

CULTURE CONNECTIONS:

A PILOT STUDY OF ONLINE ART CONVERSATIONS DESIGNED TO SUPPORT THE PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING OF PEOPLE LIVING WITH OR ALONGSIDE RARE FORMS OF DEMENTIA

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Project Summary

Research has shown that engaging with art activates the same brain networks as complex social behaviour (Cela-Conde et al., 2004; Cela-Conde et al., 2013.; Fox et al., 2005; Ishizu and Zeki, 2011; Ishizu and Zeki, 2013; Van Leeuwen, 2020; Vartanian and Skov, 2014; Vessel et al., 2012; Vessel et al., 2013). It is also known that different dementia syndromes specifically affect these social brain networks (Buckner et al., 2008; Galvin et al., 2011; Greicius et al., 2004; Hafkemeijer et al., 2012; Sheline and Raichle, 2013; Seeley et al., 2009). Furthermore, having an active social life has been shown to protect against dementia (Fabrigoule et al., 1995; Sommerlad et al., 2019).

The Culture Connections pilot project aimed to harness the insights from these different strands of research by developing novel online art conversations, which were specifically designed to support the psychological wellbeing of people living with, or alongside rare forms of dementia. A cross-disciplinary approach, combining art, psychology and social neuroscience was used to explore how art conversations affect (neuro)psychological wellbeing in a social context. The aim of the pilot workshops was to i) scope public interest, ii) test the content, structure and delivery and iii) measure the impact of the online art conversations on psychological wellbeing.

Four 1-hour online pilot workshops were conducted between May and July 2021, with a maximum of 8 participants in each group. Two training workshops were organised for students and professionals and two support workshops were organised for people living with, or alongside people living with rare forms of dementia. All participants were recruited from the Rare Dementia Support (RDS) Network and Impact Study. In total 27 people, with ages ranging between 18-74, took part in the Culture Connections pilot workshops: 8 students, 8 professionals, 4 people living with a rare form of dementia and 7 family member carers.

The content design of the Culture Connections workshops built further on the PhD research of Van Leeuwen (2020), which investigated the relationships between visual imagination and the social brain in healthy ageing

and dementia. The well-known facilitated arts-based conversation method called Visual Thinking Strategies, known as VTS (Housen, 1987, 1999, 2002; Yenawine, 2013), was used to explore how people engage with visual art and complex images in a series of eye tracking experiments. The research findings showed that engaging with art and complex images with VTS had both qualitative and quantitative positive effects on visual exploration, communication and affective responses in all participant groups, which included healthy young and senior adults, as well people living with various forms of dementia.

The Culture Connections pilot study investigated if VTS could be of value as an online psychological support tool for people living with, or alongside rare forms of dementia. VTS was used to facilitate online art conversations in both the training and the support workshops, whereby the training workshops had a stronger emphasis on the theoretical background and elaborated on how the facilitation techniques of the VTS method could support the psychological wellbeing of people living with, or alongside rare forms of dementia.

Both the training and the support pilot Culture Connections workshops were received very well, with 67% of all participants indicating they had enjoyed the workshop a great deal and 23% of participants indicating they had enjoyed the workshop a lot. The selected artworks were also considered very engaging by the majority of participants, with 43% indicating 'a great deal' and 23% indicating 'a lot'. Repeat interest was also high, with 60% of all participants indicating they would definitely take part again in a Culture Connections workshop and 20% indicating they would probably take part again. Social connectedness during the workshops was the strongest predictor of psychological wellbeing during the workshops across all groups ($b = .48$, $t(5)$, $p < .001$).

One aspect that could be improved concerned the choice of video platform on which the Culture Connections workshops were delivered. For security reasons, it had been advised to use the GoToMeeting platform, but this platform was less accessible than the more widely used Zoom platform for instance, and one participant in the support pilot workshops experienced so much technical difficulties he lost connection during the workshop and crashed out. Another point for potential improvement regarded the group dynamics of the support workshops. One of the workshops had been designed for participants living with rare forms of dementia to take part together with a loved one (family member carer). However, from the feedback we received we learned that participants in that group felt more inhibited to speak their mind (this worked both ways), than participants that took part in a Culture Connections workshop in peer-to-peer group setting. Another learning experience was that one participant in a support workshop, who has been diagnosed with a visuospatial variant of rare dementia called Posterior Cortical Atrophy (PCA), was triggered by one of the selected artworks in the session, which caused a burning sensation in the back of her brain as she described it in her own words. This caused such an unpleasant sensation that she had to walk away from her computer screen until the picture had been taken down. Thankfully the participant didn't experience a lasting negative impact from this incident. Upon further enquiry it was established that this situation unfortunately could not have been avoided either, as the participant was unable to predict what particular elements in a visual scene might trigger the reaction she experienced.

The best advice at this point is therefore to have a couple of back-up artworks ready, in case the selected artworks for a Culture Connections workshop cause a strongly negative response in a participant (either physiologically or psychologically).

The project was a spin-off from the UCL I&E-funded [CelebrAGE Innovation Network](#) and expanded on a successful working relationship with the social enterprise [The Thinking Eye](#), while simultaneously developing a new cross-disciplinary collaboration with the [UCL Rare Dementia Support \(RDS\) Impact Study](#). The mission of CelebrAGE is to celebrate ageing by exploring and repurposing existing technologies that enable the population to enjoy a healthier and more independent old age. The Rare Dementia Support (RDS) Impact Study is aimed at better understanding the lived experiences of people affected by rare dementias, in an effort to improve support services and quality of life. The Thinking Eye is a social enterprise which aims to open up minds by combining art and social neuroscience to create inclusive and interconnected worlds.

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