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Arts and culture online for mental health in young people: A qualitative interview study

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Abbreviations

OAC: Online Arts and Culture

CMD: Common Mental Disorder

Word Count

5022

Abstract

Objectives: This study aimed to understand young people's perception of the potential utility of arts and culture, focussing on online access, for supporting their mental health. **Design:** A qualitative interview study. **Setting:** Online. **Participants:** Participants aged 16-24 were selected by purposeful sampling from an online survey of arts and culture for mental health and wellbeing. **Method:** Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted from 30th July to 9th Sept 2020 with thirteen participants who were socio-demographically diverse and varied in their use of online arts and culture (OAC) and in their level of psychological distress. Rich interview data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. **Results:** Participants identified that culture and the arts could be helpful for their mental health, online engagement had some advantages over in-person engagement and benefits were greater with regular use. Participants described that the features of OAC most likely to benefit mental health were diverse human stories about personal challenges and a variety of viewpoints with which they could connect on a human level. This brought a sense of perspective and provided opportunities for reflection, learning, escapism, creativity, exploration and discovery. Perceived impacts on mental health included the disruption of negative thought patterns, lifting of mood and increased feelings of calm and proactivity. **Conclusions:** This study demonstrates that young people have a critical level of insight and understanding regarding their mental health and ways in which it might be improved. These findings can be used to optimise the mental health benefits of OAC in an engaging and acceptable way for young people. These methodologies could be applied to other types of community resource for mental health.

Key Words: Adolescent, Art, Culture, Mental health

Strengths and limitations

- This is the first study of which we are aware to explore young people perceptions of the potential utility of arts and culture online for mental health, and was devised with PPI input
- Research team members were multidisciplinary, diverse, and reflexive in their approach
- The findings of this study appear credible and dependable with cohesion and consistency in the themes identified
- Despite participants being identified through an online survey which may have allowed a degree of volunteer bias, we were able to identify information-rich participants, with substantial sociodemographic diversity, a range of psychological distress scores, and varied previous use of arts and culture

Introduction

Mental illness is a large and increasingly recognised problem in young people, with the onset of three quarters of all lifetime cases of mental disorder occurring before the age of 24 [1]. Common mental disorders (CMDs), such as anxiety and depression, are not only distressing in young people but also impact on recurrent disorder [2] and suicidality in the long-term [3] even when the young person's symptoms do not reach the diagnostic threshold for mental disorder at the time [4]. Only a minority of young people access professional help for CMDs [5]. The main barriers to help seeking are lack of recognition of their own mental health problem, lack of awareness of help available, and stigma [5-11]. Moreover, often the young people most in need of mental health support, such as ethnic minorities, are the least likely to seek help [5-7, 12, 13].

It is increasingly recognised that professional help, such as the provision of antidepressant medication and/or talking therapies, are neither accessible nor acceptable to many young people [10, 11]. Moreover, not all of the few young people who access professional help have a measurable improvement of symptoms. Evidence suggests that only around half of adolescents who received professional help for depression between 2011 and 2015 from specialist mental health services in England showed a reliable improvement by the time they left treatment [14]. Subsequently, epidemiological studies have demonstrated that mental health dramatically worsened in young people during the COVID-19 pandemic [15] and accessibility to mental health care decreased even further [16]. Thus, there is a compelling need for more evidence-based resources that are engaging, accessible, and that meet the mental health needs of young people as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, consideration of other approaches appears timely [14].

It is generally accepted that culture and the arts are good for mental health and wellbeing [17-22]. The proposed mechanisms are thought to include emotional activation, aesthetic engagement, social interaction, cognitive stimulation, sensory activation and imagination [17, 21, 22]. However, there is a dearth of experimental research in this area. We commenced a preregistered evidence synthesis [23] of trials evaluating community resources including engagement with arts and culture on anxiety and depression. We screened 15534 unique titles and abstracts and found no trials evaluating the effectiveness of online arts and culture (OAC) for depression and anxiety in young people.

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3 During the first UK lockdown we attempted to gain a deeper understanding of the use of online arts and culture and
4 its potential benefits to mental health and well-being, sociodemographic characteristics and self-reported data on
5 usage, perceived mental health benefits and health status. In total, 1056 people completed the survey. A high
6 proportion of participants reported finding online culture helpful for mental health. Those aged under 25 years were
7 less likely to be regular users of online culture or to have increased their use during lockdown. Therefore, it appears
8 that engagement with culture and the arts may be poorest for those who might benefit the most [24], particularly
9 young people.
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20 Whilst there is increasing interest in community assets in improving health, there is currently a lack of evidence for
21 these resources for CMDs in young people [25]. There is also a lack of engagement of young people in determining
22 the most fruitful approaches to support their mental health [25], most being investigated from the perspective of mental
23 health professionals [25].
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29 *Aims and Objectives*

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31 Given the current research gap regarding the use of arts and culture as an approach to addressing CMDs in young
32 people [25], particularly online engagement which might be more widely accessible we set out to conduct a study to
33 investigate the potential utility of OAC for CMDs in people aged 16-24. We aimed to interview socio-
34 demographically diverse participants aged 16-24 years in order to generate theory on the potential use and
35 optimisation of arts and culture, particularly online access for CMDs in young people.
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42 **Methods**

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44 A qualitative interview study was chosen in order to gain a rich description of the views of young people about arts
45 and culture for mental health, whether this was a promising approach for supporting their mental health and to give
46 them the opportunity to raise issues of significance to them. Participants aged 16-24 were purposefully sampled
47 from an online survey of arts and culture for mental health and wellbeing [26]. As per the survey, arts and culture
48 was defined as content provided by cultural institutions, such as museums, theatres, art galleries, libraries, archives
49 and natural heritage organisations.
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3 The Oxford University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) granted ethical approval for this study prior to its
4 commencement (Ethics referenc: R70187/RE005). All participants were given £10 for every hour of participation.
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6 We used the COREQ checklist for the comprehensive and explicit reporting of qualitative studies [27] and used the
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8 techniques described by Mays and Pope [28] to ensure study quality and rigour.
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11 12 13 Public and Patient Involvement

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15 There was public and patient involvement (PPI) in this study which commenced prior to the outset. PPI informed this
16 study design, topic guide and interpretation of the results. With several PPI we explored the utility of arts and culture
17 in mental health service users who were not necessarily already familiar with OAC. During this consultation, people
18 with lived experience of mental health problems said that lack of engagement with culture and the arts was not due to
19 lack of interest but more related to lack of knowledge about how to access it. They thought that people from the target
20 population should be an active part of any strategy to understand the potential use of such resources for mental health
21 benefit.
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32 Recruitment

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34 Recruitment of participants for the online survey of arts and culture for mental health and wellbeing took place
35 between 17th June and 22nd July 2020. Recruitment was carried out via Facebook adverts, Student Unions, a Press
36 Release, a pop-up advert that appeared on the Ashmolean Museum website and public relations avenues (e.g.
37 Twitter, Newsletter), and Patient and Public Involvement (PPI) groups (based in Oxford and Blackpool).
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39 Participants followed the link to e-consent procedures in order to enter the survey. In all 78 people who completed
40 the initial survey were between 16 and 24 years of age.
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48 The initial online survey [26] included items to elicit socio-demographic characteristics and psychological distress
49 using the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) [29] to give an indication of probable mental disorder [30]. We
50 utilised purposeful sampling techniques [31] to recruit information rich participants.
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55 Procedure

Selected participants were emailed to alert them to the opportunity of participating in this study and a link was provided to further information and an online consent form for further contact. Once online consent was provided, an email was sent to organise an interview at a convenient time and mode (by Zoom or telephone) for the participant. All but one of the interviews were conducted via Zoom and hosted by the research team. The other interview was conducted via telephone at the request of the participant. Oral consent procedures were used at the outset of each interview and interviews were recorded. Interviews were scheduled for up to one hour and took between 45 minutes to one hour to complete.

Qualitative Interviews

The interview topic guide and sample questions were developed by members of the study team (RJSS, HA and JR) based on a literature review, the online survey and the PPI interviews described above. Areas of inquiry and sample questions for use in the qualitative interviews are outlined in Table 1

Table 1: Areas of inquiry and sample questions

Area of enquiry	Sample Questions
Activities and experiences that benefit mental health	What sorts of things have helped your mental health and wellbeing in your everyday life?
	Is there anything that has helped particularly during the pandemic?
	Was there anything that helped particularly before the pandemic?
	Can you describe how they affect your mental health?
Ways in which online arts and culture could be useful for mental health	Do you think online arts and culture could be useful for mental health and wellbeing?
	What sorts of related experiences do you think are or could be helpful?
	What sorts of impact might they have on mental health?
Ways in which online arts and culture could be improved for mental health	In what ways could online arts and culture be improved?
	What sorts of things might they target- mood/anxiety related?
	Other elements -connection to others, daily structure, stimulation, other?
Engagement with online arts and culture for mental health	Do you or would you consider visiting online arts and culture if you thought it could help your mental health and wellbeing?
	What would attract you to accessing online arts and culture that might help with mental health and wellbeing?
	When do you think would be best to use it, for example, at all times, or when you have noticed a problem?
	Is it something would like as a series or programme, if so, about how many sessions, how would you like to be engaged?
Engagement with research in online culture for mental health	How do you think the results of this research can be optimised for young people's mental health?
	Is there anything you think it would be useful to test for?
	Where and how would you like to see the results?
	If the resource is found to improve mental health in young people, how would you like to see it used?

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3 The research team was comprised of multidisciplinary researchers including a Consultant Psychiatrist and
4 experienced qualitative researcher in adolescent mental health (RJSS) who worked collaboratively on the project. In
5 addition, another experienced qualitative researcher was an integral member of the study team (MG) as well as a
6 broad range of researchers from multiple disciplines. Participants were not previously known to the research team.
7 All interviews were conducted by RJSS and one other interviewer, with up to four silent observers to take field notes
8 and to ensure documentation of non-verbal cues and accurate transcribing of interviews. Interviews were audio-
9 recorded, transcribed and analysed as soon as feasible following the interviews.
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18 Data Analysis

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20 Qualitative interviews and analyses were conducted concurrently. The data collected in the interviews were analysed
21 as soon as possible after the interviews to minimise information loss. Four members of the research team undertook
22 the analysis (JR, LBe, RJSS and LBo) following the six phases reflexive thematic analysis as described by Braun
23 and Clarke [32, 33]. Multiple coders were chosen for a collaborative and reflexive analysis designed to develop a
24 richer and more nuanced reading of the data with the sense-checking of ideas and an exploration of assumptions and
25 interpretations of the data [34].
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34 The analysis was approached from a constructivist epistemological orientation adopting a bidirectional
35 understanding of the language/experience relationship. The data was interpreted with an experiential orientation
36 prioritising the participants own descriptions of their experiences and opinions. We analysed the dataset inductively
37 and deductively. Latent coding was adopted with the research team playing an active role in interpreting codes and
38 developing and then challenging themes and identifying relevance to the research objectives [33, 34].
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45 Coding was developed with the aid of NVivo 12 [35]. Units of text were assigned nodes and themes and subthemes
46 were developed and then refined and explored in more depth in subsequent interviews in an iterative process.

47 Themes and subthemes were generated, reviewed and revised with regular discussion. During these discussions, the
48 researchers reflected on assumptions and prior knowledge and explored the data to develop new themes.

49 Descriptions of themes and subthemes were returned to participants for comment.
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Results

Participants

Thirteen participants aged between 19 and 24 years were interviewed between 30th July to 9th Sept 2020; four of whom identified as male, seven as female and two as non-binary. Participants were socio-demographically diverse and geographically dispersed with a range of levels of psychological distress (please see Table 2). Of the thirteen participants, nine were regular users of OAC, defined as engagement with OAC once a month or more. No participants dropped out after informed consent was provided.

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3 Participants spoke about how arts and culture in general effected their mental health in general as well as about the
4 effects of online engagement. Mental health impacts were described as being those that they had actually
5 experienced themselves, either through OAC, or elsewhere that they thought could be easily applied to OAC.
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7 Themes and subthemes are described in Table 3 along with exemplary quotes using pseudonyms to identify
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9 participants.
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16 *Arts and Culture for mental health*

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18 There was an overall sense that culture and the arts had benefits to mental health and wellbeing in young people.
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20 This was described in multiple ways. Some described the aesthetic content of the work provoking an emotional
21 response allowing the self to reflect or identify with the feelings of the artist and shifting one's own mindset,
22 promoting empathy and reducing loneliness. More generally this was described as a sense of human connection
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24 bringing a broader context and sense of perspective.
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29 *'Art can be something you connect with that touches you on a personal level. It can lead to philosophical*
30 *thoughts as when we consider everything else and the wider perspective, we can feel less alone in our feelings*
31 *and our problems don't seem as big as a result'. Nina, female, Asian/British*
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33 *'When something bad in life happens it impacts you, when you look at magnificent dark landscape such as*
34 *by Van Gogh, it can remind you that you are not alone. Dark emotive imagery can be calming. It can show*
35 *darkness that perhaps the artist felt or that others relate to and feel that you are not alone in sometimes*
36 *having those feels. You step out of yourself, which helps to make things that are currently going on in your*
37 *life not seem so bad.'* Nina, female, Asian/British
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	Themes	Description	Exemplary Quotes
Benefits of Online	Flexible engagement	Can be accessed regularly, remotely, and as and when needed	'However, the important thing is having something that you can just access when you need it
	Diverse content	Content from around the world and from different global cultures and periods of history	'You don't have to go to the place. You can watch it whenever you want. You can watch something in a different country that is at a different time[zone]. It has added value.'
	Stories and depth of commentary	More detailed descriptions of the humans behind the art and an increased depth and breadth of commentary.	I liked that online people can take you through and explain things a little more as I felt more connected to it. I liked knowing why paintings were made.
Engagement preferences	Regular	Regular engagement with frequency and timing managed by the individual to help form a routine and add daily structure	The more you're doing it regularly the more your anxiety doesn't build up again so it's good to keep using it
	Familiarity	Introduction at an earlier stage	We should promote [online cultural content] more in schools. Not everyone has parents that are interested in culture. Getting them interested from an early age could help them develop a lifelong interest which in turn would benefit them.
	Not therapy 'for mental health'	Can be put off by content explicitly for mental health and wellbeing, such as 'mindfulness'	Personally I don't find mindfulness really helpful. Perhaps if it was something more general that I was interested in that was targeted in mental health I would be interested.
	Substantial	Engaging with deep content (rather than brief content)	'The content helps me to be calm. It's about zoning out of your mind-set and calming down'
	Optional contribution/ co-production	Optional interaction with the content and co-production opportunities	Enhancing the content can be more fun and also more informative. You wouldn't just stare at the picture but be more involved or more absorbed. A lot of culture has been lost through this. Some people there are now taking action and taking ownership of their heritage. I see this as very positive. It is them turning over information which is commonly perceived as true.'
Ingredients	Human Stories	Engaging stories about people who they could relate to. Stories about people facing challenges such as not fitting in, mental health difficulties or facing transition. Importance of diversity and historic context in being able to transcend time and place and provide a sense of perspective	'How they overcame challenges is important, just as much as hearing about their success. I don't think it's helpful to hear about good things about someone as it's not an accurate perception of their life. Even if they have been really successful they will have had challenges at some point and it's important to hear about that.'
	Alternative viewpoints	Viewpoints of different people (need not be 'live') from a wide variety of people, not necessarily famous people or professionals.	Both expressing your views and hearing other people's views is helpful. It is also good to have diverse views... Most of the time, your social circle shares the same views as you but I think it's also good to hear opposing views so you can question your own views.'
	Diversity	Need for representation of a variety of people from different places and periods in history with representation of different ethnicities, gender identity and sexual orientation	Sometimes when I am in a museum like the Ashmolean and I see fewer people around Asian and Indian art, it feels personal. Representation in art is important as it shapes how you perceive it. I always feel really moved when I see representation of Indian people because it is so rare. It's easier to find online. We feel connected to art and artists that represent things that we can relate to.'

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Mechanisms (through Human Connection)	Relatability	Importance of being able to relate to people in stories (eg artists) on a human level	'The hook could be just everyday information about people. How other people live and day to day life. Its immediately relatable to me because that's my life'.
	Reflection	Using the opportunity of engaging with other peoples experiences and viewpoints to reflect on your own internal experience	Sometimes hearing what others are feeling helps you to think about your own thoughts and feelings and helps you to empathise with others too.'
	Perspective	Using the opportunity of engaging with diverse content to bring a sense of perspective to ones own personal struggles	It helps relate it to yourself and in some way either empathise with the people at the time or give you some kind of perspective in your life. For example, looking at [cultural] things like the plague and thinking of other people that have experienced a similar kind of pandemic and thinking we will be okay. It's not the end; knowing it has happened before.'
	Exploration and discovery	The feeling of exploring and getting 'lost', allowing serendipitous discovery of lost or hidden stories	I like the journey of hunting something down and searching it myself rather than instantly finding it or being handed it really easily.'
	Learning	Learning applied to both learning about art and culture but also about the way other people respond to challenges	It's about learning new things. I'm a quite curious person. I get to see things that I don't normally see.
	Creativity	Being inspired to be creative oneself or witnessing creativity in others that you connect with	Creativity can express things in a way that therapy can't always do.
	Escapism	Being able to use stories to imagine being in a different context	I find that it is a form of escapism. When you watch a play you are watching other people's lives and perspectives'
Outcomes	Reduce negativity	Disruption of negative thought patterns by engaging with different stories and viewpoints that differ from your own	'I tend to think in black and white and have polarising thoughts. Doing these things gives me another way of thinking'
	Lift mood	Engaging with arts and culture can serve to increase positive affect	'I just think we need to see more content that makes us happy and smile to lift our mood in that moment, and just be a remind that we don't have to feel sad or stuck in the mind-set we are in.'
	Calming	Feelings of calm and help with insomnia	'Dark emotive imagery can be calming. It can show darkness that perhaps the artist felt or that others relate to and feel that you are not alone in sometimes having those feelings. You step out of yourself, which helps to make things that are currently going on in your life not seem so bad'.
	Proactivity	Feeling more proactive to do something creative or motivated for social activism	'If you have done something nice it can be uplifting and inspire you to do other things that day. It can make you feel more motivated and proactive'.

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5 *Online arts and culture (OAC)*

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7 Participants said that online engagement with OAC had great potential for improving mental health and described
8 some benefits over in-person engagement. They highlighted that online engagement had several advantages over in-
9 person experiences as online content could be accessed regularly, remotely and on demand. Many described that
10 they could access it as and when they felt they needed it, such as when experiencing negative or anxious thoughts, or
11 late at night. They also described how it improved access to younger people who might not have the independent
12 means of getting themselves to a museum or art gallery and whose families might not take them regularly. They
13 described that online engagement also gives them access to a wider variety of diverse content.
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22 *'However, the important thing is having something that you can just access when you need it.'* Alex, non-
23 binary, White

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25 *'You don't have to go to the place. You can watch it whenever you want. You can watch something in a*
26 *different country that is at a different time[zone]. It has added value.'* Jake, male, White
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30 In addition, online engagement was seen as being able to offer more detailed descriptions of the humans behind the
31 art, an increased depth and breadth of commentary and more varied perspectives.
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36 *'Online can offer the narrative behind the artists that museums don't do as easily.'* Nina, female,
37 Asian/British
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43 Participants also described advantages of online arts and culture as providing positive alternatives to social media and
44 other typical online content. For example, some spoke about social media and other online experiences as having a
45 negative impact on their mental health, feeling like they got drawn into scrolling online content for unanticipated long
46 periods of time with no purpose. In addition, many described that many online experiences become like 'echo
47 chambers' where similar viewpoints and perspective are shared. They described feelings of nervousness of expressing
48 alternative views that might differ or be perceived as unpopular, whereas they felt that they would benefit from being
49 exposed to a variety of viewpoints, promoting a shift in perspective (see Viewpoints, below).
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5 *'Especially during lockdown, I didn't get along well with my phone at all.....On your phone there's this*
6 *constant thing of checking of messages, seeing what you have or haven't got, checking who is online,*
7 *scrolling down Facebook with no real purpose. Because your phone is always with you. Your phone*
8 *sometimes stops you from getting up for things. Then you get that negative realisation that you've just laid*
9 *in your bed for an hour and not made anything of it.'* Tom, male, White

10 11 12 13 Regularity of use

14 Many participants described that the mental health benefits of arts and culture were greater with regular use. Some
15 said that they had been introduced to arts and culture at an early age and that this familiarity meant that they felt
16 more comfortable accessing it at times of need. Many preferred to engage with OAC regularly to maximise the
17 benefits and then to dip into it when they felt particularly in need, for example when feeling low, anxious or unable
18 to sleep. Some also described that it was not that they benefitted from regular engagement but rather experienced
19 negative consequences when they couldn't do it.
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27 *'These are effects that are like a domino effect, it comes up again and again, so I will regularly feel the*
28 *benefit and this gets stronger with time'.* Jo, non-binary, White
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31 32 **Ingredients**

33 *Human stories*

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35 Human stories of real individuals based on relatable human experiences were identified as an important way in
36 which the mental health benefits could be optimised from OAC. This could be the story of the artist or other
37 individuals whose life journey was connected with art or artefacts. In particular, they wanted to hear the stories of
38 people they could relate to who had experienced challenges. Such challenges included facing transition, not fitting
39 in, or experiencing mental health difficulties. Stories describing human experiences (relationships, beliefs, hopes,
40 behaviours and feelings) resonated more than standard birth to death biographical accounts centred on dates or
41 facts.
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49 *'How they overcame challenges is important, just as much as hearing about their success. I don't think it's*
50 *helpful to hear about good things about someone as it's not an accurate perception of their life. Even if they*
51 *have been really successful they will have had challenges at some point and it's important to hear about*
52 *that.....Even if they just seem like an everyday person, you could identify with them more strongly.*
53 *Sometimes hearing the unheard stories are good as you can feel like your own story is going unheard. It can*
54 *be comforting.'* Layla, female, White
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Diversity and representation

Young people wanted to be able to relate to the individuals within stories on a human or emotional level. They also wanted to see diverse stories of individuals from global cultures and different periods in history. A relatable human experience transcending time and space was seen as having optimal mental health benefits in providing human connection, escapism and perspective. Another essential aspect was the story being non-fiction and authentic which made human stories behind arts and culture an ideal vehicle for such stories. However, feeling represented was also seen as essential for mental health benefit. In particular under-representation of people by race, gender identity or sexual orientation across a whole cultural experience (such as a museum) was identified as being detrimental to mental health.

'Sometimes when I am in a museum like the Ashmolean and I see fewer people around Asian and Indian art, it feels personal. Representation in art is important as it shapes how you perceive it. I always feel really moved when I see representation of Indian people because it is so rare. It's easier to find online. We feel connected to art and artists that represent things that we can relate to. I remember my brother was once so affected by seeing a painting with south Asian people in it that he took a picture of it.' Nina, female, Asian/British

Alternative Viewpoints

Participants said that being able to access different people's viewpoints was important for optimising the mental health benefit of online cultural content. They valued varied viewpoints from a broad range of people of different ages and backgrounds. They described that often they were only exposed to similar viewpoints, such as from their friendship groups or online forums. They described anxiety of sharing their views in certain forums for fear of being perceived to be saying the wrong thing or ending up on the wrong side of an argument.

In contrast, in the context of OAC they described the benefits of different viewpoints which allowed them to see content in a different light. Some said that it could be transiently uncomfortable to see a view that differed substantially from their own but that there was an overall mental health benefit from that experience. They said that online cultural content felt like a safe space to house different viewpoints and that they wanted to have the option of

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3 sharing their own viewpoint. They described that seeing a variety of viewpoints could be comforting, could disrupt
4
5 negative thought patterns and broaden their perspective.
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8 *'With online resources, the more views and perspectives there are to access the better. It can provide new*
9 *perspectives that we haven't heard before. I think it's nice to see different perspectives and hear someone*
10 *else's point of view. You can get stuck in your mind a lot and sometimes it's beneficial to have someone else's*
11 *view bring you out of that'.* Abi, female, White
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13
14 *'It's interesting with 'trigger warning' things, people say that you need to have them for mental health. But*
15 *this works both ways because my mental health is enhanced by hearing different perspectives.'* Luke, male,
16 White
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19 Mechanisms

21 Relatability

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23 Participants described that mental health benefits derived from human connection. Participants spoke about being
24
25 able to connect with the individuals in stories, often being 'hooked' by a detail about their everyday life that they
26
27 could relate to. Everyday 'quirky' details such as what a person liked to eat for breakfast were thought to be more
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29 important than life events or major achievements.
30

31
32 *'The hook could be just everyday information about people. How other people live and day to day life. Its*
33 *immediately relatable to me because that's my life'.* Luke, male, White
34

38 Reflection

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40 Human connection through arts and culture provided young people the opportunity to reflect on the experiences,
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42 thoughts, feelings and behaviours of other people. This allowed them to understand more about the emotional life of
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44 others and also reflect on their own.
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48 *'I enjoy reading about things that resonate with me. I'm interested in people that have had similar*
49 *struggles. I am interested in learning about people who aren't straight. As I am not and it took a long time*
50 *to come out to my parents. It's powerful to read about people in history that experience this kind of love. I*
51 *don't really have a lot of care for celebrities, I don't follow them and I also don't really enjoy watching the*
52 *news as it often makes me feel frustrated. I think being able to understand my own emotions is important*
53 *for me'.* Mia, female, White
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Perspective

Participants described that connecting with those outside of their current context, such as those from a different period in history or global culture was of benefit for which diversity was essential. This was often described as providing a sense of perspective.

'It helps relate it to yourself and in some way either empathise with the people at the time or give you some kind of perspective in your life. For example, looking at [cultural] things like the plague and thinking of other people that have experienced a similar kind of pandemic and thinking we will be okay. It's not the end; knowing it has happened before.' Kate, female, White

Exploration and Discovery

Participants described the benefits of access to a variety of diverse stories and perspectives. The process of exploration and discovery was seen as beneficial in themselves, particularly in finding untold or hidden stories.

'I like the journey of hunting something down and searching it myself rather than instantly finding it or being handed it really easily'. Abi, female, White

Other mechanisms included learning, witnessing creativity and escapism (see Table 3).

Outcomes

Young people were able to describe that OAC could impact on their mental health in a variety of ways. This included lifting their mood, disrupting negative thought patterns, promoting a sense of calm and encouraging proactivity and motivation, both for creative activities and social activism.

'Dark emotive imagery can be calming. It can show darkness that perhaps the artist felt or that others relate to and feel that you are not alone in sometimes having those feelings. You step out of yourself, which helps to make things that are currently going on in your life not seem so bad'. Nina, female, Asian/British

'I tend to think in black and white and have polarising thoughts. Doing these things gives me another way of thinking' Alex, non-binary, White

Discussion

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3 Participants identified that culture and the arts were a potentially useful approach to support their mental health and
4 that benefits were more likely to be derived with greater familiarity and regular use. Participants described some
5 advantages of online versus in-person engagement. This included being able to use it regularly, remotely and on
6 demand, as well as containing deeper and broader commentary and more diverse content. Features of OAC that
7 participants thought were most likely to benefit their mental health were diverse human stories and alternative
8 viewpoints via human connection, providing opportunities to reflect on the experiences of others and providing a
9 sense of perspective. Perceived impacts on mental health were disrupting negative thought patterns, lifting mood, an
10 increased sense of calm, and increased proactivity.

11
12 All participants were able to speak about their own mental health and efforts they make to support their mental
13 health. Many studies [5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 36, 37] have attempted to understand conventional forms of help-seeking in
14 young people. In contrast this study allowed young people to describe alternative ways of supporting their mental
15 health on their own terms [25].

16
17 Regular attendance of cultural events in the community has been shown to be associated with a multitude of health
18 benefits including increased longevity [38-41] and previous commentary has described the potential of the cultural
19 heritage sector as providing sites for public health interventions [20]. OAC from cultural institutions such as
20 museums, arts galleries and libraries, has enormous potential for enabling wider access and more frequent and
21 flexible engagement for optimal public health impact.

22
23 Whilst it might be assumed that pleasing and agreeable content might maximise the mental health benefits of OAC,
24 the findings of this study suggest that the mechanisms for mental health benefit rely on descriptions of challenges
25 and the divergence of viewpoints. Participants described that cancel culture [42] and trigger warnings were
26 unhelpful. This is consistent with recent studies demonstrating that even young people with relevant traumas do not
27 avoid triggering material and the effects of triggering material appear to be short-lived, even in those with PTSD
28 [43]. Taking this a step further, the participants in this study felt that a *lack* of divergent views was detrimental to
29 mental health.

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3 In this current study, those from traditionally marginalised groups described the benefits of representation and how
4 they felt that under-representation was detrimental to mental health. Those from non-minority groups described the
5 benefits of diversity in the cultures and histories presented in bringing a sense of perspective. Opportunities for
6 people to ‘speak for themselves’ have been accelerated by new media and technological tools, but those
7 contributions tend to nevertheless remain heavily mediated by institutions [44]. Options to comment on and co-
8 produce content might allow young people to feel empowered and motivated to engage [45]. However the current
9 inequalities in representation in cultural institutions [46] must be reversed in order to realise the public health
10 potential of OAC for mental health in those with the greatest unmet mental health need [47].
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22 *Implications*

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24 The results of this qualitative interview study suggest that connection to cultural assets on a personal level has
25 potential mental health benefits for young people. For cultural institutions to produce online content that benefits
26 mental health for young people, there must be increased efforts to draw out, present and engage people in the human
27 stories and alternative viewpoints behind the collections’ arts and artefacts. For young people, it is not necessarily
28 the quantity or illustriousness of the objects presented, but the emotional power of the human narratives behind these
29 objects that has the greatest potential impact on mental health. This has important implications to optimise and test
30 cultural resources for mental health.
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40 *Conclusion*

41 Many of those interviewed for this study self-reported levels of psychological distress indicating clinically
42 significant depression and/or anxiety. Therefore, these results have public health implications with potential
43 applicability to clinical populations. Moreover, this study suggests new and innovative ways of unleashing culture to
44 broader audiences online with previously underutilised ways of enriching engagement and mental health impact.
45 This study demonstrates that young people believed that OAC could be an engaging and efficacious way of
46 supporting mental health. Of note is the importance of representation and equitable access which must be addressed
47 to realise the full public health potential of OAC [26]. OAC has the potential to reach the volumes of young people
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with threshold and subthreshold CMDs who currently do not seek help. In addition, these methodologies can be used to elucidate the potential utility of other community-based resources for mental health.

For peer review only

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3 **Ethics Approval Statement:** The Oxford University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) granted ethical approval
4 for this study prior to its commencement (Ethics reference R70187/RE005).
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22

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34 **Data sharing statement:** No data are available.
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Online Arts and culture for mental health in young people: A qualitative interview study

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3 **1 Online arts and culture for mental health in young people: A qualitative interview study**
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32 16 **Abbreviations**

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34 17 OAC: Online Arts and Culture

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Abstract

Objectives: This study aimed to understand young people's perception of the potential utility of arts and culture, focussing on online access, for supporting their mental health. **Design:** A qualitative interview study. **Setting:** Online. **Participants:** Participants were selected by purposeful sampling from an online survey of arts and culture for mental health and wellbeing. **Method:** Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted from 30th July to 9th Sept 2020. Rich interview data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. **Results:** Thirteen participants aged 18-24 who were socio-demographically diverse and varied in their use of online arts and culture (OAC) and in their level of psychological distress were interviewed. Six themes, 'Characteristics of other activities', 'Online engagement', 'Human connection', 'Mechanisms', 'Outcomes' and 'Engagement optimisation', were identified along with subthemes. Participants identified that online engagement had some advantages over in-person engagement and benefits were greater with familiarity and regular use. Participants described that human connection was the feature of OAC most likely to benefit mental health and emphasised the importance of representation. Mechanisms included improving perspective, reflection, learning, escapism, creativity, exploration and discovery. Outcomes were described as the disruption of negative thought patterns, lifting of mood and increased feelings of calm and proactivity. **Conclusions:** This study demonstrates that young people have a critical level of insight and understanding regarding their mental health and ways in which it might be improved. These findings can be used to optimise the mental health benefits of OAC in an engaging and acceptable way for young people. These methodologies could be applied to other types of community resource for mental health.

Key Words: Adolescent, Art, Culture, Mental health

Strengths and limitations

- This is the first study of which we are aware to explore young people perceptions of the potential utility of arts and culture online for mental health, and was devised with PPI input
- Research team members were multidisciplinary, diverse, and reflexive in their approach
- The findings of this study appear credible and dependable with cohesion and consistency in the themes identified

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5 2 volunteer bias, we were able to identify information-rich participants, with substantial sociodemographic
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7 3 diversity, a range of psychological distress scores, and varied previous use of arts and culture
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- Despite participants being identified through an online survey which may have allowed a degree of volunteer bias, we were able to identify information-rich participants, with substantial sociodemographic diversity, a range of psychological distress scores, and varied previous use of arts and culture

For peer review only

Introduction

Mental illness is a large and increasingly recognised problem in young people, with the onset of three quarters of all lifetime cases of mental disorder occurring before the age of 24 [1]. Common mental disorders (CMDs), such as anxiety and depression, are not only distressing in young people but also impact on recurrent disorder [2] and suicidality in the long-term [3] even when the young person's symptoms do not reach the diagnostic threshold for mental disorder at the time [4]. Only a minority of young people access professional help for CMDs [5]. The main barriers to help seeking are lack of recognition of their own mental health problem, lack of awareness of help available, and stigma [5-11]. Moreover, often the young people most in need of mental health support, such as ethnic minorities, are the least likely to seek help [5-7, 12, 13].

It is increasingly recognised that professional help, such as the provision of antidepressant medication and/or talking therapies, are neither accessible nor acceptable to many young people [10, 11]. Moreover, not all of the few young people who access professional help have a measurable improvement of symptoms. Evidence suggests that only around half of adolescents who received professional help for depression between 2011 and 2015 from specialist mental health services in England showed a reliable improvement by the time they left treatment [14]. Subsequently, epidemiological studies have demonstrated that mental health dramatically worsened in young people during the COVID-19 pandemic [15] and accessibility to mental health care decreased even further [16]. Further, of those accessing community mental health care, there are higher rates of disengagement among young adults (aged 18-25 years old) when compared to adults for a range of reasons – from perceiving that services are not relevant to their needs, through language and cultural barriers [17, 18]. Thus, there is a compelling need for more evidence-based resources that are engaging, accessible, and that meet the mental health needs of young people as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, consideration of other approaches appears timely [14].

It is generally accepted that culture and the arts are good for mental health and wellbeing [19-24]. The proposed mechanisms are thought to include emotional activation, aesthetic engagement, social interaction, cognitive stimulation, sensory activation and imagination [19, 23, 24]. However, there is a dearth of experimental research in this area. We commenced a preregistered evidence synthesis [25] of trials evaluating community resources including engagement with arts and culture on anxiety and depression. We screened 15534 unique titles and abstracts and

1 found no trials evaluating the effectiveness of online arts and culture (OAC) for depression and anxiety in young
2 people [26].

3 During the first UK lockdown we attempted to gain a deeper understanding of the use of online arts and culture and
4 its potential benefits to mental health and well-being, sociodemographic characteristics and self-reported data on
5 usage, perceived mental health benefits and health status. In total, 1056 people completed the survey. A high
6 proportion of participants reported finding online culture helpful for mental health. Those aged under 25 years were
7 less likely to be regular users of online culture or to have increased their use during lockdown. Therefore, it appears
8 that engagement with culture and the arts may be poorest for those who might benefit the most [27], particularly
9 young people. As per the survey, arts and culture is defined as content provided by cultural institutions, such as
10 museums, theatres, art galleries, libraries, archives and natural heritage organisations [27]. Online arts and culture is
11 defined as arts and cultural content that is digitally accessible via the internet.

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13 Whilst there is increasing interest in community assets in improving health, there is currently a lack of evidence for
14 these resources for CMDs in young people [26, 28]. There is also a lack of engagement of young people in determining
15 the most fruitful approaches to support their mental health [28], most being investigated from the perspective of mental
16 health professionals [28].

17 18 *Aims and Objectives*

19 Given the current research gap regarding the use of arts and culture as an approach to addressing CMDs in young
20 people [28], particularly online engagement which might be more widely accessible, we set out to conduct a study to
21 investigate the potential utility of OAC for CMDs in people aged 16-24. We aimed to interview socio-
22 demographically diverse participants aged 16-24 years in order to generate theory on the potential use and
23 optimisation of arts and culture, particularly online access for CMDs in young people.

24 25 **Methods**

26 A qualitative interview study was chosen in order to gain a rich description of the views of young people about arts
27 and culture for mental health, whether this was a promising approach for supporting their mental health and to give

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3 1 them the opportunity to raise issues of significance to them. A phenomenological approach was adopted to view the
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5 2 data from a constructivist epistemological orientation adopting a bidirectional understanding of the
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7 3 language/experience relationship.
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11 5 The Oxford University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) granted ethical approval for this study prior to its
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13 6 commencement (Ethics reference: R70187/RE005). All participants were given £10 for every hour of participation.
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15 7 We used the COREQ checklist for the comprehensive and explicit reporting of qualitative studies [29] and used the
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17 8 techniques described by Mays and Pope [30] to ensure study quality and rigour. Data security followed institutional
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19 9 guidance.
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22 23 24 11 *Public and Patient Involvement*

25 12 There was public and patient involvement (PPI) in this study which commenced prior to the outset. PPI informed
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27 13 this study design, topic guide and interpretation of the results as well as the preferred term for the target population
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29 14 as ‘young people’. PPI were involved via exploratory discussions and stakeholder meetings. With PPI we explored
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31 15 the utility of arts and culture in mental health service users who were not necessarily already familiar with OAC.
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33 16 During this consultation, people with lived experience of mental health problems said that lack of engagement with
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35 17 culture and the arts was not due to lack of interest but more related to lack of knowledge about how to access it.
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37 18 They thought that people from the target population should be an active part of any strategy to understand the
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39 19 potential use of such resources for mental health benefit.
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42 43 44 21 *Context*

45 22 Participants aged 16-24 were purposefully sampled from an online survey of arts and culture for mental health and
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47 23 wellbeing[27]. Recruitment of participants for the online survey took place between 17th June and 22nd July 2020.
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49 24 Recruitment was carried out via Facebook adverts, Student Unions, a Press Release, a pop-up advert that appeared
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51 25 on the Ashmolean Museum website and public relations avenues (e.g. Twitter, Newsletter), and Patient and Public
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53 26 Involvement (PPI) groups (based in Oxford and Blackpool). Participants followed the link to e-consent procedures
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55 27 in order to enter the survey. In all 78 people who completed the initial survey were between 16 and 24 years of age.
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3 1 The online survey of arts and culture for mental health and wellbeing is described in more detail elsewhere[27]. The
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5 2 survey demonstrated that there were age-related differences in the reported mental health benefits of online arts and
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7 3 culture and that young people were less likely to be regular users of online arts and culture. A broad
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9 4 sociodemographic range of young participants were reached in the original online survey and were then sampled
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11 5 using purposeful sampling techniques [31] to gain an information rich cases for this qualitative interview study.
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14 7 *Sampling strategy*

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17 8 The initial online survey [27] included items to elicit socio-demographic characteristics and psychological distress
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19 9 using the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) [32] to give an indication of probable mental disorder [33].
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21 10 Purposeful sampling was used to gain an information rich sample that varied socio-demographically (age, sex,
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23 11 income, education, occupation, ethnicity), in previous use of online arts and culture and level of psychological
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25 12 distress, as measured by the K10 [34].
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29 14 *Procedure*

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32 15 Participants selected via purposeful sampling were emailed to alert them to the opportunity of participating in this
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34 16 study and a link was provided to further information and an online consent form for further contact. Once online
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36 17 consent was provided, an email was sent to organise an interview at a convenient time and mode (by Zoom or
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38 18 telephone) for the participant. All but one of the interviews were conducted via Zoom and hosted by the research
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40 19 team. The other interview was conducted via telephone at the request of the participant. Oral consent procedures
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42 20 were used at the outset of each interview and interviews were recorded. Interviews were scheduled for up to one
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44 21 hour and took between 45 minutes to one hour to complete. Interviews were transcribed verbatim manually by the
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46 22 researchers.
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49 24 *Qualitative Interviews*

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51 25 The interview topic guide and sample questions were developed by members of the study team (RJSS, HA and JR)
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53 26 based on a literature review, the online survey and the PPI consultation described above. Areas of inquiry and
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55 27 sample questions for use in the qualitative interviews are outlined in Table 1
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5 2 Table 1: Areas of inquiry and sample questions
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Area of enquiry	Sample Questions
Activities and experiences that benefit mental health in general	What sorts of things have helped your mental health and wellbeing in your everyday life?
	Is there anything that has helped particularly during the pandemic?
	Was there anything that helped particularly before the pandemic?
	Can you describe how they affect your mental health?
Ways in which online arts and culture impact mental health	Do you think online arts and culture are, or could be useful for mental health and wellbeing?
	What sorts of experiences related to online arts and culture do you think are or could be helpful?
	What sorts of impact might they have on mental health?
Ways in which online arts and culture could be improved for mental health	In what ways could online arts and culture be improved?
	What sorts of things might they target- mood/anxiety related?
	Any other elements -structure, connection, stimulation, other?
Engagement with online arts and culture for mental health	Do you or would you consider visiting online arts and culture if you thought it could help your mental health and wellbeing?
	What would attract you to accessing online arts and culture that might help with mental health and wellbeing?
	When do you think would be best to use it, for example, at all times, or when you have noticed a problem?
	Is it something would like as a series or programme, if so, about how many sessions, how would you like to be engaged?

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3 1 The research team was comprised of multidisciplinary researchers including a Consultant Psychiatrist and
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5 2 experienced qualitative researcher in adolescent mental health (RJSS) who worked collaboratively on the project. In
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7 3 addition, another experienced qualitative researcher was an integral member of the study team (MG) as well as a
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9 4 broad range of diverse researchers from multiple disciplines. Participants were not previously known to the research
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11 5 team.

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14 7 All interviews were conducted by RJSS and one other interviewer (HA, JR, LBo), with up to four silent observers
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16 8 (LBe, LBo, BO, JR, HA) to take field notes and to ensure documentation of non-verbal cues and accurate
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18 9 transcribing of interviews. Interviews were audio-recorded using an audio-recorder, transcribed (verbatim by the
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20 10 researchers) and analysed as soon as feasible following the interviews. Identifiable data were removed from
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22 11 transcripts and data were handled in keeping with institutional (Oxford University) protocols and guidance
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25 13 *Data Analysis*

26 14 Qualitative interviews and analyses were conducted concurrently. The data collected in the interviews were analysed
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28 15 as soon as possible after the interviews to minimise information loss. Four members of the research team undertook
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30 16 the analysis (JR, LBe, RJSS and LBo) following the six phases reflexive thematic analysis as described by Braun
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32 17 and Clarke [35, 36]. Multiple coders were chosen for a collaborative and reflexive analysis designed to develop a
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34 18 richer and more nuanced reading of the data with the sense-checking of ideas and an exploration of assumptions and
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36 19 interpretations of the data [37].
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39 21 The analysis was approached from a constructivist epistemological orientation adopting a bidirectional
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41 22 understanding of the language/experience relationship. The data was interpreted prioritising the participants own
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43 23 descriptions of their experiences and opinions. Recurrence of terms as well as the meaningfulness of described
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45 24 phenomena was pivotal to informing the thematic analysis. For example, the term ‘distraction’ was used repeatedly
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47 25 throughout the dataset, however its meaning varied from a shift in focus, to feeling entertained, to disrupting
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49 26 negative thought patterns, therefore themes were revised to more clearly reflect the phenomenon described rather
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51 27 than the language used per se. In this way meaningfulness was highly influential in the development and
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53 28 interpretation of codes and themes. We analysed the dataset inductively and deductively. Whilst a framework based
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1 on thoughts, feelings and behaviours was a starting point for sense making of the data, the analysis itself became
2 more deductive in its approach as we progressed. Latent coding was adopted with the research team playing an
3 active role in interpreting codes and developing and then challenging themes and identifying relevance to the
4 research objectives [36, 37].

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6 Coding was developed with the aid of NVivo 12 [38]. Units of text were assigned nodes and themes were developed
7 and then refined and explored in more depth in subsequent interviews in an iterative process. Themes and subthemes
8 were generated, reviewed and revised with regular discussion. During these discussions, the researchers reflected on
9 assumptions and prior knowledge and explored the data to develop new themes. Descriptions of themes were
10 returned to participants individually for comment. The participants preferred mode of communication for the
11 presentation of themes was via email. Participants were in agreement with the themes and it was not necessary to
12 revise themes in response participant feedback.

13 14 **Results**

15 *Participants*

16 Thirteen socio-demographically participants aged between 19 and 24 years were interviewed between 30th July to 9th
17 Sept 2020; four of whom identified as male, seven as female and two as non-binary. Annual household income
18 ranged from less than £16,000 to over £120,000. Only one participant lived alone, and the others lived with up to
19 eight other people. They were geographically dispersed, eleven living in the UK (two in the west midlands, two in
20 the east midlands, two in south east England, one in south west England and two in greater London), and two
21 overseas, one in a high-income country and one in a low/middle-income country. They had a broad range of levels
22 of psychological distress, all but two scoring twenty or more on the K10 indicating the likely presence of a mental
23 disorder [34]. They varied in their regularity of use of OAC, with four having used it only once or twice ever. No
24 participants dropped out after informed consent was provided. (please see Table 2).

Table 2: Participant demographics and mental health status

Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Gender	Age	Frequency of engagement with arts and culture online	K10
Abi	White	Female	18-24	Daily	20-24
Nina	Asian	Female	18-24	Once a week or more	>30
Alex	White	Non Binary	18-24	Once a week or more	>30
Kate	White	Female	18-24	Only once or twice ever	>30
Jake	White	Male	18-24	Only once or twice ever	20-24
Tom	White	Male	18-24	Once a month or more	<20
Luke	White	Male	18-24	Only once or twice ever	<20
Jo	White	Non Binary	18-24	Once a week or more	>30
Jaya	Asian	Female	18-24	Once a week or more	20-24
Layla	White	Female	18-24	Daily	20-24
Mia	White	Female	18-24	Once a month or more	>30
Cara	White	Female	18-24	Once a month or more	20-24
Eve	White	Female	18-24	Only once or twice ever	>30
White= White – British, Irish, other. Asian= Asian/British, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, other.					

Table 3: Themes, subthemes and additional quotes

Theme	Subthemes	Exemplary Quote
Characteristics of other activities	Regular, Connecting, Absorbing	It's a 'we are all in the same boat' thing that makes me feel better because it means I'm not the only one going through whatever is stressing me out' Luke, male, White.
Online engagement	Flexible engagement, Diverse content, In depth, Alternative to social media	I liked that online people can take you through and explain things a little more as I felt more connected to it. I liked knowing why paintings were made. Mia, female, White
Human connection	Human stories, Alternative viewpoints, Representation/diversity	Both expressing your views and hearing other people's views is helpful. It is also good to have diverse views... Most of the time, your social circle shares the same views as you but I think it's also good to hear opposing views so you can question your own views.' Jake, male, White
Mechanisms of impact	Relatability, Reflection, Perspective, Exploration and discovery, Learning, Creativity, Escapism	Sometimes hearing what others are feeling helps you to think about your own thoughts and feelings and helps you to empathise with others too.' Kate, female, White
Mental health outcomes	Reduce negativity, Lift mood, Calming, Proactivity	The content helps me to be calm. It's about zoning out of your mind-set and calming down' Alex, non-binary, White
Engagement optimisation	Regular, Familiar, Optionality, Not 'targeted' at mental health	Enhancing the content can be more fun and also more informative. You wouldn't just stare at the picture but be more involved or more absorbed.' Jo, non-binary, White

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3 1 Six themes, 'Characteristics of other activities', 'Online engagement', 'Human connection', 'Mechanisms of
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5 2 impact', 'Mental health outcomes' and 'Engagement optimisation', were identified from the interviews along with
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7 3 subthemes. Themes and subthemes are outlined in Table 3 along with exemplary quotes using pseudonyms to
8
9 4 identify participants. Themes are described in more detail below.

10 5 11 6 12 6 *Characteristics of other activities*

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14 7 Participants described a broad range of activities from sewing and cookery to running outdoors and socialising that
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16 8 they felt benefitted their mental health. Although types of activity were wide ranging, what seemed more important
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18 9 and had greater commonality between participants was the characteristics of activities that were perceived as being
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20 10 helpful mental health. These were mainly activities that they did regularly and proactively, to keep themselves well
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22 11 and prevent mental health problems, rather than activities that they would do if they felt their mental health was
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24 12 deteriorating.

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28 14 *'I think the positive effects are heavily tied up with the routine aspect of it. The loss that you feel for not*
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30 15 *doing it for whatever reason, mitigates against the benefit of leaving it an extra day and coming back to it*
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32 16 *fresh.'* Tom, male, White

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36 18 *'They say that you should try to spend at least two hours outside a day, so I try to do that. I also try to look*
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38 19 *after myself and eat well because I think that helps me to feel like I'm taking care of myself. I also like to*
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40 20 *see friends, I think that really helps keep me going.'* Luke, male, White

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43 22 Connecting with other people was a common feature of activities perceived as being helpful for mental health. This
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45 23 was described in a broad range of activities including tuning into dialogues and narratives in podcasts and reading
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47 24 about characters in books, as well as direct social contact via phone, social media, video and in person.

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51 26 *'When you hear about people talking about their experiences, I find that really interesting and quite*
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53 27 *helpful.'* Layla, female, White

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3 1 *'I made a big effort to be with other people. I would make efforts to not be alone during the day as it*
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5 2 *(connecting with others) energised me.'* Mia, female, White
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9 4 In addition, participants described that the more absorbing an experience, the greater the benefit, particularly
10 5 activities that served to completely shift their focus away from their thoughts. Participants described that a shift
11 6 away from their thoughts was key for separating themselves from negative thought patterns that they might have
12 7 been experiencing beforehand.
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19 9 *'I like content that encourages activity and gives you something to do which can provide a distraction from*
20 10 *everything else, so you just get consumed with doing it.'* Alex, non-binary, White
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25 12 *'When I'm reading I do it to get away from the world...it's nice to sit in the garden and not have to think*
26 13 *about my own life.'* Mia, female, White
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30 15 *'During that time, you are only really thinking about that thing, not about what other people think about*
31 16 *you or having those sorts of accumulative thoughts that have negative impacts. So I guess it's kind of*
32 17 *a relief from these thoughts and things. It's the idea of an all-consuming task.'* Tom, male, White
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3 1 *Online arts and culture*

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5 2 Participants highlighted that online engagement with arts and culture had several advantages over in-person
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7 3 experiences as online content could be accessed regularly, remotely and on demand. Many described that they could
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9 4 access it as and when they felt they needed it, such as when experiencing negative of anxious thoughts, or late at
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11 5 night. They also described how it improved access to younger people who might not have the independent means of
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13 6 getting themselves to a museum or art gallery and whose families might not take them regularly. They explained that
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15 7 online engagement also gives them access to a wider variety of diverse content. In addition, online engagement was
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17 8 seen as being able to offer more detailed descriptions of the humans behind the art, an increased depth and breadth
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19 9 of commentary and more varied perspectives.
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24 12 *'However, the important thing is having something that you can just access when you need it.'* Alex, 20, non-
25 13 binary, White

27 15 *'You don't have to go to the place. You can watch it whenever you want. You can watch something in a
28 16 different country that is at a different time[zone]. It has added value.'* Jake, male, White
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31 18 *'Online can offer the narrative behind the artists that museums don't do as easily.'* Nina, female,
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33 19 Asian/British
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37 21 Participants also described online arts and culture as providing positive alternatives to social media and other typical
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39 22 online content. For example, some spoke about social media and other online experiences as having a negative impact
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41 23 on their mental health, feeling like they got drawn into scrolling online content for unanticipated long periods of time
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43 24 with no purpose. In addition, many described that many online experiences become like 'echo chambers' where similar
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45 25 viewpoints and perspective are shared. They described feelings of nervousness of expressing alternative views that
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47 26 might differ or be perceived as unpopular, whereas they felt that they would benefit from being exposed to a variety
48
49 27 of viewpoints, promoting a shift in perspective (see Viewpoints, below).
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52 29 *'Especially during lockdown, I didn't get along well with my phone at all.....On your phone there's this
53 30 constant thing of checking of messages, seeing what you have or haven't got, checking who is online,
54 31 scrolling down Facebook with no real purpose. Because your phone is always with you. Your phone*

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3 1 *sometimes stops you from getting up for things. Then you get that negative realisation that you've just laid*
4 2 *in your bed for an hour and not made anything of it.'* Tom, male, White
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10 6 *Human Connection*

11 7 Human stories of real individuals based on relatable human experiences were identified as an important way in
12 8 which the mental health benefits of OAC could be optimised. This could be the story of the artist or other
13 9 individuals whose life journey was connected with art or artefacts. In particular, they wanted to hear the stories of
14 10 people they could relate to who had experienced challenges. Such challenges included facing transition, not fitting
15 11 in, or experiencing mental health difficulties. Stories describing human experiences (relationships, beliefs, hopes,
16 12 behaviours and feelings) were seen as having mental health benefits.
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23 13 *'How they overcame challenges is important, just as much as hearing about their success. I don't think it's*
24 14 *helpful to hear about good things about someone as it's not an accurate perception of their life. Even if they*
25 15 *have been really successful they will have had challenges at some point and it's important to hear about*
26 16 *that.....Even if they just seem like an everyday person, you could identify with them more strongly.*
27 17 *Sometimes hearing the unheard stories are good as you can feel like your own story is going unheard. It can*
28 18 *be comforting.'* Layla, 20, female, White
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33 22 However, feeling represented was also seen as essential for mental health benefit. Moreover, under-representation of
34 23 people by race, gender identity or sexual orientation across a whole cultural experience (such as a museum) was
35 24 identified as being detrimental to mental health.
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39 25 *'I think it can help seeing yourself reflected in art. I liked how the British Museum did a presentation of*
40 26 *objects (LGBT trail) related to pride. As someone who is LGBT it was nice to see how pride is not necessarily*
41 27 *a "new thing" but something that has been researched for a long time. It is nice to feel reflected in people*
42 28 *or things that existed hundreds of years ago.'* Alex, non-binary, White
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45 30 *'Sometimes when I am in a museum like the Ashmolean and I see fewer people around Asian and Indian art,*
46 31 *it feels personal. Representation in art is important as it shapes how you perceive it. I always feel really*
47 32 *moved when I see representation of Indian people because it is so rare. It's easier to find online. We feel*
48 33 *connected to art and artists that represent things that we can relate to. I remember my brother was once so*
49 34 *affected by seeing a painting with south Asian people in it that he took a picture of it.'* Nina, female,
50 35 Asian/British
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54 39 Participants said that being able to access different people's viewpoints was important for optimising the mental
55 40 health benefit of online cultural content. They valued varied viewpoints from a broad range of people of different
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3 1 ages and backgrounds. They described that often they were only exposed to similar viewpoints, such as from their
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5 2 friendship groups or online forums. They described anxiety of sharing their views in certain forums for fear of being
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7 3 perceived to be saying the wrong thing or ending up on the wrong side of an argument. They described the benefits
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9 4 of different viewpoints which allowed them to see content in a different light. Some said that it could be transiently
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11 5 uncomfortable to see a view that differed substantially from their own but that there was an overall mental health
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13 6 benefit from that experience. They said that online cultural content felt like a safe space to house different
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15 7 viewpoints and that they wanted to have the option of sharing their own viewpoint. They described that seeing a
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17 8 variety of viewpoints could be comforting, could disrupt negative thought patterns and broaden their perspective.

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20 10 *'With online resources, the more views and perspectives there are to access the better. It can provide new*
21 11 *perspectives that we haven't heard before. I think it's nice to see different perspectives and hear someone*
22 12 *else's point of view. You can get stuck in your mind a lot and sometimes it's beneficial to have someone else's*
23 13 *view bring you out of that'.* Abi, female, White

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26 16 *'It's interesting with 'trigger warning' things, people say that you need to have them for mental health. But*
27 17 *this works both ways because my mental health is enhanced by hearing different perspectives.'* Luke, male,
28 18 White

29 20 30 31 21 *Mechanisms of impact*

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33 22 There was a variety of ways in which OAC was described as impacting on mental health. This included reflection,
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35 23 perspective, diversity, exploration and discovery, learning, creativity and escapism. These mechanisms were
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37 24 interconnected and most commonly related to human connection. However, the gateway to the pathway appeared to
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39 25 be via the relatability of the person to whom the human connection applied.

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42 27 In order to derive optimal benefit from human stories, participants described the need to be able to relate to the
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44 28 individuals on a human or emotional level, often by being 'hooked' by a detail about their everyday life that they
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46 29 could relate to. Everyday 'quirky' details such as what a person liked to eat for breakfast were thought to be more
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48 30 important than life events or major achievements. This not only provided benefits by engaging them in the story but
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50 31 also relieved feelings of loneliness.

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54 33 *'The hook could be just everyday information about people. How other people live and day to day life. Its*
55 34 *immediately relatable to me because that's my life'.* Luke, 22, male, White

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5 2 Participants also wanted to see diverse stories of individuals from global cultures and different periods in history. A
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7 3 true and relatable human experience transcending time and space was seen as having optimal mental health benefits.
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9 4 They described that connecting with those outside of their current context, such as those from a different period in
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11 5 history or global culture was of benefit for which diversity was essential. This was often described as providing a
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13 6 sense of perspective.

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15 7 *'It helps relate it to yourself and in some way either empathise with the people at the time or give you some*
16 8 *kind of perspective in your life. For example, looking at [cultural] things like the plague and thinking of other*
17 9 *people that have experienced a similar kind of pandemic and thinking we will be okay. It's not the end;*
18 10 *knowing it has happened before.'* Kate, female, White
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23 14 Human connection through arts and culture provided young people the opportunity to reflect on the experiences,
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25 15 thoughts, feelings and behaviours of other people. This allowed them to understand more, not only about the
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27 16 emotional life of others but also reflect on their own internal experiences.
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31 18 *'I enjoy reading about things that resonate with me. I'm interested in people that have had similar*
32 19 *struggles. I am interested in learning about people who aren't straight. As I am not and it took a long time*
33 20 *to come out to my parents. It's powerful to read about people in history that experience this kind of love. I*
34 21 *don't really have a lot of care for celebrities, I don't follow them and I also don't really enjoy watching the*
35 22 *news as it often makes me feel frustrated. I think being able to understand my own emotions is important*
36 23 *for me.'* Mia, 20, female, White
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42 27 The process of exploration and discovery when engaging with OAC were seen as beneficial to mental health,
43
44 28 particularly in finding untold or hidden stories. This was described both in the absorbing process of 'getting lost' in
45
46 29 collections and the excitement of serendipitous discovery. Separately and interconnected with these mechanisms
47
48 30 were other mechanisms, including creativity, in which participants described the mental health benefits of being
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50 31 inspired to be creative or witnessing creativity in other people which often led to feeling more proactive, in creative
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52 32 and other ways. Learning applied to both learning about art and culture and about the internal experiences of other
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54 33 people and the benefits as being related to using time usefully and of a sense of achievement. Participants also
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1 described the mental health benefits of using the experiences of others to imagine being in a different context as a
 2 form of escapism.

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'I like the journey of hunting something down and searching it myself rather than instantly finding it or being handed it really easily'. Abi, 20, female, White, student

'Creativity can express things in a way that therapy can't always do' Abi, female, White

It's about learning new things. I'm a quite curious person. I get to see things that I don't normally see.

Alex, non-binary, White

'I find that it is a form of escapism. When you watch a play you are watching other people's lives and perspectives' Nina, female, Asian/British

Mental health outcomes

Participants described that OAC could impact on their mental health in a variety of ways. They described a positive impact on mental health that came with the disruption of of negative thought patterns especially when absorbed in activities or engaged with diverse stories or viewpoints. They also described a mood lifting aspect, which also related to looking outwards and adjusting a negative mindset, which could also lead to feeling of proactivity. Many talked about the promotion of feelings of calm that came with engaging with cultural content which was also described by some as helping with insomnia and was even sort out when having problems with sleep.

'I tend to think in black and white and have polarising thoughts. Doing these things gives me another way of thinking' Alex, 20, non-binary, White

'I just think we need to see more content that makes us happy and smile to lift our mood in that moment, and just be a remind that we don't have to feel sad or stuck in the mind-set we are in. Abi, female, White

'Dark emotive imagery can be calming. It can show darkness that perhaps the artist felt or that others relate to and feel that you are not alone in sometimes having those feelings. You step out of yourself, which helps to make things that are currently going on in your life not seem so bad'. Nina, female, Asian/British

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6 2 A major advantage was seen as encouraging proactivity and motivation, both for creative activities and social
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8 3 activism. Often this was after transient distress at witnessing social inequalities but overall was viewed as a positive
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10 4 experience with mental health benefit.

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12
13 5 *'If you have done something nice it can be uplifting and inspire you to do other things that day. It can make*
14 6 *you feel more motivated and proactive.'* Eve, female, White

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16 7 *Some people there are now taking action and taking ownership of their heritage. I see this as very positive.*
17 8 *It is them turning over information which is commonly perceived as true.'* Jo, non-binary, White

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23 11 *Engagement optimisation*

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25 12 Many participants described that the mental health benefits of arts and culture were greater with regular use and
26
27 13 familiarity. Some said that they had been introduced to arts and culture at an early age and that this familiarity meant
28
29 14 that they felt more comfortable accessing it at times of need. Many expressed that they would also recommend an
30
31 15 early introduction for others.

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34 17 *'The more you're doing it regularly the more your anxiety doesn't build up again so it's good to keep using*
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36 18 *it.'* Layla, female, White

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40 20 *'We should promote [online cultural content] more in schools. Not everyone has parents that are interested*
41
42 21 *in culture. Getting them interested from an early age could help them develop a lifelong interest which in*
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44 22 *turn would benefit them.'* Abi, female, White

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48 24 Many preferred to engage with OAC regularly to maximise the benefits and then to dip into it when they felt
49
50 25 particularly in need, for example when feeling low, anxious or unable to sleep. Optionality around engagement
51
52 26 preferences was seen as important. Some also described that it was not that they benefitted from regular engagement
53
54 27 but rather experienced negative consequences when they couldn't do it.

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3 1 *'These are effects that are like a domino effect, it comes up again and again, so I will regularly feel the*
4 2 *benefit and this gets stronger with time'*. Jo, non-binary, White
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8 5 Whilst a few participants thought they would access content that was explicitly targeted at mental health, many were
9
10 6 more cautious. Many participants expressed being particularly cynical about mindfulness being promoted online in
11 7
12 7 relation to arts and culture.
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14 8
15 9 *'I find that hearing something that I'm interested in reading in is so much more helpful as you are*
16 10 *engaged and distracted. I know others do like mindfulness, but I just don't connect with it.*

17 10
18 11 *Sometimes it feels like it is done to tick a box and so people move away from it.'* Layla, female,
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21 12 White
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27 15 **Discussion**

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29 16 This study contributes to a gap in the literature by examining the use and potential benefit of OAC for mental health
30
31 17 in young people. Overall, it highlights that OAC for young people has several advantages over in-person
32
33 18 experiences as well as providing positive alternatives to social media and other typical online content. Of note,
34
35 19 human connection (through diverse human stories and alternative viewpoints) was universally described as the
36
37 20 feature of OAC most likely to optimize a mental health impact and the importance of representation was highlighted
38
39 21 within that. Furthermore, we identify several mechanisms through which this optimization might occur – including
40
41 22 through reflection on experiences, providing a sense of perspective, and the process of exploration and discovery, as
42
43 23 well as perceived mental health outcomes, including proactivity, disruption of negative thoughts and lifting mood. In
44
45 24 particular these findings have significant implications for further research targeting approaches of OAC for mental
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47 25 health.
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50 27 A number of participants described and articulated the ways in which culture and the arts could support their mental
51
52 28 health, and that benefits were more likely to be derived with greater familiarity and regular use. Participants
53
54 29 described some advantages of online versus in-person engagement. This included being able to use it regularly,
55
56 30 remotely and on demand, as well as containing deeper and broader commentary and more diverse content. Features
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1 of OAC that participants thought were most likely to benefit their mental health were diverse human stories and
2 alternative viewpoints via human connection, providing opportunities to reflect on the experiences of others and
3 providing a sense of perspective. Perceived impacts on mental health were disrupting negative thought patterns,
4 lifting mood, an increased sense of calm, and increased proactivity.

5 All participants were able to speak about their own mental health and efforts they make to support their mental
6 health. Many studies [5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 39, 40] have attempted to understand conventional forms of help-seeking in
7 young people. In contrast this study allowed young people to describe alternative ways of supporting their mental
8 health on their own terms [28].

9 Regular attendance of cultural events in the community has been shown to be associated with a multitude of health
10 benefits including increased longevity [41-44] and previous commentary has described the potential of the cultural
11 heritage sector as providing sites for public health interventions [22]. OAC from cultural institutions such as
12 museums, arts galleries and libraries, has enormous potential for enabling wider access and more frequent and
13 flexible engagement for optimal public health impact.

14 Whilst it might be assumed that pleasing and agreeable content might maximise the mental health benefits of OAC,
15 the findings of this study suggest that the mechanisms for mental health benefit rely on descriptions of challenges
16 and the divergence of viewpoints. Participants described that cancel culture [45] and trigger warnings were
17 unhelpful. This is consistent with recent studies demonstrating that even young people with relevant traumas do not
18 avoid triggering material and the effects of triggering material appear to be short-lived, even in those with PTSD
19 [46]. Taking this a step further, the participants in this study felt that a *lack* of divergent views was detrimental to
20 mental health. These findings suggest that future OAC initiatives could benefit from, rather than seek to avoid,
21 material which is perceived as ‘triggering.’ Instead, such material could potentially be included – in consultation
22 with users and relevant stakeholders.

23
24 In this current study, those from traditionally marginalised groups described the benefits of representation and how
25 they felt that under-representation was detrimental to mental health. Those from non-minority groups described the
26 benefits of diversity in the cultures and histories presented in bringing a sense of perspective. Opportunities for

1 people to ‘speak for themselves’ have been accelerated by new media and technological tools, but those
2 contributions tend to nevertheless remain heavily mediated by institutions [47]. Options to comment on and co-
3 produce content might allow young people to feel empowered and motivated to engage [48]. However the current
4 inequalities in representation in cultural institutions [49] must be reversed in order to realise the public health
5 potential of OAC for mental health in those with the greatest unmet mental health need [50].

6 7 *Limitations*

8 Whilst providing a useful insight into young people’s perspectives on OAC for mental health, this study focused on
9 a sample of thirteen participants aged between 19 and 24 years, nine of whom were already users of OAC content.
10 Whilst this allowed an exploration of the perceived mental health benefits of OAC and how to optimise these, a
11 limitation of this study was that it did not fully explore barriers to engagement. The focus of this study, to fully
12 explore the benefits and potential for optimisation of OAC for mental health in young people, meant that the
13 potential harms whilst touched on were not explored in detail. In addition, this study was conducted during COVID-
14 19 restrictions, which brought into sharp focus the usefulness of OAC for mental health, due to the physical closure
15 of cultural institutions and heightened mental health difficulties in young people. This context must be remembered
16 when considering some of the findings such as the benefits of online engagement which may have been more
17 obvious at the time of COVID-19 than at other times.

18 19 20 *Implications*

21 The results of this qualitative interview study suggest that connection to cultural assets on a personal level has
22 potential mental health benefits for young people. For cultural institutions to produce online content that benefits
23 mental health for young people, there must be increased efforts to draw out, present and engage people in the human
24 stories and alternative viewpoints behind the collections’ arts and artefacts. For young people, it is not necessarily
25 the quantity or illustriousness of the objects presented, but the emotional power of the human narratives behind these
26 objects that has the greatest potential impact on mental health. Thus, future OAC projects could consider integrating
27 human stories, as well as diversity and representation and alternative viewpoints into their catalogue of offerings –
28 as their inclusion could help to optimise online and cultural resources for mental health (even where that is not the
29 primary aim of the OAC being offered).

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5 2 Future research should expand to include an increasingly diverse study sample - including more perspectives from
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7 3 more underrepresented young people such as ethnic minorities and those from deprivation, including digital poverty,
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9 4 who might also have lower levels of help seeking from health services as well as lower levels of community
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11 5 engagement, including OAC. Such research could increase understanding of the potential barriers to engagement. In
12
13 6 addition, this research focussed on the potential positive impacts, however further research is needed into the
14
15 7 potential harms of OAC for mental health. As with implications for practice this has important implication for an
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17 8 age targeted approach to research. Given the preference of young adults for the proactive use of such resources, on
18
19 9 the importance of human connection in optimisation for mental health and the scepticism of resources targeted at
20
21 10 mental health, this has important implications for the testing of cultural resources for mental health in this age-
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23 11 group. Further mixed methods research is needed to fully elucidate these research gaps in an age targeted way with
24
25 12 attention to underrepresented groups.

26 13

28 14 *Conclusion*

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30 15 Many of those interviewed for this study self-reported levels of psychological distress indicating clinically
31
32 16 significant depression and/or anxiety. Therefore, these results have public health implications with potential
33
34 17 applicability to clinical populations. Moreover, this study suggests new and innovative ways of unleashing culture to
35
36 18 broader audiences online with previously underutilised ways of enriching engagement and mental health impact.
37
38 19 This study demonstrates that young people believed that OAC could be an engaging and efficacious way of
39
40 20 supporting mental health. Of note is the importance of representation and equitable access which must be addressed
41
42 21 to realise the full public health potential of OAC[51]. OAC has the potential to reach the volumes of young people
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44 22 with threshold and subthreshold CMDs who currently do not seek help. In addition, these methodologies can be used
45
46 23 to elucidate the potential utility of other community-based resources for mental health.

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1 **Ethics Approval Statement:** The Oxford University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) granted ethical approval
2 for this study prior to its commencement (Ethics reference R70187/RE005).

3
4 **Contribution Statement:** All authors contributed to the study. The study was conceived by Rebecca J Syed Sheriff
5 informed by discussions with PPI. Analyses were performed by Laura Bonsaver, Laura Bergin and Jenny Riga
6 supported by team discussions with Bessie O'Dell, Helen Adams and Margaret Glogowska. The first draft of the
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8 manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

9
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16
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Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR)*

<http://www.equator-network.org/reporting-guidelines/srqr/>

Page/line no(s).

Title and abstract

<p>Title - Concise description of the nature and topic of the study Identifying the study as qualitative or indicating the approach (e.g., ethnography, grounded theory) or data collection methods (e.g., interview, focus group) is recommended</p>	<p>Yes- page 1, line 1</p>
<p>Abstract - Summary of key elements of the study using the abstract format of the intended publication; typically includes background, purpose, methods, results, and conclusions</p>	<p>Yes- page 2, lines 1-20</p>

Introduction

<p>Problem formulation - Description and significance of the problem/phenomenon studied; review of relevant theory and empirical work; problem statement</p>	<p>Yes- page 4, line 4- page 5, line 16</p>
<p>Purpose or research question - Purpose of the study and specific objectives or questions</p>	<p>Yes- page 5, lines 18-23</p>

Methods

<p>Qualitative approach and research paradigm - Qualitative approach (e.g., ethnography, grounded theory, case study, phenomenology, narrative research) and guiding theory if appropriate; identifying the research paradigm (e.g., postpositivist, constructivist/ interpretivist) is also recommended; rationale**</p>	<p>Yes- page 16, lines 1-3</p>
<p>Researcher characteristics and reflexivity - Researchers' characteristics that may influence the research, including personal attributes, qualifications/experience, relationship with participants, assumptions, and/or presuppositions; potential or actual interaction between researchers' characteristics and the research questions, approach, methods, results, and/or transferability</p>	<p>Yes- page 9, lines 1-8</p>
<p>Context - Setting/site and salient contextual factors; rationale**</p>	<p>Yes- page 6, lines 21-27, page 7, lines 1-3</p>
<p>Sampling strategy - How and why research participants, documents, or events were selected; criteria for deciding when no further sampling was necessary (e.g., sampling saturation); rationale**</p>	<p>Yes- page 7, lines 6-11</p>
<p>Ethical issues pertaining to human subjects - Documentation of approval by an appropriate ethics review board and participant consent, or explanation for lack thereof; other confidentiality and data security issues</p>	<p>Yes, page 6, lines 5-9</p>
<p>Data collection methods - Types of data collected; details of data collection procedures including (as appropriate) start and stop dates of data collection and analysis, iterative process, triangulation of sources/methods, and modification of procedures in response to evolving study findings; rationale**</p>	<p>Yes- Page 7, lines 24-27, page 9 lines 7-10</p>

1 2 3 4 5	Data collection instruments and technologies - Description of instruments (e.g., interview guides, questionnaires) and devices (e.g., audio recorders) used for data collection; if/how the instrument(s) changed over the course of the study	Yes, page 9, lines 7-10
6 7 8	Units of study - Number and relevant characteristics of participants, documents, or events included in the study; level of participation (could be reported in results)	Table 2, page 10, lines 14-22
9 10 11 12	Data processing - Methods for processing data prior to and during analysis, including transcription, data entry, data management and security, verification of data integrity, data coding, and anonymization/de-identification of excerpts	Yes, page 9, lines 7-11
13 14 15 16	Data analysis - Process by which inferences, themes, etc., were identified and developed, including the researchers involved in data analysis; usually references a specific paradigm or approach; rationale**	Yes, page 9, line 13- page 10 line 10
17 18 19 20	Techniques to enhance trustworthiness - Techniques to enhance trustworthiness and credibility of data analysis (e.g., member checking, audit trail, triangulation); rationale**	Yes, page 10 lines 8- 10

Results/findings

23 24 25 26	Synthesis and interpretation - Main findings (e.g., interpretations, inferences, and themes); might include development of a theory or model, or integration with prior research or theory	Yes, Table 3 and page 13 line 1- page 21 line9
27 28 29 30	Links to empirical data - Evidence (e.g., quotes, field notes, text excerpts, photographs) to substantiate analytic findings	Yes, Table 3 and page 13 line 1- page 21 line9

Discussion

33 34 35 36 37 38	Integration with prior work, implications, transferability, and contribution(s) to the field - Short summary of main findings; explanation of how findings and conclusions connect to, support, elaborate on, or challenge conclusions of earlier scholarship; discussion of scope of application/generalizability; identification of unique contribution(s) to scholarship in a discipline or field	Yes, page 21 line 12- page 24, line 22
39 40 41	Limitations - Trustworthiness and limitations of findings	Yes, page 23, lines 6-16

Other

44 45 46	Conflicts of interest - Potential sources of influence or perceived influence on study conduct and conclusions; how these were managed	Yes, page 25, line 10
47 48	Funding - Sources of funding and other support; role of funders in data collection, interpretation, and reporting	Yes, page 25, lines 11-15

*The authors created the SRQR by searching the literature to identify guidelines, reporting standards, and critical appraisal criteria for qualitative research; reviewing the reference lists of retrieved sources; and contacting experts to gain feedback. The SRQR aims to improve the transparency of all aspects of qualitative research by providing clear standards for reporting qualitative research.

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**The rationale should briefly discuss the justification for choosing that theory, approach, method, or technique rather than other options available, the assumptions and limitations implicit in those choices, and how those choices influence study conclusions and transferability. As appropriate, the rationale for several items might be discussed together.

Reference:

O'Brien BC, Harris IB, Beckman TJ, Reed DA, Cook DA. **Standards for reporting qualitative research: a synthesis of recommendations.** *Academic Medicine*, Vol. 89, No. 9 / Sept 2014
DOI: 10.1097/ACM.0000000000000388

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Online Arts and culture for mental health in young people: A qualitative interview study

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1 2 3 **Online arts and culture for mental health in young people: A qualitative interview study** 4

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32 **Abbreviations**

33
34 17 OAC: Online Arts and Culture

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36 18 CMD: Common Mental Disorder
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40 **Word Count**

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Abstract

Objectives: This study aimed to understand young people's perception of the potential utility of arts and culture, focussing on online access, for supporting their mental health. **Design:** A qualitative interview study. **Setting:** Online. **Participants:** Participants were selected by purposeful sampling from an online survey of arts and culture for mental health and wellbeing. **Method:** Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted from 30th July to 9th Sept 2020. Rich interview data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. **Results:** Thirteen participants aged 18-24 who were socio-demographically diverse and varied in their use of online arts and culture (OAC) and in their level of psychological distress were interviewed. Six themes, 'Characteristics of other activities', 'Online engagement', 'Human connection', 'Mechanisms of impact', 'Mental health outcomes' and 'Engagement optimisation', were identified along with subthemes. Participants identified that online engagement had some advantages over in-person engagement and benefits were greater with familiarity and regular use. Participants described that human connection was the feature of OAC most likely to benefit mental health and emphasised the importance of representation. Mechanisms included improving perspective, reflection, learning, escapism, creativity, exploration and discovery. Outcomes were described as the disruption of negative thought patterns, lifting of mood and increased feelings of calm and proactivity. **Conclusions:** This study demonstrates that young people have a critical level of insight and understanding regarding their mental health and ways in which it might be improved. These findings can be used to optimise the mental health benefits of OAC in an engaging and acceptable way for young people. These methodologies could be applied to other types of community resource for mental health.

Key Words: Adolescent, Art, Culture, Mental health

Strengths and limitations

- This is the first study of which we are aware to explore young people perceptions of the potential utility of arts and culture online for mental health, and was devised with PPI input
- Research team members were multidisciplinary, diverse, and reflexive in their approach
- The findings of this study appear credible and dependable with cohesion and consistency in the themes identified

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3 1 • Despite participants being identified through an online survey which may have allowed a degree of
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5 2 volunteer bias, we were able to identify information-rich participants, with substantial sociodemographic
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7 3 diversity, a range of psychological distress scores, and varied previous use of arts and culture
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- Despite participants being identified through an online survey which may have allowed a degree of volunteer bias, we were able to identify information-rich participants, with substantial sociodemographic diversity, a range of psychological distress scores, and varied previous use of arts and culture

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Introduction

Mental illness is a large and increasingly recognised problem in young people, with the onset of three quarters of all lifetime cases of mental disorder occurring before the age of 24 [1]. Common mental disorders (CMDs), such as anxiety and depression, are not only distressing in young people but also impact on recurrent disorder [2] and suicidality in the long-term [3] even when the young person's symptoms do not reach the diagnostic threshold for mental disorder at the time [4]. Only a minority of young people access professional help for CMDs [5]. The main barriers to help seeking are lack of recognition of their own mental health problem, lack of awareness of help available, and stigma [5-11]. Moreover, often the young people most in need of mental health support, such as ethnic minorities, are the least likely to seek help [5-7, 12, 13].

It is increasingly recognised that professional help, such as the provision of antidepressant medication and/or talking therapies, are neither accessible nor acceptable to many young people [10, 11]. Moreover, not all of the few young people who access professional help have a measurable improvement of symptoms. Evidence suggests that only around half of adolescents who received professional help for depression between 2011 and 2015 from specialist mental health services in England showed a reliable improvement by the time they left treatment [14]. Subsequently, epidemiological studies have demonstrated that mental health dramatically worsened in young people during the COVID-19 pandemic [15] and accessibility to mental health care decreased even further [16]. Further, of those accessing community mental health care, there are higher rates of disengagement among young adults (aged 18-25 years old) when compared to adults for a range of reasons – from perceiving that services are not relevant to their needs, through language and cultural barriers [17, 18]. Thus, there is a compelling need for more evidence-based resources that are engaging, accessible, and that meet the mental health needs of young people as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, consideration of other approaches appears timely [14].

It is generally accepted that culture and the arts are good for mental health and wellbeing [19-24]. The proposed mechanisms are thought to include emotional activation, aesthetic engagement, social interaction, cognitive stimulation, sensory activation and imagination [19, 23-25]. However, there is a dearth of experimental research in this area. We commenced a preregistered evidence synthesis [26] of trials evaluating community resources including engagement with arts and culture on anxiety and depression. We screened 15534 unique titles and abstracts and

1 found no trials evaluating the effectiveness of online arts and culture (OAC) for depression and anxiety in young
2 people [27].

3 During the first UK lockdown we attempted to gain a deeper understanding of the use of online arts and culture and
4 its potential benefits to mental health and well-being, sociodemographic characteristics and self-reported data on
5 usage, perceived mental health benefits and health status. In total, 1056 people completed the survey. A high
6 proportion of participants reported finding online culture helpful for mental health. Those aged under 25 years were
7 less likely to be regular users of online culture or to have increased their use during lockdown. Therefore, it appears
8 that engagement with culture and the arts may be poorest for those who might benefit the most [28], particularly
9 young people. As per the survey, arts and culture is defined as content provided by cultural institutions, such as
10 museums, theatres, art galleries, libraries, archives and natural heritage organisations [28]. Online arts and culture is
11 defined as arts and cultural content that is digitally accessible via the internet.

12
13 Whilst there is increasing interest in community assets in improving health, there is currently a lack of evidence for
14 these resources for CMDs in young people [27, 29]. There is also a lack of engagement of young people in determining
15 the most fruitful approaches to support their mental health [29], most being investigated from the perspective of mental
16 health professionals [29].

17 18 *Aims and Objectives*

19 Given the current research gap regarding the use of arts and culture as an approach to addressing CMDs in young
20 people [29], particularly online engagement which might be more widely accessible, we set out to conduct a study to
21 investigate the potential utility of OAC for CMDs in people aged 16-24. We aimed to interview socio-
22 demographically diverse participants aged 16-24 years in order to generate theory on the potential use and
23 optimisation of arts and culture, particularly online access for CMDs in young people.

24 25 **Methods**

26 A qualitative interview study was chosen in order to gain a rich description of the views of young people about arts
27 and culture for mental health, whether this was a promising approach for supporting their mental health and to give

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3 1 them the opportunity to raise issues of significance to them. A phenomenological approach was adopted to view the
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5 2 data from a constructivist epistemological orientation adopting a bidirectional understanding of the
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7 3 language/experience relationship.
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11 5 The Oxford University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) granted ethical approval for this study prior to its
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13 6 commencement (Ethics reference: R70187/RE005). All participants were given £10 for every hour of participation.
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15 7 We used the COREQ checklist for the comprehensive and explicit reporting of qualitative studies [30] and used the
16
17 8 techniques described by Mays and Pope [31] to ensure study quality and rigour. Data security followed institutional
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19 9 guidance.
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22 23 24 11 *Public and Patient Involvement*

25 12 There was public and patient involvement (PPI) in this study which commenced prior to the outset. PPI informed
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27 13 this study design, topic guide and interpretation of the results as well as the preferred term for the target population
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29 14 as ‘young people’. PPI were involved via exploratory discussions and stakeholder meetings. With PPI we explored
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31 15 the utility of arts and culture in mental health service users who were not necessarily already familiar with OAC.
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33 16 During this consultation, people with lived experience of mental health problems said that lack of engagement with
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35 17 culture and the arts was not due to lack of interest but more related to lack of knowledge about how to access it.
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37 18 They thought that people from the target population should be an active part of any strategy to understand the
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39 19 potential use of such resources for mental health benefit.
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42 43 44 21 *Context*

45 22 Participants aged 16-24 were purposefully sampled from an online survey of arts and culture for mental health and
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47 23 wellbeing[28]. Recruitment of participants for the online survey took place between 17th June and 22nd July 2020.
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49 24 Recruitment was carried out via Facebook adverts, Student Unions, a Press Release, a pop-up advert that appeared
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51 25 on the Ashmolean Museum website and public relations avenues (e.g. Twitter, Newsletter), and Patient and Public
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53 26 Involvement (PPI) groups (based in Oxford and Blackpool). Participants followed the link to e-consent procedures
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55 27 in order to enter the survey. In all 78 people who completed the initial survey were between 16 and 24 years of age.
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3 1 The online survey of arts and culture for mental health and wellbeing is described in more detail elsewhere[28]. The
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5 2 survey demonstrated that there were age-related differences in the reported mental health benefits of online arts and
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7 3 culture and that young people were less likely to be regular users of online arts and culture. A broad
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9 4 sociodemographic range of young participants were reached in the original online survey and were then sampled
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11 5 using purposeful sampling techniques [32] to gain an information rich cases for this qualitative interview study.
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14 7 *Sampling strategy*

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17 8 The initial online survey [28] included items to elicit socio-demographic characteristics and psychological distress
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19 9 using the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) [33] to give an indication of probable mental disorder [34].
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21 10 Purposeful sampling was used to gain an information rich sample that varied socio-demographically (age, sex,
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23 11 income, education, occupation, ethnicity), in previous use of online arts and culture and level of psychological
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25 12 distress, as measured by the K10 [35].
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29 14 *Procedure*

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32 15 Participants selected via purposeful sampling were emailed to alert them to the opportunity of participating in this
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34 16 study and a link was provided to further information and an online consent form for further contact. Once online
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36 17 consent was provided, an email was sent to organise an interview at a convenient time and mode (by Zoom or
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38 18 telephone) for the participant. All but one of the interviews were conducted via Zoom and hosted by the research
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40 19 team. The other interview was conducted via telephone at the request of the participant. Oral consent procedures
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42 20 were used at the outset of each interview and interviews were recorded. Interviews were scheduled for up to one
43
44 21 hour and took between 45 minutes to one hour to complete. Interviews were transcribed verbatim manually by two
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46 22 of the researchers.
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49 24 *Qualitative Interviews*

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51 25 The interview topic guide and sample questions were developed by members of the study team (RJSS, HA and JR)
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53 26 based on a literature review, the online survey and the PPI consultation described above. Areas of inquiry and
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55 27 sample questions for use in the qualitative interviews are outlined in Table 1
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1
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3 1
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5 2 Table 1: Areas of inquiry and sample questions
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Area of enquiry	Sample Questions
Activities and experiences that benefit mental health in general	What sorts of things have helped your mental health and wellbeing in your everyday life?
	Is there anything that has helped particularly during the pandemic?
	Was there anything that helped particularly before the pandemic?
	Can you describe how they affect your mental health?
Ways in which online arts and culture impact mental health	Do you think online arts and culture are, or could be useful for mental health and wellbeing?
	What sorts of experiences related to online arts and culture do you think are or could be helpful?
	What sorts of impact might they have on mental health?
Ways in which online arts and culture could be improved for mental health	In what ways could online arts and culture be improved?
	What sorts of things might they target- mood/anxiety related?
	Any other elements -structure, connection, stimulation, other?
Engagement with online arts and culture for mental health	Do you or would you consider visiting online arts and culture if you thought it could help your mental health and wellbeing?
	What would attract you to accessing online arts and culture that might help with mental health and wellbeing?
	When do you think would be best to use it, for example, at all times, or when you have noticed a problem?
	Is it something would like as a series or programme, if so, about how many sessions, how would you like to be engaged?

1 The research team was comprised of multidisciplinary researchers including a Consultant Psychiatrist and
2 experienced qualitative researcher in adolescent mental health (RJSS) who worked collaboratively on the project. In
3 addition, another experienced qualitative researcher was an integral member of the study team (MG) as well as a
4 broad range of diverse researchers from multiple disciplines. Participants were not previously known to the research
5 team.

6
7 All interviews were conducted by RJSS and one other interviewer (HA, JR, LBo), with up to four silent observers
8 (LBe, LBo, BO, JR, HA) to take field notes and to ensure documentation of non-verbal cues and accurate
9 transcribing of interviews. Interviews were audio-recorded using an audio-recorder, transcribed (verbatim by two of
10 the researchers) and analysed as soon as feasible following the interviews. Identifiable data were removed from
11 transcripts and data were handled in keeping with institutional (Oxford University) protocols and guidance

12 13 *Data Analysis*

14 Qualitative interviews and analyses were conducted concurrently. The data collected in the interviews were analysed
15 as soon as possible after the interviews to minimise information loss. Four members of the research team undertook
16 the analysis (JR, LBe, RJSS and LBo) following the six phases reflexive thematic analysis as described by Braun
17 and Clarke [36, 37]. Multiple coders were chosen for a collaborative and reflexive analysis designed to develop a
18 richer and more nuanced reading of the data with the sense-checking of ideas and an exploration of assumptions and
19 interpretations of the data [38].

20
21 The analysis was approached from a constructivist epistemological orientation adopting a bidirectional
22 understanding of the language/experience relationship. The data was interpreted prioritising the participants own
23 descriptions of their experiences and opinions. Recurrence of terms as well as the meaningfulness of described
24 phenomena was pivotal to informing the thematic analysis. For example, the term ‘distraction’ was used repeatedly
25 throughout the dataset, however its meaning varied from a shift in focus, to feeling entertained, to disrupting
26 negative thought patterns, therefore themes were revised to more clearly reflect the phenomenon described rather
27 than the language used per se. In this way meaningfulness was highly influential in the development and
28 interpretation of codes and themes. We analysed the dataset inductively and deductively. Whilst a framework based

1 on thoughts, feelings and behaviours was a starting point for sense making of the data, the analysis itself became
2 more deductive in its approach as we progressed. Latent coding was adopted with the research team playing an
3 active role in interpreting codes and developing and then challenging themes and identifying relevance to the
4 research objectives [37, 38].

5
6 Coding was developed with the aid of NVivo 12 [39]. Units of text were assigned nodes and themes were developed
7 and then refined and explored in more depth in subsequent interviews in an iterative process. Themes and subthemes
8 were generated, reviewed and revised with regular discussion. During these discussions, the researchers reflected on
9 assumptions and prior knowledge and explored the data to develop new themes. Descriptions of themes were
10 returned to participants individually for comment. The participants preferred mode of communication for the
11 presentation of themes was via email. Participants were in agreement with the themes and it was not necessary to
12 revise themes in response participant feedback.

13 14 **Results**

15 *Participants*

16 Thirteen socio-demographically participants aged between 19 and 24 years were interviewed between 30th July to 9th
17 Sept 2020; four of whom identified as male, seven as female and two as non-binary. Annual household income
18 ranged from less than £16,000 to over £120,000. Only one participant lived alone, and the others lived with up to
19 eight other people. They were geographically dispersed, eleven living in the UK (two in the west midlands, two in
20 the east midlands, two in south east England, one in south west England and two in greater London), and two
21 overseas, one in a high-income country and one in a low/middle-income country. They had a broad range of levels
22 of psychological distress, all but two scoring twenty or more on the K10 indicating the likely presence of a mental
23 disorder [35]. They varied in their regularity of use of OAC, with four having used it only once or twice ever. No
24 participants dropped out after informed consent was provided. (please see Table 2).

Table 2: Participant demographics and mental health status

Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Gender	Age	Frequency of engagement with arts and culture online	K10
Abi	White	Female	18-24	Daily	20-24
Nina	Asian	Female	18-24	Once a week or more	>30
Alex	White	Non Binary	18-24	Once a week or more	>30
Kate	White	Female	18-24	Only once or twice ever	>30
Jake	White	Male	18-24	Only once or twice ever	20-24
Tom	White	Male	18-24	Once a month or more	<20
Luke	White	Male	18-24	Only once or twice ever	<20
Jo	White	Non Binary	18-24	Once a week or more	>30
Jaya	Asian	Female	18-24	Once a week or more	20-24
Layla	White	Female	18-24	Daily	20-24
Mia	White	Female	18-24	Once a month or more	>30
Cara	White	Female	18-24	Once a month or more	20-24
Eve	White	Female	18-24	Only once or twice ever	>30
White= White – British, Irish, other. Asian= Asian/British, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, other.					

Table 3: Themes, subthemes and additional quotes

Theme	Subthemes	Exemplary Quote
Characteristics of other activities	Regular, Connecting, Absorbing	It's a 'we are all in the same boat' thing that makes me feel better because it means I'm not the only one going through whatever is stressing me out' Luke, male, White.
Online engagement	Flexible engagement, Diverse content, In depth, Alternative to social media	I liked that online people can take you through and explain things a little more as I felt more connected to it. I liked knowing why paintings were made. Mia, female, White
Human connection	Human stories, Alternative viewpoints, Representation/diversity	Both expressing your views and hearing other people's views is helpful. It is also good to have diverse views... Most of the time, your social circle shares the same views as you but I think it's also good to hear opposing views so you can question your own views.' Jake, male, White
Mechanisms of impact	Relatability, Reflection, Perspective, Exploration and discovery, Learning, Creativity, Escapism	Sometimes hearing what others are feeling helps you to think about your own thoughts and feelings and helps you to empathise with others too.' Kate, female, White
Mental health outcomes	Reduce negativity, Lift mood, Calming, Proactivity	The content helps me to be calm. It's about zoning out of your mind-set and calming down' Alex, non-binary, White
Engagement optimisation	Regular, Familiar, Optionality, Not 'targeted' at mental health	Enhancing the content can be more fun and also more informative. You wouldn't just stare at the picture but be more involved or more absorbed.' Jo, non-binary, White

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3 1 Six themes, 'Characteristics of other activities', 'Online engagement', 'Human connection', 'Mechanisms of
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5 2 impact', 'Mental health outcomes' and 'Engagement optimisation', were identified from the interviews along with
6
7 3 subthemes. Themes and subthemes are outlined in Table 3 along with exemplary quotes using pseudonyms to
8
9 4 identify participants. Themes are described in more detail below.

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11 5
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13 6 *Characteristics of other activities*

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15 7 Participants described activities they did in their everyday life that they thought benefitted their mental health and
16
17 8 wellbeing. Subthemes under *Characteristics of other activities* were 'Regular', 'Connecting' and Absorbing.

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19 9
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21 10 Activities included sewing and cookery to running outdoors and socialising that they felt benefitted their mental
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23 11 health. Although types of activity were wide ranging, what seemed more important and had greater commonality
24
25 12 between participants was the characteristics of activities that were perceived as being helpful mental health. These
26
27 13 were mainly activities that they did regularly and proactively, to keep themselves well and prevent mental health
28
29 14 problems, rather than activities that they would do if they felt their mental health was deteriorating.

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31 15
32 16 *'I think the positive effects are heavily tied up with the routine aspect of it. The loss that you feel for not*
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34 17 *doing it for whatever reason, mitigates against the benefit of leaving it an extra day and coming back to it*
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36 18 *fresh.'* Tom, male, White

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40 20 *'They say that you should try to spend at least two hours outside a day, so I try to do that. I also try to look*
41
42 21 *after myself and eat well because I think that helps me to feel like I'm taking care of myself. I also like to*
43
44 22 *see friends, I think that really helps keep me going.'* Luke, male, White

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48 24 Connecting with other people was a common feature of activities perceived as being helpful for mental health. This
49
50 25 was described in a broad range of activities including tuning into dialogues and narratives in podcasts and reading
51
52 26 about characters in books, as well as direct social contact via phone, social media, video and in person.

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3 1 *'When you hear about people talking about their experiences, I find that really interesting and quite*
4 *helpful.'* Layla, female, White
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9 4 *'I made a big effort to be with other people. I would make efforts to not be alone during the day as it*
10 *(connecting with others) energised me.'* Mia, female, White
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15 7 In addition, participants described that the more absorbing an experience, the greater the benefit, particularly
16 8 activities that served to completely shift their focus away from their thoughts. Participants described that a shift
17 9 away from their thoughts was key for separating themselves from negative thought patterns that they might have
18 10 been experiencing beforehand.
19
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25 12 *'I like content that encourages activity and gives you something to do which can provide a distraction from*
26 *everything else, so you just get consumed with doing it.'* Alex, non-binary, White
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31 15 *'When I'm reading I do it to get away from the world...it's nice to sit in the garden and not have to think*
32 *about my own life.'* Mia, female, White
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37 18 *'During that time, you are only really thinking about that thing, not about what other people think about*
38 *you or having those sorts of accumulative thoughts that have negative impacts. So I guess it's kind of*
39 19 *a relief from these thoughts and things. It's the idea of an all-consuming task.'* Tom, male, White
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3 1 *Online engagement*
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5 2 Subthemes under ‘Online engagement’ were ‘Regular’, ‘Connecting’ and ‘Absorbing’. Participants highlighted that
6
7 3 online engagement with arts and culture had several advantages over in-person experiences as online content could
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9 4 be accessed regularly, remotely and on demand. Many described that they could access it as and when they felt they
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11 5 needed it, such as when experiencing negative or anxious thoughts, or late at night. They also described how it
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13 6 improved access to younger people who might not have the independent means of getting themselves to a museum
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15 7 or art gallery and whose families might not take them regularly. They explained that online engagement also gives
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17 8 them access to a wider variety of diverse content. In addition, online engagement was seen as being able to offer
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19 9 more detailed descriptions of the humans behind the art, an increased depth and breadth of commentary and more
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21 10 varied perspectives.
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26 13 *‘However, the important thing is having something that you can just access when you need it.’* Alex, non-
27 14 binary, White
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29 16 *‘You don’t have to go to the place. You can watch it whenever you want. You can watch something in a*
30 17 *different country that is at a different time[zone]. It has added value.’* Jake, male, White
31 18

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33 19 *‘Online can offer the narrative behind the artists that museums don’t do as easily’.* Nina, female,
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35 20 Asian/British
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39 22 Participants also described online arts and culture as providing positive alternatives to social media and other typical
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41 23 online content. For example, some spoke about social media and other online experiences as having a negative impact
42
43 24 on their mental health, feeling like they got drawn into scrolling online content for unanticipated long periods of time
44
45 25 with no purpose. In addition, many described that many online experiences become like ‘echo chambers’ where similar
46
47 26 viewpoints and perspective are shared. They described feelings of nervousness of expressing alternative views that
48
49 27 might differ or be perceived as unpopular, whereas they felt that they would benefit from being exposed to a variety
50
51 28 of viewpoints, promoting a shift in perspective (see Viewpoints, below).
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54 30 *‘Especially during lockdown, I didn’t get along well with my phone at all.....On your phone there’s this*
55 31 *constant thing of checking of messages, seeing what you have or haven’t got, checking who is online,*
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3 1 *scrolling down Facebook with no real purpose. Because your phone is always with you. Your phone*
4 2 *sometimes stops you from getting up for things. Then you get that negative realisation that you've just laid*
5 3 *in your bed for an hour and not made anything of it.'* Tom, male, White
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10 7 *Human connection*

11 8 Subthemes under 'Human connection' were 'Human stories', 'Alternative viewpoints', and
12 9 'Representation/diversity'. Human stories of real individuals based on relatable human experiences were identified
13 10 as an important way in which the mental health benefits of OAC could be optimised. This could be the story of the
14 11 artist or other individuals whose life journey was connected with art or artefacts. In particular, they wanted to hear
15 12 the stories of people they could relate to who had experienced challenges. Such challenges included facing
16 13 transition, not fitting in, or experiencing mental health difficulties. Stories describing human experiences
17 14 (relationships, beliefs, hopes, behaviours and feelings) were seen as having mental health benefits.
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26 15 *'How they overcame challenges is important, just as much as hearing about their success. I don't think it's*
27 16 *helpful to hear about good things about someone as it's not an accurate perception of their life. Even if they*
28 17 *have been really successful they will have had challenges at some point and it's important to hear about*
29 18 *that.....Even if they just seem like an everyday person, you could identify with them more strongly.*
30 19 *Sometimes hearing the unheard stories are good as you can feel like your own story is going unheard. It can*
31 20 *be comforting.'* Layla, female, White
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35 24 However, feeling represented was also seen as essential for mental health benefit. Moreover, under-representation of
36 25 people by race, gender identity or sexual orientation across a whole cultural experience (such as a museum) was
37 26 identified as being detrimental to mental health.
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41 27 *'I think it can help seeing yourself reflected in art. I liked how the British Museum did a presentation of*
42 28 *objects (LGBT trail) related to pride. As someone who is LGBT it was nice to see how pride is not necessarily*
43 29 *a "new thing" but something that has been researched for a long time. It is nice to feel reflected in people*
44 30 *or things that existed hundreds of years ago.'* Alex, non-binary, White
45 31
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47 32 *'Sometimes when I am in a museum like the Ashmolean and I see fewer people around Asian and Indian art,*
48 33 *it feels personal. Representation in art is important as it shapes how you perceive it. I always feel really*
49 34 *moved when I see representation of Indian people because it is so rare. It's easier to find online. We feel*
50 35 *connected to art and artists that represent things that we can relate to. I remember my brother was once so*
51 36 *affected by seeing a painting with south Asian people in it that he took a picture of it.'* Nina, female,
52 37 Asian/British
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3 1 Participants said that being able to access different people's viewpoints was important for optimising the mental
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5 2 health benefit of online cultural content. They valued varied viewpoints from a broad range of people of different
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7 3 ages and backgrounds. They described that often they were only exposed to similar viewpoints, such as from their
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9 4 friendship groups or online forums. They described anxiety of sharing their views in certain forums for fear of being
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11 5 perceived to be saying the wrong thing or ending up on the wrong side of an argument. They described the benefits
12
13 6 of different viewpoints which allowed them to see content in a different light. Some said that it could be transiently
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15 7 uncomfortable to see a view that differed substantially from their own but that there was an overall mental health
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17 8 benefit from that experience. They said that online cultural content felt like a safe space to house different
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19 9 viewpoints and that they wanted to have the option of sharing their own viewpoint. They described that seeing a
20
21 10 variety of viewpoints could be comforting, could disrupt negative thought patterns and broaden their perspective.

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23 11
24 12 *'With online resources, the more views and perspectives there are to access the better. It can provide new*
25 13 *perspectives that we haven't heard before. I think it's nice to see different perspectives and hear someone*
26 14 *else's point of view. You can get stuck in your mind a lot and sometimes it's beneficial to have someone else's*
27 15 *view bring you out of that'.* Abi, female, White

28 17
29 18 *'It's interesting with 'trigger warning' things, people say that you need to have them for mental health. But*
30 19 *this works both ways because my mental health is enhanced by hearing different perspectives.'* Luke, male,
31 20 White

32 21 33 22 34 23 *Mechanisms of impact*

35 24 Subthemes under 'Mechanisms of impact' were 'Relatability', 'Reflection', 'Perspective', 'Exploration and
36
37 25 discovery', 'Learning', 'Creativity' and 'Escapism'. These mechanisms were interconnected and most commonly
38
39 26 related to human connection. However, the gateway to the pathway appeared to be via the relatability of the person
40
41 27 to whom the human connection applied.

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45 29 In order to derive optimal benefit from human stories, participants described the need to be able to relate to the
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47 30 individuals on a human or emotional level, often by being 'hooked' by a detail about their everyday life that they
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49 31 could relate to. Everyday 'quirky' details such as what a person liked to eat for breakfast were thought to be more
50
51 32 important than life events or major achievements. This not only provided benefits by engaging them in the story but
52
53 33 also relieved feelings of loneliness.

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3 1 *'The hook could be just everyday information about people. How other people live and day to day life. Its*
4 2 *immediately relatable to me because that's my life'.* Luke, male, White
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9 5 Participants also wanted to see diverse stories of individuals from global cultures and different periods in history. A
10 6 true and relatable human experience transcending time and space was seen as having optimal mental health benefits.
11 7 They described that connecting with those outside of their current context, such as those from a different period in
12 8 history or global culture was of benefit for which diversity was essential. This was often described as providing a
13 9 sense of perspective.
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18 10 *'It helps relate it to yourself and in some way either empathise with the people at the time or give you some*
19 11 *kind of perspective in your life. For example, looking at [cultural] things like the plague and thinking of other*
20 12 *people that have experienced a similar kind of pandemic and thinking we will be okay. It's not the end;*
21 13 *knowing it has happened before.'* Kate, female, White
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27 17 Human connection through arts and culture provided young people the opportunity to reflect on the experiences,
28 18 thoughts, feelings and behaviours of other people. This allowed them to understand more, not only about the
29 19 emotional life of others but also reflect on their own internal experiences.
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35 21 *'I enjoy reading about things that resonate with me. I'm interested in people that have had similar*
36 22 *struggles. I am interested in learning about people who aren't straight. As I am not and it took a long time*
37 23 *to come out to my parents. It's powerful to read about people in history that experience this kind of love. I*
38 24 *don't really have a lot of care for celebrities, I don't follow them and I also don't really enjoy watching the*
39 25 *news as it often makes me feel frustrated. I think being able to understand my own emotions is important*
40 26 *for me'.* Mia, female, White
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45 30 The process of exploration and discovery when engaging with OAC were seen as beneficial to mental health,
46 31 particularly in finding untold or hidden stories. This was described both in the absorbing process of 'getting lost' in
47 32 collections and the excitement of serendipitous discovery. Separately and interconnected with these mechanisms
48 33 were other mechanisms, including creativity, in which participants described the mental health benefits of being
49 34 inspired to be creative or witnessing creativity in other people which often led to feeling more proactive, in creative
50 35 and other ways. Learning applied to both learning about art and culture and about the internal experiences of other
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1 people and the benefits as being related to using time usefully and of a sense of achievement. Participants also
2 described the mental health benefits of using the experiences of others to imagine being in a different context as a
3 form of escapism.

4
5 *'I like the journey of hunting something down and searching it myself rather than instantly finding it or being*
6 *handed it really easily'*. Abi, female, White
7

8 *'Creativity can express things in a way that therapy can't always do'* Abi, female, White
9

10 It's about learning new things. I'm a quite curious person. I get to see things that I don't normally see.
11

12 Alex, non-binary, White
13

14 *'I find that it is a form of escapism. When you watch a play you are watching other people's lives and*
15 *perspectives'* Nina, female, Asian/British
16

17 *Mental health outcomes*

18 Subthemes under 'Mental health outcomes' were 'Reduce negativity', 'Lift mood', 'Calming', and 'Proactivity'.

19 Participants described that OAC could impact on their mental health in a variety of ways. They described a positive
20 impact on mental health that came with the disruption of negative thought patterns especially when absorbed in
21 activities or engaged with diverse stories or viewpoints. They also described a mood lifting aspect, which also
22 related to looking outwards and adjusting a negative mindset, which could also lead to feeling of proactivity. Many
23 talked about the promotion of feelings of calm that came with engaging with cultural content which was also
24 described by some as helping with insomnia and was even sort out when having problems with sleep.

25 *'I tend to think in black and white and have polarising thoughts. Doing these things gives me another way*
26 *of thinking'* Alex, non-binary, White

27 *'I just think we need to see more content that makes us happy and smile to lift our mood in that moment,*
28 *and just be a remind that we don't have to feel sad or stuck in the mind-set we are in.* Abi, female, White

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3 1 *'Dark emotive imagery can be calming. It can show darkness that perhaps the artist felt or that others relate*
4 2 *to and feel that you are not alone in sometimes having those feelings. You step out of yourself, which helps*
5 3 *to make things that are currently going on in your life not seem so bad'*. Nina, female, Asian/British
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10 5 A major advantage was seen as encouraging proactivity and motivation, both for creative activities and social
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12 6 activism. Often this was after transient distress at witnessing social inequalities but overall was viewed as a positive
13
14 7 experience with mental health benefit.
15

16
17 8 *'If you have done something nice it can be uplifting and inspire you to do other things that day. It can make*
18 9 *you feel more motivated and proactive.'* Eve, female, White
19

20 10 *Some people there are now taking action and taking ownership of their heritage. I see this as very positive.*
21 11 *It is them turning over information which is commonly perceived as true.'* Jo, non-binary, White
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27 14 *Engagement optimisation*
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29 15 Subthemes under 'Engagement optimisation' were 'Regular', 'Familiar', 'Optionality', and 'Not 'targeted' at mental
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31 16 health'. Many participants described that the mental health benefits of arts and culture were greater with regular use
32
33 17 and familiarity. Some said that they had been introduced to arts and culture at an early age and that this familiarity
34
35 18 meant that they felt more comfortable accessing it at times of need. Many expressed that they would also
36
37 19 recommend an early introduction for others.
38
39 20

40 21 *'The more you're doing it regularly the more your anxiety doesn't build up again so it's good to keep using*
41
42 22 *it.'* Layla, female, White
43
44 23

45
46 24 *'We should promote [online cultural content] more in schools. Not everyone has parents that are interested*
47
48 25 *in culture. Getting them interested from an early age could help them develop a lifelong interest which in*
49
50 26 *turn would benefit them.'* Abi, female, White
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54 28 Many preferred to engage with OAC regularly to maximise the benefits and then to dip into it when they felt
55
56 29 particularly in need, for example when feeling low, anxious or unable to sleep. Optionality around engagement
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1 preferences was seen as important. Some also described that it was not that they benefitted from regular engagement
2 but rather experienced negative consequences when they couldn't do it.

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'These are effects that are like a domino effect, it comes up again and again, so I will regularly feel the benefit and this gets stronger with time'. Jo, non-binary, White

8 Whilst a few participants thought they would access content that was explicitly targeted at mental health, many were
9 more cautious. Many participants expressed being particularly cynical about mindfulness being promoted online in
10 relation to arts and culture.

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'I find that hearing something that I'm interested in reading in is so much more helpful as you are engaged and distracted. I know others do like mindfulness, but I just don't connect with it.

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Sometimes it feels like it is done to tick a box and so people move away from it.' Layla, female, White

18 Discussion

19 This study contributes to a gap in the literature by examining the use and potential benefit of OAC for mental health
20 in young people. Overall, it highlights that OAC for young people has several advantages over in-person
21 experiences as well as providing positive alternatives to social media and other typical online content. Of note,
22 human connection (through diverse human stories and alternative viewpoints) was universally described as the
23 feature of OAC most likely to optimize a mental health impact and the importance of representation was highlighted
24 within that. Furthermore, we identify several mechanisms through which this optimization might occur – including
25 through reflection on experiences, providing a sense of perspective, and the process of exploration and discovery, as
26 well as perceived mental health outcomes, including proactivity, disruption of negative thoughts and lifting mood. In
27 particular these findings have significant implications for further research targeting approaches of OAC for mental
28 health.

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3 1 A number of participants described and articulated the ways in which culture and the arts could support their mental
4
5 2 health, and that benefits were more likely to be derived with greater familiarity and regular use. Participants
6
7 3 described some advantages of online versus in-person engagement. This included being able to use it regularly,
8
9 4 remotely and on demand, as well as containing deeper and broader commentary and more diverse content. Features
10
11 5 of OAC that participants thought were most likely to benefit their mental health were diverse human stories and
12
13 6 alternative viewpoints via human connection, providing opportunities to reflect on the experiences of others and
14
15 7 providing a sense of perspective. Perceived impacts on mental health were disrupting negative thought patterns,
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17 8 lifting mood, an increased sense of calm, and increased proactivity.

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20 9 All participants were able to speak about their own mental health and efforts they make to support their mental
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22 10 health. Many studies [5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 40, 41] have attempted to understand conventional forms of help-seeking in
23
24 11 young people. In contrast this study allowed young people to describe alternative ways of supporting their mental
25
26 12 health on their own terms [29].

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29 13 Regular attendance of cultural events in the community has been shown to be associated with a multitude of health
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31 14 benefits including increased longevity [42-45] and previous commentary has described the potential of the cultural
32
33 15 heritage sector as providing sites for public health interventions [22]. OAC from cultural institutions such as
34
35 16 museums, arts galleries and libraries, has enormous potential for enabling wider access and more frequent and
36
37 17 flexible engagement for optimal public health impact.

39
40 18 Whilst it might be assumed that pleasing and agreeable content might maximise the mental health benefits of OAC,
41
42 19 the findings of this study suggest that the mechanisms for mental health benefit rely on descriptions of challenges
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44 20 and the divergence of viewpoints. Participants described that cancel culture [46] and trigger warnings were
45
46 21 unhelpful. This is consistent with recent studies demonstrating that even young people with relevant traumas do not
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48 22 avoid triggering material and the effects of triggering material appear to be short-lived, even in those with PTSD
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50 23 [47]. Taking this a step further, the participants in this study felt that a *lack* of divergent views was detrimental to
51
52 24 mental health. These findings suggest that future OAC initiatives could benefit from, rather than seek to avoid,
53
54 25 material which is perceived as ‘triggering.’ Instead, such material could potentially be included – in consultation
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56 26 with users and relevant stakeholders.

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4
5 2 In this current study, those from traditionally marginalised groups described the benefits of representation and how
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7 3 they felt that under-representation was detrimental to mental health. Participants described the benefits of diversity
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9 4 in the cultures and histories presented in bringing a sense of perspective. Opportunities for people to ‘speak for
10
11 5 themselves’ have been accelerated by new media and technological tools, but those contributions tend to
12
13 6 nevertheless remain heavily mediated by institutions [48]. Options to comment on and co-produce content might
14
15 7 allow young people to feel empowered and motivated to engage [49]. However the current inequalities in
16
17 8 representation in cultural institutions [50] must be reversed in order to realise the public health potential of OAC for
18
19 9 mental health in those with the greatest unmet mental health need [51].
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21 10

22 11 *Limitations*

23
24 12 Whilst providing a useful insight into young people’s perspectives on OAC for mental health, this study focused on
25
26 13 a sample of thirteen participants aged between 19 and 24 years, nine of whom were already users of OAC content.
27
28 14 Whilst this allowed an exploration of the perceived mental health benefits of OAC and how to optimise these, a
29
30 15 limitation of this study was that it did not fully explore barriers to engagement. The focus of this study, to fully
31
32 16 explore the benefits and potential for optimisation of OAC for mental health in young people, meant that the
33
34 17 potential harms whilst touched on were not explored in detail. In addition, this study was conducted during COVID-
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36 18 19 restrictions, which brought into sharp focus the usefulness of OAC for mental health, due to the physical closure
37
38 19 of cultural institutions and heightened mental health difficulties in young people. This context must be remembered
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40 20 when considering some of the findings such as the benefits of online engagement which may have been more
41
42 21 obvious at the time of COVID-19 than at other times.
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46 24 *Implications*

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48 25 The results of this qualitative interview study suggest that connection to cultural assets on a personal level has
49
50 26 potential mental health benefits for young people. For cultural institutions to produce online content that benefits
51
52 27 mental health for young people, there must be increased efforts to draw out, present and engage people in the human
53
54 28 stories and alternative viewpoints behind the collections’ arts and artefacts. For young people, it is not necessarily
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56 29 the quantity or illustriousness of the objects presented, but the emotional power of the human narratives behind these
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3 1 objects that has the greatest potential impact on mental health. Thus, future OAC projects could consider integrating
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5 2 human stories, as well as diversity and representation and alternative viewpoints into their catalogue of offerings –
6
7 3 as their inclusion could help to optimise online and cultural resources for mental health (even where that is not the
8
9 4 primary aim of the OAC being offered).

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11 5
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13 6 Future research should expand to include an increasingly diverse study sample - including more perspectives from
14
15 7 more underrepresented young people from ethnically diverse backgrounds and those from deprivation, including
16
17 8 digital poverty, who might also have lower levels of help seeking from health services as well as lower levels of
18
19 9 community engagement, including OAC. Such research could increase understanding of the potential barriers to
20
21 10 engagement. In addition, this research focussed on the potential positive impacts, however further research is needed
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23 11 into the potential harms of OAC for mental health. As with implications for practice this has important implication
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25 12 for an age targeted approach to research. Given the preference of young adults for the proactive use of such
26
27 13 resources, on the importance of human connection in optimisation for mental health and the scepticism of resources
28
29 14 targeted at mental health, this has important implications for the testing of cultural resources for mental health in this
30
31 15 age-group. Further mixed methods research is needed to fully elucidate these research gaps in an age targeted way
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33 16 with attention to underrepresented groups.

34 35 36 18 *Conclusion*

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38 19 Many of those interviewed for this study self-reported levels of psychological distress indicating clinically
39
40 20 significant depression and/or anxiety. Therefore, these results have public health implications with potential
41
42 21 applicability to clinical populations. Moreover, this study suggests new and innovative ways of unleashing culture to
43
44 22 broader audiences online with previously underutilised ways of enriching engagement and mental health impact.
45
46 23 This study demonstrates that young people believed that OAC could be an engaging and efficacious way of
47
48 24 supporting mental health. Of note is the importance of representation and equitable access which must be addressed
49
50 25 to realise the full public health potential of OAC[52]. OAC has the potential to reach the volumes of young people
51
52 26 with threshold and subthreshold CMDs who currently do not seek help. In addition, these methodologies can be used
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54 27 to elucidate the potential utility of other community-based resources for mental health.

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For peer review only

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3 1 **Ethics Approval Statement:** The Oxford University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) granted ethical approval
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5 2 for this study prior to its commencement (Ethics reference R70187/RE005).
6
7 3

8
9 4 **Contribution Statement:** All authors contributed to the study. The study was conceived by Rebecca J Syed Sheriff
10
11 5 informed by discussions with PPI. Analyses were performed by Laura Bonsaver, Laura Bergin and Evgenia Riga
12
13 6 supported by team discussions with Bessie O'Dell, Helen Adams and Margaret Glogowska. The first draft of the
14
15 7 manuscript was written by Rebecca J Syed Sheriff and all authors commented on previous versions of the
16
17 8 manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.
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19 9

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22

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