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Conflict and Belonging

Socially engaged art practice as a resource for resilience-building in rurban communities.

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ABSTRACT

Rapidly expanding rural ("rurban") areas are generally discussed with regard to logistical and administrative challenges while the impact of expansion on community resilience remains relatively unexamined. This paper describes a preliminary study on rurban community resilience with a view to supporting these communities with digital socially engaged art interventions. A series of focus groups, conducted to better understand the strengths of and challenges faced by rurban communities, demonstrated nuanced notions of identity as well as identity tensions that paradoxically contribute to a sense of belonging and inclusion. We propose that engaging with this kind of 'identity work' is a necessary first step for those who wish to deploy digital SEA interventions in communities undergoing rapid changes.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered Computing → Collaborative and social computing;** Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing

KEYWORDS

Rapidly expanding rural communities, rurban communities, community resilience, digital socially-engaged art, identity work.

1 Introduction

In recent years, socio-economic impacts on employment and essential services have led to the rapid expansion of rural areas and their becoming ancillary communities to nearby cities. Such communities, described as 'rurban', hold a set of unique characteristics that are different to both urban and rural areas [15].

Existing literature tends to focus on the decline of rural communities, with resulting policies aimed at increasing vibrancy, combating depopulation, maintaining and enhancing quality of life and securing provision of services [14], while the expansion of rural communities has been overlooked [2,31]. The rapid expansion of the rurban population raises concerns that demographic changes could undermine community resilience through challenges posed to identity, agency and empowerment [14,30]. Our research explores ways to address concerns around expansion and to support rurban communities through the use of digital socially engaged arts (SEA) interventions.

There is a growing body of HCI research investigating how SEA can support resilience in urban contexts [17,28,32,34] and HCI researchers have successfully drawn on SEA interventions to develop multiple understandings of community, place, belonging and identity [8,12,18,22,26,35]. However, the rural context, and even more specifically the rapidly expanding rural context, has yet to be explored. Our research is driven by the belief that there is a role for digital SEA interventions in resilience building in communities undergoing rapid change. In this paper, we present the results of our first study investigating the strengths of and challenges faced by a rurban community, with a view to designing subsequent digital SEA interventions.

2 Background

SEA is an established participatory arts movement valuing conflict and dissent as dynamics believed to achieve transformative social change [4,25,29]. SEA has been used to encourage active citizenship and progress mutual understanding and inclusivity [11,13,34]. SEA practices have long been a part of urban development and are considered a means of gaining cultural participation and community development [34].

In an HCI context, SEA, while still relatively underexamined [9], has focused on areas related to sustainability [12], inclusion [22] and identity[10,35]. SEA in HCI has been used to enable collective learning and democratic moments [34], and impacts on ideas of place, belonging & identity [16,24,35]. In this respect, we are interested in the potential of digital SEA as a vehicle to explore community dynamics with the view to supporting resilience.

We are led by Liepins [20] in our conceptualisation of the community as "a social collective of great diversity" and "a signifier of both research scale and cultural meanings about social life and rurality". Communities are considered 'resilient' when they respond to crises in ways that strengthen communal bonds, resources and the capacity to adapt, evolve and grow in the face of change [3,27,30]. Crises faced by rural communities are often triggered by rapid urbanisation which leads to either expansion or decline of rural communities [2,33]. Members of these communities are said to develop personal and collective capacity to respond to and influence change [3], placing human potential and empowerment at the centre of individual and community resilience [14,19,30], a desire that resonates with the function of SEA. Our research aims to explore the potential of digital SEA in the context of rurban community resilience. In this paper, we present the results of our first study investigating the strengths of and challenges faced by a rurban community dealing with rapid expansion, with a view to designing subsequent digital SEA interventions.

3 The Study

This research was conducted in "NorthRock" [1], a rurban community in the south of Ireland. This formerly rural community was reported in the last census to have expanded at almost four times the national average. Almost one-third of the population were born outside of Ireland [7] and residents report almost 40 languages and 6 religions present in the community. Reasons for this expansion include proximity to an urban centre, good transport connections and availability of housing. Local community organisations recently published a "strategic plan" in response to the expansion, aimed at promoting community resilience. Suggested actions include the development of a "digital village book" detailing life in the community. This community profile aligned well with our research aim of supporting rurban communities. The community's initiative in the strategic plan and interest in developing digital resources were also encouraging factors in deciding to posit our research work within this community.

The primary researcher conducted initial fieldwork; this took the form of attending community meetings and social events to build rapport with key individuals and organisations in the community. The primary researcher is originally from the area and so was well positioned to identify key stakeholders and design research with the community. The aim of the present study was to elicit the experiences of the population with a view to understanding the challenges they face as a result of expansion and the strengths inherent in the community to address these challenges. We conducted three focus groups with a total of 20 community residents (7 men, 13 women). Participants' age ranged from 25 to 80 years old, their time residing in the community from between two and over seventy years. Sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed by the lead researcher who facilitated the focus groups. The transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis [6] which allowed for examining underlying ideas and assumptions in self-reporting by participants and the discourses behind understandings of experience [5]. During this analysis four themes emerged: (1) Contested Identities, (2) Rural Culture, (3) Changing Social Structures, and (4) Mechanisms of Inclusion. Here we focus on *Contested Identities* and discuss its significance for digital SEA interventions with a view to supporting resilience in rurban communities.

4 Contested Identities

Across the focus groups, participants alluded implicitly or explicitly to divided identities with regard to new residents, as well as in-groups and out-groups in various contexts. This is indicative of the community cultivating an understanding of identity that is in part defined by the "other". While this could be construed as insular and suggest something counteractive to inclusivity, it can also be seen as giving rise to a sense of solidarity and belonging. As part of this theme of contested identities, three subthemes are presented: Old versus New, East versus West, and Internal versus External. All are illustrative of community divisions borne out of expansion at different times since NorthRock's first settlement. These divisions contest and at the same time constitute the identity of the community. Further, these three themes all speak to the complex nature of identity processes in rurban communities. The divisions illustrate how identity evolves from conflict and dialogue to forge new connections and understandings. We present these in detail below.

4.1 Old versus New

Our first division draws on longevity of residence as a factor in defining individual and collective identity. During the focus groups, participants used various linguistic devices, such as the labels "Old Rock" and "New Rock", "blow ins" and "outsiders" to indicate longevity of community membership as part of positioning themselves in relation to others or talking about community events or personal history. The terms "Old" and "New" take on specific connotations within the community context. For example, "New Rock" is defined by one participant as "people who have only moved in the last 15 years". (T:B, P:2, L:527-528) but is equally used to refer to people who have moved in more recently.

The terms "Old" and "New Rock" are used to describe the involvement of newer residents in community events: *"It is the communion and the confirmations is very important because that's the New NorthRock getting a feel for the old people and seeing who's around as well."* (T:B, P:2, L:373-374), or to describe interactions between community members.

In the following extract, a community member uses the "New" and "Old" labels to outline the interaction he has with the "New Rock" population. This is useful in illustrating his point while positioning it in a positive way with regard to any perceived differences between residents. *"I have dealings with more New NorthRock than I have with Old NorthRock on a daily basis for myself. […] I'd be just walking down the street, and a lot of them are New NorthRock, and nearly everyone now would say hello to me"* (T:B, P:2, L:346-357).

The expression is also used to illustrate the positive and revitalising aspects of new people joining the community: "*There's 90 volunteers each St Patricks day parade, and there's well in excess*

[1] anonymised

of half of those are New NorthRock" (T:B, P:2, L:525-529). The label "new communities" is used in a similar way in the following extract to illustrate the connection key organisations have with the "New Rock" population; *"We all have the same issues and I think maybe that's why we're open to the new communities coming in as well because we see people with the same problems and the same issues [...] and I think that's maybe why the resource centre is so open to new communities and I think that's been the success of it really."* (T:A, P:1, L:278-283).

This practice of differentiating long-term residents and newcomers is also evident in terms such as "blow-ins" and "outsiders". The term "blow-in", which was used in previous generations and feels more derogatory no longer seems to hold the same currency as evidenced by the following exchange between two participants about 20 years apart in age:

P5: *And as well as that since I moved here and met people in the schools, I've friends that I know from the city who are down here as well, but I've also friends who were born and bred in NorthRock, that get on great and they never kind of say "oh you're only a blow in" or anything like that.*

P1: *The might say it in fun*

P6: *They used to say I'm only a blow-in too* (T:A, P:1,6,5, L:326 334)

The use of the "Old" and "New" labels and the terms "blow-ins" and "outsiders" suggests the desire to identify and divide groups with regard to their longevity in the community. However, participants observed that language used seems to have transitioned from harsher terms (e.g. "blow-in") to the more equitable language of "New" and "Old". This suggests an amount of softening in the process of inclusion, whereby differences are still acknowledged, but in a less hierarchical way, the terms "Old" and "New" not indicating any intrinsic value of one over the other.

4.2 East versus West

The division of East versus West is both geographical and class-based in nature. To provide some background, in the 1970s two estates were established in NorthRock. One in the East end and one in the West end, which subsequently was followed by community tensions. These estates radically altered the social structure of the community as their establishment brought the first big influx of new residents. This event gave rise to social problems such as exclusion and anti-social behaviour, as reflected in the extracts below. The two estates were established at opposite ends of the village, one as social housing and the other private. This was in effect an act of segregation between the two economic classes as evidenced by the following exchange during one of the focus groups;

P7: *As I quickly found out that there was a class structure in NorthRock, there's no doubt about that.*

Researcher: *Ok, and how does that break down?*

P7: *Well it broke down that you had the West End and the East End, to put it very crudely, the two different ends of the village and I kind of got a sense that the people who lived up this end, although they may have originally come from the West End, didn't want to mix too much with the people from the West End.*

P2: *I actually live in the West End and that was the case.* (T:A, P:7,2, L:250-260)

At that time in history, in-group / out-group divisions resulted in an amount hostility, as seen in the following exchange between two women, in their 60s and both a part of "Old Rock".

P2: *Ryan and Aherne [estate] and am, Castle View [estate] we'll say, they'd go play matches and there could be a fight between them, between matches.*

P1: *It was totally crazy.* (T:A, P:2,1, L:300-303)

P1: *Now you'd kind of forget alright but there was a lot of aggro between the two sides, and because it was the only private estate in the village at the time, people had notions about themselves which was totally wrong* (T:A, P:1, L:270-273)

This level of social tension is a dark chapter in the community history and indicative of how destructive insular divisions can be. In this case, geographical and social divisions led to entrenched group identities that resulted in violent behaviour. Interestingly, in our focus groups, these divisions were discussed not as part of current identity but as a thing of the past which has now been resolved, with "New Rock" participants expressing surprise that those divisions ever existed. Still, the divisions and the ensuing process of reconciliation was formative in the evolving identity of the community as some participants acknowledge that process as instrumental in creating a more inclusive and empathetic community, as reflected in the following quote:

"Well I suppose, maybe that was the first integration we had to do, [...] I know this is why we're conscious of it for the new communities as well,[...] the resource centre originally was about empowerment and it was around education and that broke down the barriers, and then it was probably easier when new people came in, there was some curiosity about them, and there was a welcoming I think." (T:A, P:1, L:408-421)

4.3 Internal versus External

Frictions between the community and outside legislative and social bodies constitute the third contested identity. This manifested in a number of different dialogues, both contemporary and historical. We describe two of those conflicts below, revolving around a historical connection with the IRA[2] and disputes with the city and county council. The participants reference historically being discriminated against due to IRA activity in the community:

[2] a republican paramilitary organization seeking the end of British rule in Northern Ireland

***P2**: Again, I go back to my teens and my early 20s, the IRA would have been synonymous with NorthRock right, and very strong, and that was a lot of why it was so hard to get jobs, because, I mean,*

***P5**: You would have been suspected as being in the IRA.*

P2: Yeah, you know, if you're from Rock, "oh right they're from Rock" you know what I mean. (T:B, P:1,2, L:708-711)

IRA activity is no longer associated with the community, however it is mentioned by several older participants and so still plays a part in the psyche of the community. This old discrimination may have played a part in the community becoming "*close knit*" (T:B, P:1, L:588) in the face of outside adversity.

Expansion itself led to a recent conflict between the community and the county and city council when an attempt to redefine the administrative boundary of the village led to the mobilisation of community groups in opposition to the proposed changes. This episode is discussed in the following excerpt from a female participant in her 50s, a member of "New Rock" and a very active community member; *"When the Cork city council mentioned the expansion of the boundaries [...] I wrote the letter on behalf of the business association [...] In the letter we just said that's completely unacceptable to us and we'll fight it. [...] before it was officially announced, we found out that we were going to be officially excluded [...]. It is going to grow, NorthRock is definitely going to grow, but I believe that the strength of this community is so engrained, and I think that people are so [...] invested in making sure that NorthRock remains as it is. [...] If you come and try to mess with our NorthRock, you'd better beware! We're not going to tolerate it."* (T:C, P:7, L:534-570)

This shows a protective attitude to the community from members of both "New" and "Old Rock" and is indicative of the issue having helped to cultivate a sense of solidarity against perceived threats.

These three subthemes all speak to the complex nature of identity processes in rurban communities. All three divisions illustrate how identity evolves from conflict and dialogue and how over time new connections and understandings are forged.

5 Discussion and future work

The aim of this study was to investigate the strengths of and challenges faced by a rurban community, with a view to designing subsequent digital SEA interventions to support resilience. We conducted a series of focus groups in a rapidly expanding rural community in the south of Ireland. Limitations to the study include the small number of participants – although the overall sample was representative of various community sectors - and its specificity to the Irish context. The sample is also representative of enthusiastic community members – those who volunteered to participate - which may have biased the results towards a more positive outcome. For the purposes of this paper, we presented one overarching theme from our analysis: *Contested Identities*. During the focus groups, participants engaged in conversations that revealed the multiple layers of identities within the community and the conflicts underpinning them: old versus new, east versus west and internal versus external. Our findings illustrate the relevance of uncovering the various identities present in any community and the significance of investigating the conflicts that may drive them. We suggest an approach whereby digital SEA work in a community undergoing significant change may focus on *identity work* and *conflict* in order to provide an opportunity for dialogue, difference and dissent between participants:

Conducting Identity Work: The theme *Contested Identities*, illustrates the multiple layers of identity present in the community, highlighting the complexity of rural communities consistently with existing research [1,21,23,27,32]. Existing literature positions ideas of place, belonging and identity at the heart of rural community life[20,21]. It is our belief that identity may also be at the heart of community resilience, where the sometimes confrontational nature of identity allows for diverse understandings to be articulated, forming collective identities and evolving over time to support a more inclusive community. In our context, this collective identity work of evolving understandings of community identity as articulated in the focus groups put systems in place that supported the inclusion of new people to the community today.

Based on these findings, we suggest practitioners and researchers in SEA and HCI place an investigation of collective identities at the centre of any work supporting community resilience in communities in a state of flux. Understanding the multiple collective identities inherent in a community and/or supporting the articulation of those may provide a way into these communities and a mechanism to open up critical, self-reflexive work around community dynamics. This work may generate insights to provoke further discourse and promote forms of capacity or community building, as suggested in existing literature on SEA frameworks, which attribute value to the opening up of space for critical analysis. [13].

Drawing on Conflict: Our findings suggest conflict can be a positive dynamic whereby identities are developed and feelings of belonging and solidarity can arise. Conflict in SEA is seen as a valued part of social interaction, providing opportunities for dialogue and so leading to deeper mutual understandings [9,29]. The historic SEA concern with conflict and dissent should be translated into contemporary digital SEA practice in HCI, which is still relatively unexamined in terms of its capacity for social change [9]. We suggest that SEA and HCI researchers and practitioners engaging communities in participatory digital SEA interventions can benefit from uncovering, verbalising and engaging with conflict as it relates to community values, in our case in the area of identity development, in order to bring about greater understanding and transformative change.

These two elements of focusing on identity work and drawing on conflict constitute a conceptual framework which draws from perspectives from existing SEA in HCI research [12] whereby the framework is not prescriptive, but can potentially act as an exploratory tool to generate topics that may be debated or engaged with in order to promote transformative social change. These elements may be integrated into digital SEA interventions via participatory design workshops whereby identity and conflict are central themes for exploration. The next part of our research aims to apply this framework into a set of digital SEA workshops exploring social, cultural and historical narratives as a means to promoting community resilience.

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