



# APPLICATION OF THEATRE IN DIGITAL SPACE FOR MENTAL HEALTH CARE DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Lulu Jiang and Farideh Alizadeh

*During the COVID-19 pandemic, psychological problems have increased due to social distancing under lockdown. Theatre in the digital space, as a healing approach for mental health, is playing a role in helping people adapt to a new environment and confront mental issues, such as isolation and oppression. The nature of theatre online provides a safe environment for individuals to play, act and express themselves. Online meeting platforms allow people to connect and interact through video and audio calls. Based on the theatre workshop online sessions through electronic devices, such as internet-connected smartphones and computers, the researcher, as the facilitator with theatre acting and directing background, carried out theatre training in the digital space in partnership with the Cultural Affairs Bureau. The workshop provided a safe space for theatre education, communication, self-development, challenge acceptance and coping with life in the pandemic. Being aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the theatre online, this study investigated it in the digital space as a viable tool for enhancing individuals' capacity to accept the challenge and satisfy the need for mental health during the pandemic and post-pandemic period.*

**KEYWORDS:** Theatre, Digital Space, Mental Health, COVID19 Pandemic

## INTRODUCTION

During the difficult COVID-19 pandemic, increasing number of individuals need mental health services (Amsalem et al., 2021). The pandemic has significantly affected people's daily life, including individual freedom, financial

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losses, family dynamics, education, etc., leading to an increased risk of developing mental issues, such as loneliness, depression, anxiety, and stress (Burjaq & Hammoudeh, 2022). Social effects and the changed life mode caused by the pandemic can have impact on individuals' mental health now and in the future.

In recent decades, theatre has been rapidly developed to be a form for non-actors to learn theatre techniques and improve their ability of self-development. It encourages the expression of emotions, facilitates self-development, and improve the social network (Bosco et al., 2014), thus contributing to positive changes for personal and social improvement. For people in need of mental health care, theatre tends to be a healing approach to treat and prevent mental illnesses with positive effects on self-esteem and self-efficacy (Corrigan et al., 2006). However, Covid-19 pandemic has unprecedentedly shifted people's lives to online platforms for almost all spheres across the world, including work and education (Maqsood et al., 2021). It is a challenge for a drama educator to carry out the training work with online platform partnership.

This research aims to explore the impact of theatre in the digital space as a healing approach applying Augusto Boal's technique, such as games, improvisation, storytelling, and discussion for adult participants with different backgrounds. At the same time, the researcher tries to enrich the aspects and raise the consciousness of theatre practice so that various innovative forms of theatre will be encouraged. This research focuses on developing interaction between individuals, reducing anxiety and other pandemic-based mental issues, as well as improving happiness and satisfaction. In this paper, the potential role of theatre in virtual space for the need of psychological health care is discussed, and the utilities, benefits, limitations, and risks are examined in theatrical settings.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Drama therapy constantly investigates the relationships among drama, therapy, personal growth and social change. As Landy (1994) stated, "drama therapy is the application of one or more forms of drama and theatre to people who choose to explore personal and collective problems or to seek for changes" (p. 171). Joining in drama can realize connections to individuals' unconscious aware and meet the natural needs of playing for human beings. By creating and building characters in theatre practice, people have the opportunity to express their inside feelings and find more possibilities to deal with difficulties (Jones, 2007). The therapy within the context of theatre is a specific form of intervention, applying drama techniques for personal and social adjustment and bringing intrapsychic and behavioural change to individuals (Irwin, 1979).

According to [Weber and Haen \(2005\)](#) theatre therapy is a process of achieving some moments of joy, and it is a release and balance between real life and fiction, and between the person and the role. Applying drama as healing treatment enhances individuals' ability to accept challenges and deal with mental problems.

Augusto Boal is influential in the drama therapy field, and his work, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, explores personal oppression and enables people to recognize the oppressive dilemma from different views, thus developing more options. [Boal \(2000\)](#) stated that everyone wears a mask, but theatre provides a situation where people may take off the masks to be themselves. Thus, by using theatre techniques, individuals can load off the burden of life and deal with oppression which makes people feel helpless, useless, or depressed when they are abused, ill-treated, repressed, or subjugated. Boal held that people themselves must explore and recognize the oppressive dilemma and develop options for themselves to get out of their difficult situations. [Boal \(2013\)](#) designed theatre techniques where he discussed the therapeutic function of theatre to change people's lives through using *Rainbow of Desire and Image theatre*, to overcome physical and emotional issue and take control of their life. The "four stages" proposed by Boal is the core of his work, as well as the backbone of this intervention, and the techniques of *Acting for Change* are adopted. Unlike a therapy in the traditional sense, it explores and heals individuals' inner psychic reality in a socio-political sense ([Cohen-Cruz & Schutzman, 2002](#)).

There are increasing numbers of issues, such as economic and spiritual problems owing to social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic ([Ferrell et al., 2020](#)). [Favale et al. \(2020\)](#) stated that the Internet plays a crucial part in remote online collaboration because of social distancing and lockdown. According to [Liu et al. \(2020\)](#), online psychological counselling has been developed through WeChat by mental health professionals in Chinese mainland. For clients, the model of online mental care improves the access to counselling or therapy session, as well as reduces the travel time and cost. Individuals are freer and more comfortable when staying at home, and the distance provided by virtual space makes the participants feel safe. However, applying theatre in the digital space is challenging since it normally utilizes an embodied approach to share a story or experience, and the text is conveyed by movement, sound and improvisation ([Smith & Dean, 2013](#)). [Regula \(2020\)](#) compared two drama therapy sessions, one by face-to-face interaction and the other by online video platform, with the results suggesting that the theme and data are more complicated for digital interactions. According to [Pilgrim et al. \(2020\)](#), Lesley University has established a drama therapy programme with predominant online learning due to pandemic-related campus restrictions, which is new compared with traditional drama therapy training.

It has been manifested that developing theatre in a digital space is impossible to get the embodied experience. In order to accommodate to the digital platform setting, the theatre creator [Cook et al. \(2020\)](#) adapted theatre exercises for the online version, which allow the practice accessible to the space without eye contact. While it is still a challenge for drama practitioners to carry out the training work with technology partnership. However, [Burnett et al. \(2019\)](#) argued that the integration of technology in participatory theatre can possibly develop to be a unique form for its disruption and multiplicities. Technology indeed disrupts body connection, but it rebuilds a connection utilising imagination as a result of distancing effect, which is a significant feature of drama therapy in the digital space. Digital application is urgently needed for mental health, but there are still issues unresolved and unknown. As [Sajnani \(2020\)](#) mentioned that it is just at the beginning of the experiment of combining dramatic reality and virtual reality in drama therapy. The challenges including embodiment, engagement, and insufficient research should be concerned, which calls for the exploration of more theatrical strategies and new interactions between theatre and digital space.

## RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

It is believed that theatre tends to exert a healing impact and provide a safe and peaceful environment for individuals in the digital space. Thus, a hypothesis was proposed that participants can show improvement in emotional expression, communication, and anxiety reducing after taking part in the project. Besides, in this study, the applied theatre technique in the digital space was demonstrated as a well-accepted form to enhance the diversification of theatre as a healing approach, which in turn contributes to the theories and practice in the field involving theatre and therapy with the internet and digital platform.

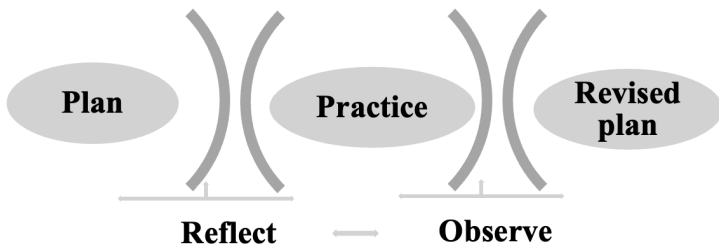
## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The research objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To examine interactions and behaviour of the participants during theatre practice online
2. To assess the theatre techniques and strategies to facilitate mental health care through online platforms.
3. To explore the effects of theatre activities in the digital space from an aesthetic perspective.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study constructed a relationship between practice itself and the method applied in this research, namely participatory action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). The researcher and participants both engaged in the research to address the research issues. Figure 1 below presents the cyclical process of the research, making and revising plan by reflecting and observing the practice to improve the effectivity and productivity, with the purpose of promoting theatre application in the digital space under different circumstances.



**Figure 1. Participatory Action Research Cyclical Process**

This study focuses on the participation of individuals interested in theatre activities and in need of mental health care, seeking to elaborate the function of theatre medium for rehabilitation, particularly for cases of behavioural and mental well-being issues. A qualitative methodology was adopted in this study, and the data were collected through observation, narrative inquiry and focus group. The audio-visual materials, recorded by the video platform, was applied in analysis. Considering the digital intervention, the practice utilized warming up, theatre games, image theatre, sharing and discussion to increase participants' engagement and spontaneity. Significantly, electronic devices were utilized to carry out the online theatre activities, such as smartphones and computers with internet connectivity.

The theatre workshop was a group participatory session using a virtual platform during the COVID-19 pandemic. The recruitment was through the online registration from Cultural Affairs Bureau, Qingdao, China (CABQC), which is a government department in charge of cultural events and activities for citizens. This research applied a nonprobability and convenience sample of individuals over 18 years old regardless of gender, education, occupation, etc. The recruitment information was disseminated through the official online platform of CABQC and personal invitations. The individuals were asked to provide their basic information from a pre-selected range of options provided.

The included group was composed of 10 individuals (8 females and 2 males) with different backgrounds aged from 21-47. The participants were required to attend three sessions (two hours per session) in two weeks. It was a longitudinal study, and the data from February and March of 2021 group session were analysed. Table 1 shows the backgrounds and grouping of these participants.

The participants stayed at their own places to take part in the theatre workshop online utilising Zoom, a video conferencing platform, with a technical test done before the workshop session. After all participants entered the online meeting room, the facilitator first made an introduction of the relevant rules of the workshop and the confidentiality of the programme. The participation was voluntary, which means the participants had rights to withdraw at any time. The participants signed the consent forms involving the participation, discussion, video recording, etc., and they were informed of the purpose of the research before taking part in the sessions.

## RESULTS OF THE STUDY

### **Interactions and Behaviours of the Participants during Theatre Practice Online**

Throughout the action research, data collection was performed through observation, narrative inquiry, and focus group. The video recording and notes were checked by the researcher to examine and evaluate the process of participation. The online platform presents theatre with an unprecedented form. The theatre practice in a digital venue is challenging as it is an in-person participatory experience, so the participants tend to be disembodied because of the distance between them. Therefore, during the session, the priority is to establish a space for the participants to engage in.

The warm-up exercise is a sound way for the participants to get familiar with the platform and the digital space. For instance, the exercise describing objects required participants to choose the commonly used objects of theirs from their places. They could describe the objects by shape, size, texture, etc. Unlike in the physical space, where objects normally are provided by the facilitator or the theatre, those in the online session were personal belongings of the participants. This is an exercise to inspire the participants to create a non-verbal vocabulary in a short time aesthetically. Besides, with this exercise, the participants can make introduction using a metaphor to assess their personal life situation.

The stories told by the participant G illustrate how the theatre workshop worked and gave different presentations in the distance platform. For the purpose of relevance, the transcripts were shortened to include the relevant

comments.

Participant G held a peach and described: 'it is a red round peach, really red, and it smells good. I guess it must be tasty. It is not a big peach, but the shape is perfect, and the skin is very smooth. I bought it online. The little peach spent three days travelling here, which means it has visited various places before arriving at my place'. Figure 2 demonstrates the moment of the participant describing the peach.



**Figure 2. One Participant Describes the Object**

It can be observed that, the participant enjoyed the activity very much and she told a funny story about the object and herself. This activity was of help for participants to create a non-verbal vocabulary in a short time aesthetically, and with this exercise, the participants could use metaphors to examine their personal life situation. After this, participants were encouraged to speak more and make stories about objects.

This activity provided participants with a safe way for expression. They could tell stories of objects in dramatic scenes and sometimes even conflicts. Nevertheless, with these objects playing the role of a metaphor, they might have a sense of safety as they were not talking about themselves directly. At the end of the session, participants were confident to speak and act. The session, with a group witnessing their feelings, also provided a place for individuals to support each other.

According to the video, it can be noticed that participants felt free when they acted in their own rooms. They were indeed more relaxed in their own places, but because of the presence of the camera, they would notice their

actions and could not focus on the movement itself. Realising that they would be watched by others, they got nervous and started to adjust their postures and even the micro-expression in front of the camera, which was a distraction. In view of this, the participants were allowed not to look at the camera, or they could even stay away from it. It was very effective, and the participants started to be warmed up. This theatre exercise facilitated a connection between the participants, the place and the space, helping them to eliminate anxiety and engage in the activity soon. Besides, the facilitator played a crucial role to create a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere and thus everyone could behave naturally, as the worry and tension of the facilitator also affected other participants.

The online session was sometimes affected by the stability of the network. For example, the picture of the participants might suddenly get still, which recovered after a few seconds, or sometimes, the participants should logout and re-login several times as the Internet was unstable. Such kind of interruption could not guarantee the continuity of the session, especially during pair works. As the facilitator was not able to see the picture outside the camera range and it was difficult to build video connection with each of them, what the participants were exactly doing or whether they were distracted could not be observed in time.

During the focus group discussion, the topics were proposed by the facilitator or suggested by the participants, as shown in Table 1. According to the sharing of several participants, in the physical space, they can have a better interaction, as the human audiences are much livelier than the screen after all. However, an online session is more flexible in time and place. Another participant said that he felt nervous and awkward when he attended this online session for the first time, since his actions and expressions could be captured by the camera and noticed by everyone. But when he integrated into the activity, he enjoyed the online process since it inspired his interaction with other participants. When talking about the feeling of this experience and their improvement achieved, the participant A said Image Theatre helped her a lot and opened up different ways to her life. In the process, she got her long-lost imagination back, and meanwhile learned some new angles and methods for solving problems. Most importantly, with a sense of accomplishment in the performance, she became more confident and started to enjoy expressing. One participant shared that when he performed, facing the screen was much easier than being with a human, and he also believed that with this practice, he would be willing to talk and express when facing people one day.



**Table 1****Focus Group Topics.**

Topic	Comments Proposed by the Participants	Number of Participants
Practicing Theatre in Digital Space	More flexible in time and place	7
	With much fun and imagination	1
	Much easier than meeting in real world	1
	Less lively and inferior interaction	3
	Lack of embodied experience and eye connection	1
Feeling of Participation	Relaxed and amused	8
	Well facilitated	2
	Active and involved	3
	Nervous and awkward sometimes	1
Growth and Achievement	Having learned knowledge of the- atre	2
	Encouraged and empowered	5
	Having got improved from self- reflection	4
	Having improved expression abil- ity	3

### **Theatre Techniques and Strategies to Facilitate Mental Health Care in the Digital Space**

This research applied Boal's techniques of utilising theatre games and image theatre to develop the awareness of expression and provoke participants' relevant sensibilities. Improvisational theatre was specifically adopted when the participants were creating theatre productions. This programme contained three sections:

**(1) Warming up:** It was designed to relax the participants, helping them to be playful and creative with the use of their mind and body. It can be games, movement exercise, etc.

**(2) Performance:** It was the core of the programme showing on the stage. The project was adapted from the real-life story of participants. The partici-

pants learned and experienced the decisions and challenges through playing the role and managing the relationships with other characters. It tended to motivate participants to actively create and act for the story.

**(3) Reflective Exercise:** The technique of Image Theatre was employed to explore oppression from different perspectives. Participants could change the elements of oppression and present an ideal image in the practice.

The theatre programme tended to empower participants to express and act on the oppressive elements and themes to seek for changes. It helped individuals to develop positive values and empower them to connect with each other. The following are the activity procedures for one session of the programme:

- **Pre-Session Meeting (10-15 min)**

- (1) Discussing with the participants about the plan of each session
- (2) Paying attention to the matters which should be noticed
- (3) Preparation (the setting and the prop)

- **Theatre Workshop Activities (100 min)**

- (1) Warming up (about 15–20 min): Theatre games and improvisations
- (2) Main activities (about 15–20 min): Image Theatre
- (3) Sketch performance (about 30-35 min): Role play
- (4) Group discussion (about 30 min): Growth, feeling and comment

- **Post-Session Meeting (45 min)**

- (1) Arranging the data collected
- (2) Developing strategies for the following sessions

**Table 2**

**Augusto Boal's Techniques Applied in the Workshop**

Theatre Techniques	Main Principles & Ideas	Goals and Examples
Theatre Game	It is used for guiding people to warm up their thought and body.	To stimulate muscles and reduce mechanisation. For instance, two individuals walk as a single person.

*Continued on next page*

*Table 2 continued*

Image Theatre	It is a performance technique that actors do not use words but only their bodies to create images for communicating ideas, attitudes, or emotions.	To explore internal oppression and unconscious thoughts in the improvisational ways. For instance, four individuals create physical images in response to the theme “peer pressure”.
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The workshop format was based on Boal’s technique: Theatre Game and Image Theatre (see Table 2).

**Theatre Game**

Theatre game allows participants to express the emotion physically and warm themselves up. They enable the de-mechanisation of the body and the mind alienated by the repetitive tasks of day-to-day living (Boal, 2005). However, practicing theatre in a digital space, as an entirely new form, tends to alter some traditional approaches, such as embodied connection. In order to deal with physical distancing, theatre games were adapted to the online version. In this session, participants were allowed to stand or move from the computers or smartphones while keeping the voice and camera on.

The game, “action name”, requires the group members to get to know each other through action. It comes from Boal’s series of games about expressing oneself through the body (Boal, 2005). With this game, individuals get to know each other with their bodies as the form of communication. Unlike in physical space, where the participants can see each other by standing in a circle, the adjusted game online was with a specific form: one participant says a name while explaining the name with action, and then other participants repeat the name and imitate the action. Figure 3 shows the moment of participants playing games in the digital space.



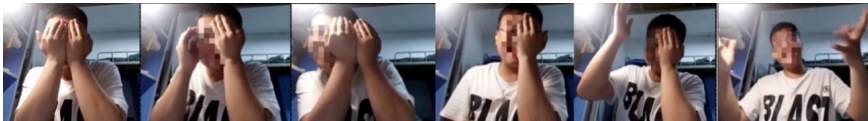
**Figure 3. Moment of Participants Playing Games in the Digital Space**

There was laughter during the game, which eased the tension and brought a relaxing environment. Besides, it was an effective way to create a connection without eye contact over online platforms. Interestingly, due to the distancing effect, technology indeed disrupted the connection of participants, but it also rebuilt a new connection through imaginations.

### Image Theatre

Image Theatre is a theatre form developed by Augusto Boal, in which individuals apply their bodies to create images (Boal, 2000). In Image Theatre, body movement becomes the main form for expressing and communicating, which requires the ability of transforming words to body language. This activity involves expressing how they are feeling by their bodies. Unlike in physical space, participants would no longer work together but created images themselves in front of cameras. After the schema-setting activity, participants started to create their images almost immediately, from which various themes were presented.

The participant E created series of images about anxiety, shyness, witness, interest, and openness (see Figure 4). In the beginning, B showed the image of covering his face with his hands, and he moved his hands to another side, presenting a shy and curious image. Then, he moved one hand away, and after that he started to be brave and tried to raise one hand. The following images show that he raised his hand to attract other people's attention, and the last image indicates that he was open to others and ready to express himself.



**Figure 4. Series of Image of the Participant E**

According to the video of the participant E, the outcomes of the practice in the digital space was very surprising. Following other participants' suggestions, E got rid of passive state and became positive and active, which means he successfully overcame his social anxiety. This achievement was happily accepted by himself.

The digital space was effective for creating images and participants tended to practice spontaneously. It is clear that the distance platform provides an opportunity for the participants to be watched while creating an image in front of the camera. At the same time, they are able to notice themselves even when they are acting, which is a kind of distraction. However, it is easier for participants to make images as clear as possible by checking in front of camera. In addition, through learning these images, individuals can find the reflections of

themselves in the images.

### **Effects of Theatre Activities in the Digital Space from the Aesthetic Perspective**

Theatre in the digital space has varied the forms and effects of theatre practice. The digital space can inspire more spontaneity, from which participants can have a new attitude towards repetitive behaviour. Spontaneity can become the inner resource of their life and initiate change when facing difficult situations. Besides, the session over the online meeting platform can lead to more concerns of self-consciousness, and the camera serves as a strong motivator for the participants to notice and check themselves.

Practicing theatre in the digital space worked well with Boal's theatre technique. Since the participants were not required to be completely engaged. Alternatively, they were involved in varying degrees and had to keep aware of themselves instead of being lost in the illusion of the dramatic setting. In Boal's theatre, aesthetic distance is constantly deluded or broken through removing the fourth wall, and thus the spectator's emotions get alienated from the narrative imitation rather than engaging in the play. Boal (2000) argued that empathy is the most dangerous weapon since it can bridle the individual. In Theatre of the Oppressed, the sense of justice of spectators is aroused in the presentation of arguments on the stage. As a result, in Boal's theatre, both the actors and spectators tend to be critical, and they can develop more distanced views. In addition, Boal's technique is a model of interactive theatre with educational, social, and therapeutic goals. It can empower marginalized populations and their companions by rehearsing creative and collaborative problem-solving methods.

In the online video platform, when the participants are looking at the screen or camera, they are not able to completely engage in the scene. Theatre coupled with technology can assist individuals to create their own thoughts on issues and the development of this capability can be a therapeutic process. For instance, individuals with difficulties controlling emotions may develop more distanced views and in turn try to deal with their feelings. As a result, the theatre online creates a safe and protected space for participants with the distance between them, which is the advantage of the therapy in the digital space.

The programme of theatre in digital space is filmed and watched as a video on the screen. The online theatre is a kind of experiment, combining different forms of theatre and film. As Causey (2007) mentioned, due to different frames of theatre and film, the close-up on stage may not be read by audiences, while it may be enlarged and presented on the screen. Obviously, a close-up or

medium shot under the camera lens tends to attract the attention of spectators. Figure 5 shows the different scenes, from close-up to full shot. Individuals are able to choose which part of their body they would like to show, which is different from the physical space where the viewers choose to watch where and which.



**Figure 5. Different Shots Under the Camera Lens**

To explore the healing impacts of theatre in the virtual space in the pandemic context, its benefits, limitations, and risks were explored by observation, narrative inquiry and group discussion. The qualitative evaluation of the theatre workshop has shown that the theatre can provide a safe environment for the participants to act and play in the digital space.

The online platform is sound for practices such as group work and pair work. For instance, Zoom allows the host to place participants in separate video chat rooms and promote the connection and immediate visual face-to-face communication in a more natural way through breakout rooms. Besides, the announcements and discussion board can enhance information sharing, such as their concerns, feedback, and suggestions, and thus to promote active engagement.

After the six-hour sessions in two weeks, participants achieved significant progress, from a group of awkward strangers to companions who can be trusted, suggesting that the theatre applied through the digital space in the therapeutic setting can contribute to the improvement of participants. The warming up, theatre games and activities are effective in the beginning for alleviating the fear and anxiety of the participants. Activities such as describing objects, can build a connection between participants, thus promoting their interactive and communication skills. Spontaneity and laughter are beneficial to the process of the workshop online. One can also attribute some of the progress to the interaction between the participants and the facilitator:

the playful responses of the participants can make the facilitator feel more comfortable, which in turn reacts on them.

## DISCUSSION

Theatre can contribute to the development of multiple viewpoints, well-informed interpretations, as well as some shifts in perspectives. With these benefits, theatre has developed to be an approach for healing individuals and groups in need of mental health care. It also provides creative options in therapeutic context for preventing serious mental illnesses and promoting positive changes for personal and social development. Compared to the traditional psychological counselling method, such as inquiry and talk, theatre is safer and freer for individuals to act out their tensions and speak out by presenting stories in a playful dramatic setting. Therefore, applying theatre as healing treatment is conducive to the improvement of individuals' ability to cope with their mental problems, which meets the need of psychological well-being care in the pandemic and post-pandemic setting.

With the concern of reducing human-to-human contact, the application of distance platforms is the most feasible approach to meet the need of mental health care for individuals. Some technology-based tools, including online meeting platforms, can provide virtual spaces for meetings and communication for individuals, groups and institutions. The healing application of theatre in the digital space for mental health service can help people adapt to the new environment in the pandemic and empower them to confront difficult situations and overcome mental issues. In addition, online platforms can also provide a playful process for theatre practice. The breakout rooms, announcement and discussion board can promote group works as well as information sharing with active engagement. However, the digital space has varied the forms and effects of theatre. It creates more concerns of individuals' self-consciousness owing to the interventions of camera and screen, which serves as a strong motivator for participants to notice and check themselves.

In the digital space, the participants are likely to be disembodied due to the distance between them, while theatre can support re-engaging and body memory (Jemal et al., 2020). There are arguments on physical versus digital theatre. As stated by Davis (2012), there is less connection between people in digital theatre, compared with the physical one. Indeed, theatre practice in the digital space is more challenging than in-person participatory experience, but with more spontaneity and creativity. For instance, the visual screen can provide more active interactions. Manifestly, the digital space presents theatre with unprecedented forms and experience. Nevertheless, as Hardesty and Sheredos (2019) stated, people can be together without body proximity

in the distance space. Therefore, online platforms have become a mediator to preserve relationships during the isolation period. It tends to be an extension of theatre and it is even more flexible for multi-modal literacies in diverse settings.

Theatre in the digital space is a multi-disciplinary practice, with space being the most crucial element. Theatre can be without props or light, but it cannot be without space, where it can occur (Tompkins, 2003). Space, which may be obvious or ignorable, contains individuals' interaction in physical and psychological ways (Solga, 2019). In this study, the theatre space in the virtual meeting platform setting had a playful atmosphere, where the participants could be imaginative and creative. With constant spontaneity, they were able to break the repetitive pattern and initiate an experimental attitude towards real-life situation. Therefore, the online workshop can provide a safe space for communication, expression, self-development as well as challenge accepting, thus offering mental health care in the pandemic.

Under the COVID-19 pandemic, the online theatre practice which allows access to dramatic experience is more flexible in terms of time and place. Individuals may be more comfortable at home, and the virtual space can provide a distance with which the participants may feel safe. For the researcher, the video-recording technique provided by the online meeting platform is helpful for studying the process. The form of theatre in the digital space emphasizes theatre participation, interaction, social change and transformation in the specific pandemic context. Hence, theatre practice can contribute to the adjustment of life in the pandemic and help people go through their mental issues.

The findings also suggest that there are some disadvantages in the distance theatre practice. Compared to face-to-face communication, the online theatre is inferior in interaction due to the lack of eye contact and embodied experience. Besides, participants are easy to be distracted as they can be at any place. In addition, it is disturbing for individuals with an unstable internet connection, which calls for more flexible processes and plans. Currently, applying theatre in the digital space is still in the preliminary stage, with embodiment and engagement being the main challenges.

## CONCLUSIONS

The theatre workshop worked successfully in the digital space with different ages and genders by adapting the modes of Boal's theatre to the online session. Five factors seem to play important roles in it: space, network, distancing effect, theatrical setting, and the facilitator. With these factors, the theatre online can be of help for individuals to adapt to the new environment in the pandemic, overcome isolation and oppression, and confront mental issues.



Besides, it can assist mental healthcare and prevent serious psychological issues for individuals in the pandemic and post-pandemic periods.

Under the COVID-19 pandemic, to address mental problems, it was proposed to create an environment for individuals to build connections with each other by the application of theatre with the distance platform. Nevertheless, this research is a frontier of applying theatre with the Internet and video platform, where the researcher and practitioner identified an alternative of theatre in the physical space to experience new theatre techniques and strategies. It tends to be the extension of the theatre, and it is even more flexible for multi-modal literacies in diverse settings. The challenge had opened the door for new visions of drama, which calls for the exploration of more theatrical strategies and new interaction between drama, therapy and technique.

Theatre in digital space is a comprehensive theoretical framework with great values. There are multiple factors for the development of the theatre form in the therapeutic setting. More theatrical strategies with new interaction between theatre, therapy and the distancing space should be explored. Combined with the mental health care, theatre, as a therapy in the COVID-19 context, can be the psychological interventions. Besides, the theatre online provides an opportunity for people to participate from different places without travelling. Furthermore, the implication of theatre in the digital space can be a selection for specific groups or individuals, such as the disabled. Overall, theatre in the digital space is an appropriate way to provide mental health assistance, but it is still in the developing stage.

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