

Mediatized Theatrical Communities: Studying and Fostering Audience Participation Through WhatsApp

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the research project

Cultural Welfare Ecosystems for Wellbeing: Mapping Semantics and Practices, Co-designing Tools, and Raising Awareness, funded by the Italian Ministry of University and Research (MIUR) and NextGenerationEU



theoretical background

1. Participation studies within the contexts of cultural planning (Carpentier 2011; Reason 2010) based on the idea that transformative participation requires an expanded temporality (Matarasso 1997).

2. Mediatization studies (Couldry, Hepp 2013, 2017; Boccia Artieri 2015). WhatsApp chats as more than simple communication tools. Messaging platforms and chats are spaces of proximity. Not just channels for practical coordination but platforms that support interactive performances and give rise to new forms of digital liveness and participatory aesthetics.

3. Digital technologies as tools for qualitative inquiry (Chen, Neo 2019; Colom 2022).



research questions and methodology

RQ

- How do the affordances and practices of WhatsApp chats influence pre- and post-performance experiences?
- In what ways do they shape participatory dynamics within mediatized cultural projects?

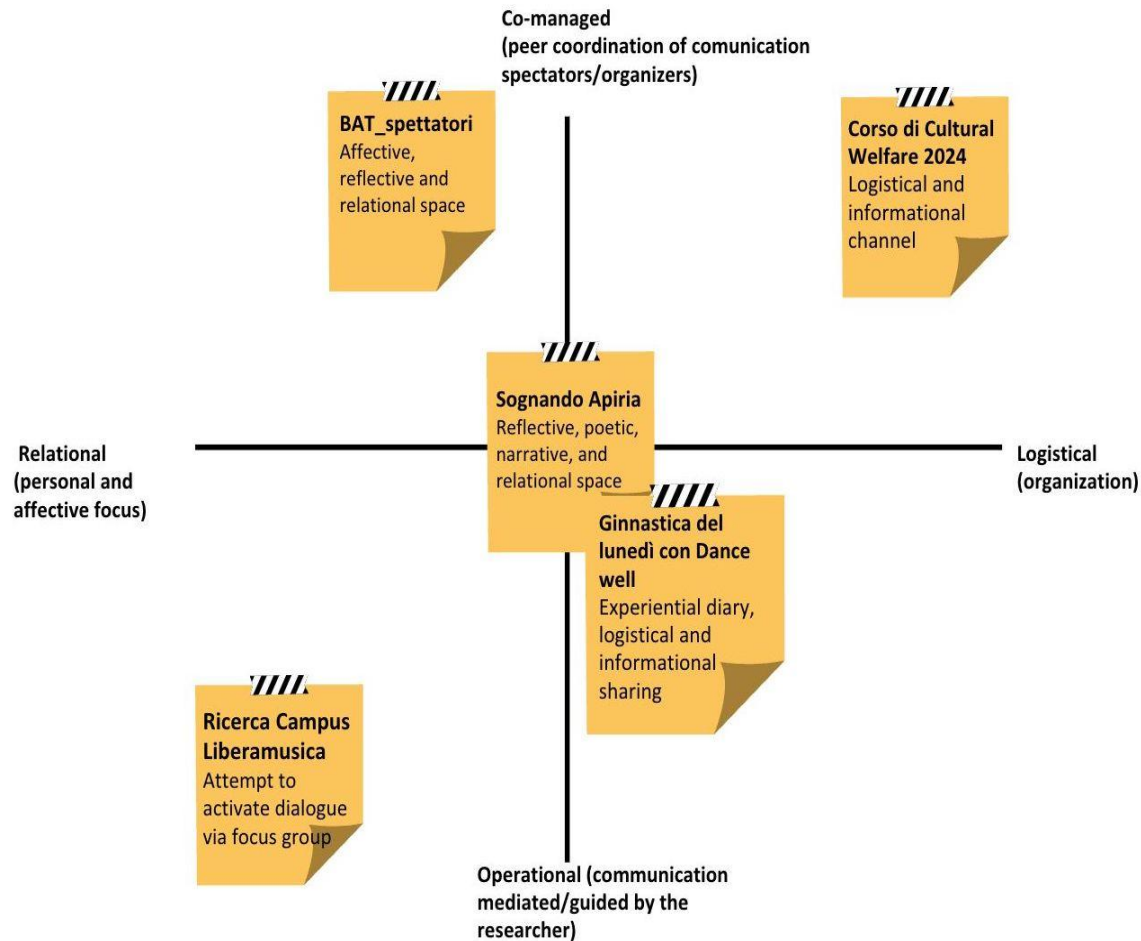
Methodology

Content analysis of chat interactions (text, emojis, images, voice messages), with specific attention to tone, communicative style, and emerging themes;

11 Semi-structured interviews and 17 focus groups with 101 individuals: participants, artists, and organizers across different projects;

Participant observation with a variable intensity gradient: from external observation to active co-design

2X2 matrix: WhatsApp chats and their functions



analysis 1. mediatization of roles

One of the distinctive features of mediatization in participatory contexts concerns the mediatization of communicative roles. This concept refers to the increasing relational labour (Baym 2018) undertaken by artists in order to cultivate their audiences and to manage participatory interaction. It also includes the relational labour performed by participants: both in social media and in digital platforms (instant messaging)



analysis 1. mediatization of roles

The chats demonstrate the importance of some mediation figures such as the artist Sonia Antinori, who designed Sognando Apiria, or cultural organizers such as Carlotta Tringali and Gilberto Santini, involved in BAT. They are all central figures for the project and for the long-term moderation of the chat itself. This is a clear example of the mediatization of roles, as it represents an extension of the role shaped by a medial condition.

[25/02/24, 15:19] **Gilberto Santini:** Dear friends, that's the only way I can think of addressing you now. I waited to read your gift to us until I had a long stretch of calm—both around me and within myself. So only today, in the quiet idleness of a strange, sunny, and very gentle Sunday, with almost-spring air drifting through the window. What can I say? **I was deeply moved**, from the very first to the very last of your words...

[24/01/25, 09:58:30] **Sonia Antinori:** Thank you, Stef. **It would be lovely if the other participants also chose to share their reasons.** Each of us has our own point of view, each of us can name a need and it's those needs that our initiative is trying to respond to. The more material we gather around this shared effort, the more clearly we can focus it and refine the next steps.



analysis 2. participation

Starting from the still useful Carpentier's (2012) distinction between minimalist and maximalist participation we can observe that:

when chats are mainly used as organizational tools, for example to arrange appointments or simply to coordinate activities, they align with a form of participation that is handled by the project designer. In this case, the chat simply works as an access point to the activity (minimalist participation).

By contrast, when the chat also becomes a space where participants express opinions, make decisions, and co-organize activities, we observe situations more in line with Carpentier's idea of maximalist and grassroots participation. Here, participants are active, autonomous, and self-organized; they are involved in the co-construction of the process itself. This is particularly evident in two best-practice cases: BAT and Apiria.

analysis 2. participation

BAT spectator: *Being a spectator of BAT means being part of an experiment in progress. It means being a **spectator-inside, a spectator-outside, a spectator-before.** [...] It is an attempt to **rethink the relationship between actor and spectator, but also between spectator and spectator,** within an unexplored perspective of reciprocity and care.*

[25/01/25, 18:33:28] **Sognando Apiria participant:** *I have always been a reserved person, careful not to take up more space than I was entitled to. **Writing is the only form of expression through which I feel free, for once, to cross the boundaries and show myself as I truly am, without fearing judgment.***



analysis 2. participation

The interviews also bring out an interesting aspect concerning the reflective potential of the chat, which proves to be a communicative environment where participants can observe their own observations and share them with others, and where the transformative effects of participatory projects can emerge.

[13/01/24, 11:46] - BAT spectator:
Reading Abanuob's impressions, I had a moment of awareness: before BAT I didn't even know of your existence, yet it was the kind of exchange I was missing, an equal dialogue between different spectators (who are different in personal history and character), coming from different places, but united by a single passion. Realizing this was truly beautiful; you fulfilled a need I didn't even know I had!



analysis 2. participation

Dance Well project is dedicated to people with Parkinson's disease. The chat takes shape as a mixed and supportive community that reflects a non-ableist vision emerging from the group. It serves an organizational function but participants also take every opportunity to exchange images, affectionate messages, and to share states of vulnerability. A form of relational labour pointing to the desire to build the kind of mediatized community that belongs to the semantics of contemporary performative discourse and to relational art (Ranci re 2004).

[28/01/25, 10:24:39] DW participant: A very **generous and respectful space** for those who inhabit bodies with difficulties. If it is aimed in particular at **people with Parkinson's**, then perhaps we need to listen to **their voices**. Beyond what I've already written, I can only thank you for this glimmer of light capable of brightening the darkness of our time. 🙏🙏

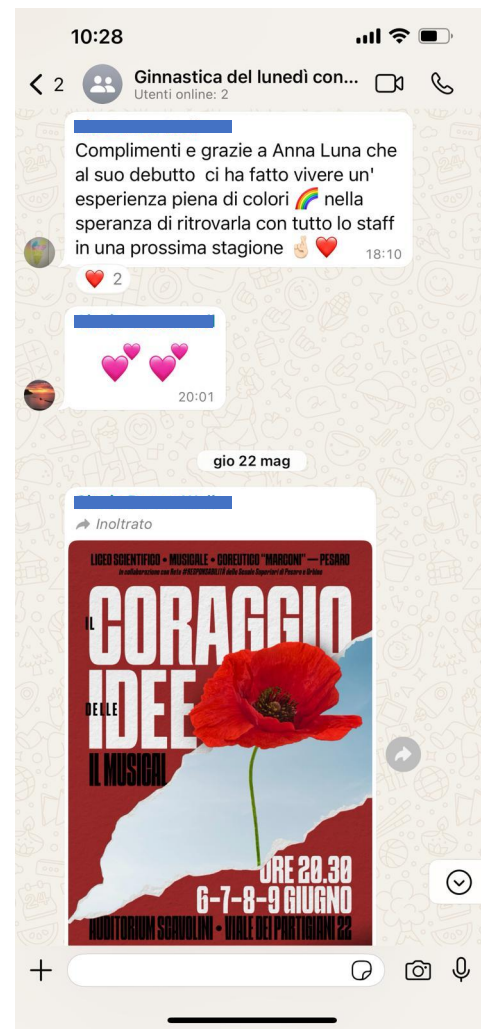
[28/01/25, 11:06:55] DW participant: Mine, in fact, is one of those voices 😊



analysis

3. redefining the boundaries of the performative event

- In the maximalist examples the chat extends the participatory projects in spatio-temporal terms.
- Platforms are not merely tools but socio-technical environments that contribute to shaping the cultural and artistic project as a whole, beyond an event defined in time and space.
- Online platforms (chats) are or become constitutive components of the projects and of their forms (and formats).
- The practices enacted within the chats characterize these platforms as digital environments for the construction of mediatized performance communities.
- Depending on the cases observed, with their differences - the active presence of a mediating figure, the degree of participants' involvement, the fact that a chat may remain active beyond the timeframe of the project for which it was created - such dynamics open up to practices of appropriation that also include researchers within the relational and observational processes.



open conclusions

The chat proves to be a relational environment that values subjectivity and helps to re-elaborate the experience.

It is useful - especially because of its flexibility - since everyone can respond at their own pace and in their own time, thanks to the possibility of formulating a thought and writing it in the chat. (G.P., interviewer - Apiria)

In this way, asynchronous exchange becomes a form of care, of listening, and of co-construction of meaning, countering the logics of commodification (Baym 2018) that often constrain participatory devices.

Whatsapp groups should be used precisely for meetings like the one we are having now, for exchanges where everyone can further contribute to the different possible topics that can be brought to the discussion table (E.M., interviewer - Apiria)

open questions

Some open questions concern the methodological strategies we can adopt in the digital contexts of cultural projects in order to work in a situated way - avoiding logics of control and commodification, while instead supporting authentic relational rhythms, distributed agency, and shared forms of participation.

