Institute of Policy Studies

Report on IPS-NAC Arts & Culture Research Symposium 2022: The Role of Arts in Well-Being and Social Inclusion
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Background

In 2017, the National Arts Council (NAC) launched the Arts & Culture Research Symposium to create greater awareness of the diversity of arts research and to encourage more collaborations between researchers and arts practitioners in Singapore. This year, the Arts & Culture Research Symposium was jointly organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and NAC on 25 August 2022. Over 170 participants, ranging from policymakers, artists and creatives, academics, and medical, social sector and mental health practitioners attended the symposium, which focused on the themes of well-being and social inclusion. The symposium was also livestreamed to about 80 participants.

The symposium featured an opening address by NAC's Chief Executive Officer, Mrs Rosa Daniel, followed by an overview of key trends and future trajectory of the arts sector by NAC's Deputy Chief Executive for Planning and Corporate Development Ms Lynette Pang, presentations by three academic speakers, and a panel discussion. The panel discussion was moderated by Dr Justin Lee, Senior Research Fellow at the IPS. The speakers were Dr Kathleen Agres, Assistant Professor and Principal Investigator of the Music Cognition Lab at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music at the National University of Singapore; Dr Victor Zhuang, Research Fellow at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information at the Nanyang Technological University; and Dr Jesvin Yeo, Associate Professor at the School of Art, Design and Media, College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences at the Nanyang Technological University.

Priorities for Singapore's art sector in the next five years

In her opening address, Mrs Daniel spoke about NAC's blueprint to improve Singapore's arts sector. This comprised the upcoming *Our SG Arts Plan (2023–2027)* that maps Singapore's priorities for the arts sector over the next five years. The next phase of *Our SG Arts Plan (2023–2027)* focuses on developing three key pillars. The first pillar is sustaining Singapore as a connected society. Speaking on the social impact of the arts, Mrs Daniel said that the NAC was interested in expanding research on the applicability of new ideas like social prescribing in healthcare and the use of other arts-based interventions to improve people's well-being. The second pillar is transforming Singapore into a distinctive city. The arts help to

strengthen community bonds through architecture, placemaking and the design of shared spaces and activities. Therefore, she said that artists, urban planners and architects should share their ideas and expertise. The third pillar is growing the creative economy. The pandemic brought about an unprecedented set of challenges for the arts sector. Over the last two years, the NAC conducted independent COVID-19 studies to better understand how to design support schemes to freelancers, the self-employed and companies. Moving forward, it would continue to use these insights gained to address the sector's needs, especially since technology has opened up new opportunities and markets. In order to prepare for future challenges, Mrs Daniel encouraged researchers, practitioners and establishments to conduct more multidisciplinary research in fields like economics, law, business, behavioural sciences, social geography and education to foster more local, global and cross-industry partnerships. On its part, the NAC would continue working closely with arts councils, academic institutions and arts establishments to produce good insights to sustain a thriving arts sector in Singapore.

Adding to Mrs Daniel's points on the future trajectory of the arts sector, Ms Pang said that Singapore's arts sector in the next five years would be influenced by these five macro trends: (1) the arts becoming more accessible due to digitalisation; (2) people's growing perception of the arts as a form of self-expression and change; (3) the rise of the Asian cultural wave in popular media; (4) the de-linearisation of the arts where artists can directly sell their work in digital markets; and (5) the arts as a part of everyday life. Hence, arts practitioners and other key stakeholders must stay updated on such shifting market trends and consumer preferences. Moving forward, *Our SG Arts Plan (2023–2027)* will drive more research, collaborations and support artistic excellence in these areas.

Leveraging music interventions and technology for health

In her presentation, Dr Agres spoke about music's ability to improve people's psychological, physiological and social well-being. For example, studies have found that music can reduce anxiety and depression among people. It can also improve memory for patients with dementia and Alzheimer's disease as well as the motor skills of stroke patients, and spark new social connections.

On the role of technology in healthcare, Dr Agres spoke about how music can be integrated into real-time, interactive and patient-centric technology that support people's cognition, emotions and physical health. She also added that music interventions and technology have an added advantage of being easily accessible, non-invasive and non-pharmaceutical in nature. Furthermore, there is no stigma attached to using music to improve well-being. Some examples of how music technology can be meaningfully used in healthcare include using data analytics to track the intervention outcomes on people's motor skills and providing new digital interfaces to support music therapy sessions.

Dr Agres also shared her own interdisciplinary research designed to support person-centred care and evidence-based treatments. For example, her team used the Brain Computer Interface (BCI) system that applied algorithmic music to capture and influence people's affective state in real time. The system also allowed listeners to mediate their own emotions

by interacting with the music. Through this, she showed how music technology is powerful in allowing people to self-regulate their emotions, which can improve their mental health. Therefore, she encouraged music practitioners to engage in more interdisciplinary conversations and to design more activities for the community and bespoke technologies for healthcare. She concluded her presentation by asking policymakers to provide more funding, resource support and spaces to develop more of such long-term and sustainable programmes for people.

Ways to do disability-led work

In his presentation, Dr Zhuang spoke about the efforts to support disability-led arts and artists in Singapore. He emphasised how critical it is that the arts have afforded disabled people an opportunity to not only showcase their talents and skills, but also to bring to the table their own unique perspectives on how society can be organised. Some examples of these artists include Dr Dawn-joy Leong, an autistic multidisciplinary artist whose work sheds light on the experiences of the disabled community; Mr Ramesh Meyyappan, a deaf theatre artist who performed in sign language during the 2013 National Day Parade; and Ms Grace Lee-Khoo, founder of Access Path Productions and a pioneer member of Singapore's first disability-led theatre production, titled *And Suddenly I Disappear… the Singapore 'd' Monologues.*

Apart from the realm of performances, Dr Zhuang also spoke about supporting artists who produce and sell merchandise. He gave examples of how social enterprises like The Art Faculty and platforms like i'mable Collective enable the disabled community to share their own unique perspectives and ideas with the public. Dr Zhuang said that such endeavours and support by stakeholders like the NAC are important in building a more inclusive arts ecosystem in Singapore. He was heartened that NAC was at the forefront of championing disability-led arts supporting disabled artists. He encouraged participants in the symposium to support the disabled community by attending their performances as well as by paying them adequately when commissioning their work or buying their products. Above all of these, he said that a key way to promote inclusion in the arts sector would be to support disabled artists to produce the work that they do in a way that is disabled-led. This would provide them with more agency and could also be a form of generative embodiment and knowledge. He explained that one way to do this would be to cast disabled people to play disabled characters in dramas or plays. To support a more inclusive future for the disabled arts community, Dr Zhuang stressed that we need to put our biases aside and embrace disability.

Research methods to assess the impact of art and design on wellness

In her presentation, Dr Yeo spoke about how the positive association between engagement in the arts and wellness is reflected in four key areas — such as the increase in emotional functioning (e.g., increase in self-esteem); social functioning (e.g., decrease in social isolation); physical functioning (e.g., lower disease burden); and cognitive functioning (e.g., increase in ability to concentrate). Nevertheless, despite the growing body of research on the benefits of the arts on people, Dr Yeo highlighted some existing gaps that need to be addressed by arts researchers. These include a lack of focus on the digital and electronic arts, which have gained popularity since the pandemic as well as the lack of proper standard measures for the arts in

public health. She also added that currently, there is limited research focus on the impact of arts intervention among different cultural and socioeconomic groups as well as on the applicability of research from the hospital to the community setting. Moving forward, she said there should be more regular and longer-term follow-up to evaluate the sustainability of arts intervention outcomes over time.

Dr Yeo also provided an overview of the different forms of research methodologies to assess the impact of arts-based interventions in society. Some examples of these include outcome evaluation studies that measure the objectives of art programmes through quantitative or qualitative methods, as well as the Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach where researchers and community stakeholders act as equal partners in the research process. She elaborated on the newer forms of study designs, such as creative research methods that address more complex research in terms of identifying emerging trends or aspects of social life. She concluded her presentation by saying that design research needs to be relevant, purposeful, extensible and well documented. Through this, it will allow others to learn from existing research and subsequently build on more ideas in the future.

Panel discussion

Consequences of artistic interventions on people and society

During the discussion, IPS Senior Research Fellow Dr Justin Lee asked the speakers on whether certain artistic interventions have a negative consequence on people's health. Relating to this, he also asked if there are "good" or "bad" forms of art. In response, Dr Yeo said that any form of intervention, be it medical or technological, can have negative repercussions on people. Therefore, arts researchers are often cautious in their work. For example, she pointed out that research involving human subjects must adhere to the Institutional Review Board (IRB)'s regulations to minimise possible risks. Adding to this, Dr Zhuang said that the definitions of "good" and "bad" art are subjective as they are highly dependent on the values prevalent in a society. Such definitions will also change over time depending on the context. Dr Agres agreed with Dr Zhuang on the difficulty of attributing the value of the arts. She felt that in the context of the work of music therapists, while technology has enabled them to work with more patients virtually, it has also created a loss of human connection. Hence, while technology allows us to experiment with new modes of production and design, she said that we must be mindful of their limitations.

Challenges in creating greater inclusivity in the arts ecosystem

A participant suggested that physical events such as seminars and forums may not always be accessible to the disabled community. He asked Dr Zhuang what the key obstacles in creating greater inclusivity in such events were. In response, Dr Zhuang said that while we have yet to "drastically alter" the mode of presentations in seminars or discussions held in-person, he said that with the pandemic and the advent of virtual platforms like Zoom, such events are now becoming more accessible and inclusive. He expressed confidence that in Singapore, with more awareness on the different needs of the disabled community and with the push for

greater inclusivity, event organisers can accommodate the disabled community, for example, by having sign language interpreters, building ramps on stage for wheelchair users and providing other necessary facilities. Nevertheless, Dr Zhuang also acknowledged that the disabled community itself is not homogeneous and therefore, the community's needs may vary. As such, he said that it is not possible to have a fixed or singular mode of presentation that is suitable for the entire disabled community; instead, we need to provoke different forms of thinking around disability.

Caption for photo: Dr Kathleen Agres (left), Dr Victor Zhuang (left), Dr Jesvin Yeo (right) & Dr Justin Lee (right) during the panel discussion. Photo by Jacky Ho, for the Institute of Policy Studies.

The value of in-person and participatory arts programmes

Alluding to Dr Agres' presentation, a participant asked about the differences between the impact of music generated by human musicians and that of recorded or computer-generated music. In response, Dr Agres said that practitioners and researchers should not use technology as a tool simply because they can do so. Instead, it is important to carefully consider the objectives of an intervention and its impact on people. For example, she explained that the BCI system in her study was used because it could react in real time to listeners' brain activities, which was useful in improving mental health outcomes. She added that participatory music (e.g., group drumming) or any activity that involves people making music together in-person provides a richer and more invigorating experience, compared with virtual activities.

Moving from "technological disruptions" to "technological embracement"

A participant shared his observations that in the last decade, more people have embraced technology. Digital and virtual platforms today provide word-for-word subtitles, which make the experience of watching plays or shows more convenient when compared with live performances. However, a trade-off of such digital experiences is that people lose the sense of "embodied engagement" and "unique experiences" with others. He asked the panel for their views on this trade-off. In response, Dr Zhuang said that technology has greatly aided the disabled community through features such as captions and audio descriptions, which has enabled people with different needs to become more involved in performances. Dr Yeo agreed with him that technology has created meaningful experiences for people. She gave the example of a project by her student who used virtual reality to help caregivers experience what it is like to live with dementia. Dr Agres added that technology can help to both divide and enable people. Its impact is largely dependent on how it is being used. While she acknowledged that technology has made the arts more accessible, she felt that in-person activities still tend to be the most impactful and meaningful.

Instrumental value versus aesthetic value of the arts

A participant asked about the underlying tensions between creating art for instrumental purposes (e.g., for social inclusion) and creating arts for art's sake (i.e., focusing on the aesthetic value of the arts). Expanding this question further in the context of disability-led arts, Dr Lee asked Dr Zhuang about instances where certain forms of art produced by the disabled community are seen as bringing value to the arts world, whereas other forms are perceived as being poorer in quality and become part of charity initiatives. In response, Dr Zhuang said that as a society, we should challenge ourselves to think differently about existing notions like meritocracy, which prescribes certain standards that people have to meet in order to be seen as successful. With disability, ideas and perceptions towards success and performances will have to change. He gave the example of his upcoming book, which features a chapter that Mr Cavan Chang who has Down Syndrome, co-wrote with Dr Dawn-joy Leong. He shared how Dr Leong, who is articulate, wrote the first part of the chapter while Mr Chan took the more creative route by expressing his ideas through pictures. Dr Zhuang felt that such presentations help us to re-think the normative ideas of writing and performances. Adding to this, Dr Agres said that the purpose of creating arts — whether for health, entertainment or aesthetic purposes — depends on specific contexts and objectives creators have in mind.

Evaluating the instrumental value of the arts

Some participants asked the panel on how to measure the impact of the arts on people's well-being. They asked how careful researchers needed to be when assessing the impact of certain interventions, which may be disruptive or cause certain people to experience negative emotions. In response to this, Dr Agres reiterated her earlier point on paying close attention to the objectives of interventions. She said that evidence-based approaches are important as they clearly depict the impact of the arts on people's health and behaviours, for example through the measure of transfer tests. However, if the purpose of creating art is to challenge

certain normative or hegemonic views in society, then the usual outcome measures (e.g., measuring heartbeat rate) may not be applicable. Dr Yeo agreed with Dr Agres' view that the purpose of an arts project or research is important. She emphasised the importance of being true to the data gathered by recording it — whether it is positive or negative, so that it can allow others to build on it as well.

Establishing a central repository of arts research

A participant asked if there is a central repository that matches researchers wanting to do research with arts organisations seeking their help to conduct research for them. He felt that it was important for practitioners to develop their research expertise so as to expand the capabilities of the arts ecosystem. He asked about the possibility of having a system to match practitioners with researchers. In response, Dr Agres and Dr Yeo felt that such a system will encourage and facilitate more interdisciplinary work that is required in the current ecosystem.

Improving researchers' and arts practitioners' well-being

During the final part of the discussion, a participant asked the panel how arts practitioners and researchers like themselves can stay motivated and remain positive in their line of work. In response, Dr Yeo said that it is timely to conduct more research on improving the well-being of arts practitioners. This will allow policymakers and other stakeholders to better address their needs as well. Drawing on his experiences working with the disabled community, Dr Zhuang said that his motivation stemmed from wanting society to embrace more diversity and inclusion. As a society, we can do even more to support and embrace the community by valuing their work and ideas, he said. Dr Agres concluded the discussion by sharing that her motivation for engaging in arts research stemmed from wanting to leverage the potential of the arts and arts spaces in Singapore so as to build a healthier and happier society.

Concluding remarks

In her concluding remarks, NAC's Chief Research Officer, Dr Sharon Chang, shared NAC's schematic to identify existing research gaps and guide research funding. A high priority was finding ways to improve the measurement of economic, social, cultural and urban impacts of the arts in Singapore. Importantly, to understand what types of new insights were needed to underpin support for the arts, NAC would increase engagement with artmakers, audiences and entrepreneurs and other stakeholders in the arts ecosystem. In the near future, NAC would adopt a "3-D approach" to spark more research, comprising publishing more *data* on its website for people to use, creating a *directory* of researchers working on arts and culture research and developing a *database* of research abstracts.

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If you have comments or feedback, please email *ips.update@nus.edu.sg*