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Current best practices of digital sociality in cultural events

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As part of Haaga-Helia's HomeOpera – Digital Social Cultural Experiences -project, Elina Moreira Kares and Aarni Tuomi explored the notion of digital sociality in various cultural events over the last two years through market research and benchmarking. In this article they collate some of the key insights and best practices they found.

The digital leap spurred by COVID-19 has had profound implications on the way people come together and interact. From virtual wine tastings to online conferences, the very human experience of meeting and being met has truly gone digital.

As part of Haaga-Helia's [HomeOpera – Digital Social Cultural Experiences](#) -project, we explored the notion of *digital sociality* in various cultural events over the last two years through market research and benchmarking. In this article we collate some of the key insights and best practices we found.

Digitalisation has altered the way we interact with the world

Technology has infiltrated our everyday lives in multiple domains from work to leisure. A meeting with a bank is organised by a chatbot, grocery shopping is done online, and face-to-face communication overall has increasingly moved to social media, bringing with it new means of social interaction: emojis, GIFs, memes, avatars, and the like.

In essence, digitalisation has irrevocably altered how we interact with the world around us, let alone each other, by modifying our social conventions, practices and expectations. As a term, digital sociality refers to how humans behave in the social context, but within this new, ever-more pervasive digital environment.

Contrasting digital sociality with face-to-face sociality, digital sociality is driven by fast-phased feedback and extensive presence of oneself and others on complex informational and affective environments (Hirdman, 2019). Characterised by what Buhalis and Sinerta (2019) coin 'nowness', digital sociality takes place in real-time, is co-created, data-driven, and user-centric.

Digitalisation has enhanced many aspects of services e.g. through availability and accessibility, but also created novel opportunities for businesses, also within the arts and culture sector. Before COVID-19, the digitalisation of cultural events mainly focused on transforming traditional cultural content into a digital form through on-demand and live streaming.

However, the digital leap spurred by the various restrictions on movement and maximum capacity in in-person events, the cultural event space experienced a major leap forward in terms of diversity of the technologies and practices used to digitalise and access content.

While research has identified social interaction as one of the key motivators for people to engage in cultural events (Levy, 2010), there is a lack of research on what this might mean in the context of the new, digitally enhanced normal. To that end, an exploration of the emergent digital sociality seems necessary to better understand the future of the cultural event sector.

Growing demand for digital cultural events

Illustrating the scale of digital cultural events, earlier this year Statista surveyed over 42 thousand Britons and found that around 57 percent of respondents had engaged with cultural events online either before or since the COVID-19 pandemic began (Statista 2021a). Of these, over two thirds reported having started engaging with cultural events virtually only after the pandemic started (Statista 2021a). Further, in another study comparing differences between age groups, all age groups were found to have increased their engagement with digital cultural content by at least 31% since the pandemic started (Statista 2021b).

In terms of digital cultural content, performances or events created specifically to be watched online were the most preferred form of digital cultural experience (preferred by 72 percent of participants), followed by a livestream or a recording of a production that had taken place since lockdown (preferred by 70 percent of participants) (Statista 2021a). Shedding insight on specific forms of digital cultural events, another survey (n=800) found that 28 percent of respondents would be willing to pay to watch opera through a dedicated online platform, with theatre (32 percent of respondents) and classical music (29 percent of respondents) receiving similar evaluations and pop music leading the pack (40 percent of respondents willing to pay for an online experience) (Statista 2021b).

As illustrated by the rapid growth in numbers, better technological capabilities have made experiencing cultural content online a feasible proposition. However, as already noted, what these offerings often lack is the social aspect of going to live performances with others, from getting ready for the experience and travelling to the venue, to experiencing the show together and discussing it afterwards.

During normal times of operation, many cultural events, venues and cultural organisations have also established a deep sense of community among their frequent visitors, the majority of which COVID-19 has left stranded without any alternative means of communication with the other members of the shared community. HomeOpera – Digital Social Cultural Experiences -project explores how such digital sociality and a feeling of community may be enhanced in virtual cultural contexts.

Current best practices of digital sociality

To explore best practices of digital sociality during COVID-19, our benchmark study analysed 10 international and diverse best practice use-cases of digital sociality over the last two years.

Overall, we found that digital sociality seems to revolve around two key pillars: 1) **interaction** and 2) **immersion**.

First, in terms of interaction, we observed two types: active and passive interaction. Active interaction referred to participants taking an active role in interacting with the content or the content producers, e.g. by asking questions from a virtual tour guide or interacting with other participants through a dedicated chat function, taking part in workshops or small group discussions, or contributing live reactions, e.g. likes, claps, cheers, emojis, and so on, to create a feeling of real-time, shared experience.

On the other hand, we also observed participants interacting with cultural content or content producers in more passive ways, whereby the interaction was not dependent on the direct reciprocity of others. These types of digital sociality included commenting or liking static content such as pictures on social media channels, using event-specific hashtags, sharing personal photos with other participants on social media, or viewing pre-recorded behind the scenes footage from the content provider.

Besides interaction we also observed digital sociality through immersion. Like with interaction, we found two key types of immersion: spatiotemporal immersion, i.e. immersion across time and space, as well as direct immersion, i.e. immersion with the actual cultural experience.

Tomorrowland's 2020 New Year's concert offers perhaps the best example of immersion across time, whereby the streaming of the global megaevent had been split across 27 time zones to create a simultaneous streaming experience for participants tuning in from all over the world. As for spatial immersion, several mixed reality approaches were observed, varying from virtual and augmented reality (e.g. Lost Horizon music festival) to DJs creating ultra-realistic soundscapes of live basketball matches to support and enhance traditional streaming of sports.

In terms of immersion with the actual cultural experiences, we saw two general trends, both borrowing ideas from traditional table top role-playing games. First, immersion through the 'main character', that is, allowing participants to decide the type of character traits they want to portray to others through the creation of personalised avatars (e.g. JVG's Ikuinen Vappu -concert). Second, immersion through interaction with the 'story' of the experience, that is, allowing participants to decide how the narrative of the experience should develop, making each 'playthrough' of the experience slightly different and thus enhancing rewatch intention (e.g. Black Mirror: Bandersnatch).

Comparing and contrasting our analysis with academic writing on the way in which individuals tend to experience events (c.f. Robertson et al., 2015; Neuhofer, Celuch and To, 2020), several parallels can be observed.

First, academic literature often emphasises the notion of *liminality* of events, whereby these types of experiences can be characterised by the act of transitioning from one's daily life to a sacred space and time that is somehow distinctive from the status quo. This seems to sit well with our thinking of the different types of immersion in digital cultural events, whereby the participants are transported through digital technology to a new reality where they might get to assume new roles, create their own digital avatars, and personalise parts of the experience to their liking in real-time.

Second, academics have argued that events revolve around the co-creation of *communitas*, that is, the act of sharing something with others who have also gathered in the same liminal space and time as the participant. This seems to resonate well with our observation of the two different types of interaction in digital cultural events, whereby technology can be used as a means to facilitate *communitas*-building through either active or passive social interaction before, during, and after the digital cultural experience.

Challenges remain

Given the rapid shift to digital, challenges with turning live performances and traditional face-to-face interaction into a virtual format are only to be expected. In their survey of over 92 thousand UK citizens, Statista found 13% say they were not confident in using the technology required to watch cultural performances online, while another 13% quoted issues of sound and/or picture quality as well as internet/broadband speed, resulting in abstaining from using digital cultural content due to expected poor performance of current technological equipment (Statista 2021b).

Our analysis found similar issues, with consumer and critic reviews of recent digital cultural events highlighting issues with both hardware and software. These included prolonged use of VR-gear taking a physical toll on the body, issues related to the instability of internet connection, and complex registration procedures or setup instructions required to get started with the experience. Besides technical and process-oriented issues, social issues were also highlighted, whereby several event-goers lamented the lack of real-time assistance during digital cultural events as well as the need for an online moderator to keep misbehaving participants from disturbing the experience of others.

Overall, despite interesting new initiatives, our benchmark study showed us that the social aspect of digital experiences is not yet addressed at the scope of its importance nor true potential, and that in many digital concepts it is still quite non-existent. Interacting with one another in face-to-face, live settings is still very much distinguishable from partaking in digital cultural content online through different technological interfaces.

To better understand these issues and to develop new, more holistic and rewarding solutions, projects like HomeOpera – Digital Social Cultural Experiences play an essential role in boosting the development of better, more holistic digital sociality to help the cultural sector recover and move past challenges brought about by COVID-19.

The findings of this study will serve as a starting point for co-creating new digital social cultural experience concepts to be used in Finland and further afield. In particular, the HomeOpera project will focus on developing new digital social cultural experiences for one key stakeholder group predicted to be most impacted by the rapid move to digital: the elderly.

About the [HomeOpera-project](#)

The benchmarking study is part of the HomeOpera – Digital Social Cultural Experiences -project, which aims to develop a concept for a social XR-service that improves elderly peoples' opportunities for a high-quality life at home. The project is

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DIGITAL SOCIAL CULTURAL EXPERIENCESLataa

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