art and culture. The digital programmes are free for all and can be accessed at any time except for online engagement programmes (e.g. Slow Art, Virtual Jalan-Jalan, Kopi Teh and Contemporary Art), where participants are required to sign up for a slot in the schedule. The online engagement programmes were designed to accommodate between 10 to 35 participants. Box 1 provides a snapshot of the various digital initiatives that were developed by museums in Singapore during the challenging time of COVID-19.

National Gallery Singapore

Slow Art (<https://www.facebook.com/events/2756312097990558/>) aims to promote emotional wellbeing through guided mindfulness practices. Through weekly video conferencing sessions via Zoom, participants are asked to explore various observation exercises while encountering a unique artwork from the museum. A facilitated group discussion also encouraged meaningful interactions with the guide and other participants whilst enjoying the unique museum experience.

#GalleryAnywhere (<https://www.nationalgallery.sg/galleryanywhere/>) is another initiative by the National Gallery Singapore to improve the accessibility and outreach of the museum through a variety of virtual experiences. Individuals can access over 1000 artworks and 7000 archival materials via the museum's online collection portal. Additionally, many activities are catered to all age groups, allowing individuals to be actively engaged with museum-related programmes even in the comfort of their homes.

Art in 90 seconds - Hope in Times of Crisis is the latest digital initiative launched by the National Gallery Singapore during the pandemic, providing access for individuals with hearing disability. Each 90-second video, introducing artwork from the museum's Southeast Asian art collection, is accompanied by a sign language interpreter alongside the narrator. This is part of the museum's effort to enhance inclusivity in their programmes and cater to individuals with special needs.

National Arts Council and National Gallery Singapore

Virtual Jalan Jalan! (<https://www.a-list.sg/virtual-jalan-jalan/>) was a digital tour led by artists Lee Sze-Chin as the Silver Arts Experience organised by the National Arts Council, Singapore. "Jalan-Jalan" refers to a stroll or a walkabout in Malay, which is commonly used in local conversation. The session engaged seniors aged 50 and above on a 60-minute exploration of the National Gallery Singapore, while also showcasing selected artworks that paint Singapore's rich past. This virtual tour also invited the senior participants to reflect on personal histories and creatively imagine the future. The experience also provided many opportunities for seniors to socialise with one another through the online platform, in the comfort of their own home.

Singapore Art Museum

Kopi, Teh and Contemporary Art (<https://kopitehandcontemporaryartonline.peatix.com/>) is an initiative featuring a virtual guided tour of Singapore Art Museum's collection conducted in four languages (English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil). 'Kopi' and 'Teh' are commonly used by locals when referring to local coffee and tea. This spontaneous activity is designed for seniors aged 50 and above, allowing them to participate actively with senior volunteers of the museum through the virtual tour and fun activities such as discussions and quizzes.

Art Science Museum

ArtScience at Home (<https://www.marinabaysands.com/museum/events/artscience-at-home.html>) is an online programme that engages participants through a series of virtual tours, workshops, talks, screenings, performances by various artists, practitioners and educators. The series of events were themed to include topics on the importance of arts and culture during a pandemic, bringing entertainment through online platforms, and mapping an inspiring future beyond the crisis. The programmes were delivered on the museum's website and social media channels such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube.

Box 1. Examples of Online Art Engagement Initiatives Museum in Singapore.

The efforts and digital imaginations undertaken by local museums while dealing with COVID-19 are highly commendable. Their swift response in developing online contents to attend to the needs of the community exemplifies the caring role museums can assume in response to social circumstances. The proliferation of online initiatives developed by museums during the COVID-19 pandemic offered opportunities for people to remain active and meaningfully engaged when other forms of activities that involve physical interaction are curbed. Museums administrators shared that the online programmes were generally well-received. Many visitors found the contents engaging and there were requests for more in-depth explorations. These online engagements offered participants a much-needed respite from social isolation by connecting and interacting with others from a safe distance. These observations made on the arts and cultural field further highlight the care capacity of museums through the willingness to reimagine the roles of museums as a resource of health and wellbeing for people.

Additionally, the push to explore possibilities with digital technologies has also evolved the way art and culture can be delivered and accessed. This digital transformation of museums also enabled enhanced accessibility for individuals of various ages and needs. For example, the inclusion of different languages as part of the *Kopi, Teh and Contemporary Art* initiative by the Singapore Art Museum has been useful to cater to the needs of older adults who may be non-English speaking. Beside enhancing access, the familiarity with language also helps to provide a sense of social connectedness and encourage engagement. Amidst these innovative efforts to engage participants, museums also took a step further to give consideration to ensure accessibility and inclusivity of individuals with disabilities to experience arts and culture through the unique museum-based programmes. As mentioned, *Art in 90 seconds - Hope in Times of Crisis* by the National Gallery Singapore engages a sign-language interpreter, allowing individuals with auditory disabilities to also be able to enjoy the virtual museum experiences. COVID-19 not only encouraged better engagements with participants, but it also spurred museums to establish considerations to ensure accessibility for individuals with varied needs in their efforts to curate wellness during and beyond the public health crisis.

Moving forward, it is also important and useful for the museums to be mindful of the barriers that digital virtual platforms might present. Firstly, access to technology differs amongst population groups. While it appears that a good portion of the population could afford and have access to digital devices, it would be also useful to take into account those who may not have the ease of access (e.g. individuals from low-income communities, people with disability). Secondly, as Singapore strives to become a 'smart' city, digital competency and literacy amongst people can still vary. Hence, museums need to consider strategies and support for those who may not currently have the skills and knowledge to access their online content. Taking these points into consideration, museums can benefit from further partnerships with sector experts and organisations to learn about the needs and challenges of different groups in future planning and

design. This will help them to gather a holistic overview and help ensure inclusionary strategy and practice.

Conclusion

There had already been a growing interest in Singapore to offer programmes to enhance health and wellbeing, and now in this time of COVID-19, arts and wellness are more relevant than ever. Not only did the crisis spur museums to adopt and expand practices by developing digital content and programmes to maintain its connection with the public, but these digital initiatives also helped mitigate the negative health impact of COVID-19 on people (such as isolation and distress) by fostering spaces that support social interaction, engagement, stimulation as well as respite care. The positive reception and active community participation of these digital initiatives are encouraging in exemplifying the caring role of museums in our society. Taking into consideration the portability of the digital content and programme, it creates opportunities for museums to explore partnerships with community organisations and health and social care sectors to expand the reach of their collections and programmes, particularly for beneficiaries who might be bed-bound in their home or care homes. Thus, these digital contents can be a useful resource in enhancing the quality of life for the maintenance or promotion of health. Moreover, it also implicates the potential role of museums in the health landscape to deliver wider care practices through digital outreach.

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