

Article

Valuation in Action: Cultural Participation and Repertoires of Justification in Suboptimal Situations

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Abstract

How do cultural participants legitimate engagement in situations where cultural participation is experienced as substandard? Drawing on pragmatist approaches to valuation, this article conceptualises *justification* as *valuation-in-action*. It maps the situated axiological work through which actors render suboptimal participation worthwhile despite experiential disincentives. Specifically, this study examines divergent sites of cultural participation: a museum makerspace in Belfast and a variety of London-based choirs, all of which were compelled to migrate online to comply with pandemic lockdown restrictions. This digitally mediated participation was experienced as inferior to co-present practice, but participants nonetheless engaged. Using inductive analysis based on interviews and focus groups, we identify six shared value repertoires mobilised to legitimate digitally mediated participation: Emotional Regulation, Socialisation, Identity, Time, Capabilities, and Indexical Continuity. These repertoires organise participants' value talk legitimising online participation based on socio-emotional coping, connection/communitas, temporal anchoring, identity continuity, skill maintenance/development, and indexical links to the felt qualities and sociality of pre-pandemic co-presence. These findings provide scholars and policy-makers with a pragmatic language for diagnosing what audiences treat as valuable in digital and hybrid cultural provision, enabling the creation of evaluation infrastructures that reflect participants' value criteria rather than relying on access metrics or assumed hierarchies of cultural value.

Keywords: cultural values; valuation; cultural participation; choirs; makerspaces; online cultural provision; digitally mediated arts; COVID-19; axiological sociology; pragmatic sociology



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1. Introduction

This article contributes to a growing body of literature that examines the justification of cultural consumption during periods of global upheaval (see [1]), as well as to understandings of digitally mediated cultural activities more broadly. We explore how cultural participants construct and deploy 'value justifications' to sustain participation in two comparable yet divergent case studies of online cultural activities. Notably, justification is here conceptualised as *valuation-in-action*: the situated practice through which actors make participation intelligible as worthwhile, necessary, or appropriate under certain evaluative criteria. Rather than treating value as a fixed attribute of cultural activities, we attend

to how ‘participation value’ is articulated and legitimised through certain ‘repertoires of justification’ captured in our analysis of digitally mediated cultural participation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic and the government’s preventative ‘lockdown’ measures had well-documented negative impacts on the cultural and creative sector in the United Kingdom [2,3]. Between March 2020 and July 2021, the UK cultural sector negotiated sequential lockdowns, social distancing measures, and an almost total collapse of in-person attendance. Such circumstances had a detrimental impact on audience engagement within the cultural sector, with co-present activities in museums, galleries, community settings, etc., all being outlawed [4]. However, while much has been written about the impacts of COVID-19 on culture’s supply-side dynamics, this article focuses on the demand side, by examining rationales for continued participation online, via modes of engagement that were openly declared as inferior to the in-person alternative.

We studied the valuation of these ‘inferior’ online modes through two distinct case studies. In the first, we examined valuation relative to the shift to remote online delivery in a participative museum makerspace in Belfast. Reimagine, Remake, Replay (RRR) is a museum participation initiative in Northern Ireland for 16–25-year-olds, centred on a co-present creative makerspace situated in Belfast Museums. However, COVID-19 social distancing measures led to the cessation of all in-person RRR activities, with remote participation activities initiated to mimic RRR’s in-person activities through online mediation technologies, most notably teleconferencing platforms. Crucially, these online activities were deemed suboptimal as compared to in-person participation but remained valuable enough to justify user participation despite clear experiential disincentives: it is the value justifications that underpin this decision that we capture empirically.

In the second case study, we explored the valuation of experience of London-based choirs and choral societies during lockdown. The social distancing regulations meant that choirs in England had to turn to teleconferencing and mediation technologies. As noted, participants believed that the online versions of their choir were experientially inferior to the in-person instantiations [5]. Nonetheless, choir participant rates increased during the lockdown, and echoing RRR, it was clear that participants appeared to leverage a set of justifications or ‘value talk’ that legitimised participation, despite openly acknowledged drawbacks and negative comparisons to co-present, pre-pandemic participation. Again, it is the *value justifications* that underpin the decision to participate in an inferior experience which are our analytical focus.

Comparing two sets of value justifications across two distinct modalities of online participation, we found six common repertoires leveraged to justify participation in the face of an ‘inferior’ digitally mediated experience: (1) Emotional Regulation, (2) Socialisation, (3) Identity, (4) Time, (5) Capabilities, and (6) Indexical Continuity (we have provided a glossary of our key terms, including summary definitions of these repertoires, in Appendix A). These six justificatory repertoires resulted from our axiological coding of the data, as described below, and the analytical saturation achieved through a six-stage recursive thematic analysis: familiarisation, initial code generation, thematic scoping, reviewing themes, defining themes, and reporting themes.

Generalising these repertoires outwards, we propose that digital cultural participation during the pandemic should not be conceptualised solely as a deficient substitute for co-presence nor as a passive distraction. Instead, our study demonstrates how participants actively justified online participation through a pragmatic axiological repertoire that emphasises socio-emotional regulation, social connectivity, temporal organisation, identity affirmation, skills acquisition, and indexical links to pre-pandemic co-presence. We contend that these repertoires constitute an axiological framework that extends beyond the social

conditions of the pandemic, offering a pragmatic understanding of how social actors justify their cultural engagements through specific rationales and regimes of valuation. Such an approach offers a new perspective on the ‘cultural value(s)’ debate with implications for cultural policy and the assumed ‘benefits’ of cultural participation on society.

2. Background

2.1. *Pandemic ‘Deterritorialisation’*

During the pandemic, the government implemented a series of ‘lockdowns’ to limit person-to-person viral transmission, an act that transformed cultural life and required social relations to shift to online platforms and teleconferencing [6–8]. These lockdowns could be conceptualised as creating a set of absences or losses within the cultural field: the loss of identity through the cessation of performative activities, the loss of socialisation through the closure of sites of cultural consumption, and the loss of structure and routine in the context of wider ‘social isolation’ [9–11]. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari [12] (p. 508), we conceptualise such absences as instances of ‘deterritorialisation’, namely ‘the movement or process by which something escapes or departs from a given territory, where a territory can be a system of any kind: conceptual, linguistic, social or affective’ [13] (p. 4). In the cultural sector, the practices, socialities, and affects of co-present cultural participation in space and time were deterritorialised in response to government lockdown measures. Crucially, however, some sites of cultural participation were ‘reterritorialised’ through online, digitally mediated interfaces. It is the value ascribed to these reterritorialised (online) cultural experiences that form the basis of this article’s axiological approach.

2.2. *Digitally Mediated Cultural Participation*

Contemporary internet-based communication technologies enabled cultural participation to continue during lockdowns, albeit online, from the home:

Unlike during previous pandemics, the world was interconnected through digital technologies, which were widely used not only to convey information (and disinformation) and to keep businesses and families in touch, but also to provide diversion, solace and inspiration to the legions of people confined to their homes as part of national pandemic control measures [14]. (p. 1)

For cultural organisations negotiating the transition to online delivery, the mediations that co-present cultural experience—visual, aural, discursive, corporal, spatial, temporal, and social—needed to be replicated through intermediating technologies (see [15]). Some of these mediations, notably the corporal and spatial, have been seen to be considerably harder to replicate via online technologies, but others, most notably temporal and social mediations, were more easily translated to online interfaces [1,16,17]. This uneven translatability foregrounds ‘social mediation’ as a key site of disruption and reconstruction in remote participation, particularly where intimate microsocial ties are central to experiential value.

2.3. *Social Mediation and Reconstituted Cultural Socialities*

Born’s planes of ‘social mediation’ [15] are particularly relevant in the context of forced social isolation and the replication of experience online, and this concept can be applied to all forms of cultural participation. Social mediation includes both the ‘intimate socialities’ of the immediate co-present and the wider constituencies of participation and imagined communities associated with participation more generally [15,18]. The first plane of social mediation is most directly impacted by the forced transfer to remote access. The intimate and immediate microsocialities of previous co-presence are lost, or at least radically reconstituted, in technological mediation through online interfaces [19]. Born outlines the second plane of social mediation as the ‘capacity to animate imagined communities,

aggregating its adherents into virtual collectivities and publics based on musical and other identifications' [15] (p. 381). Here, there are echoes of Anderson [20] and Giddens [21], with self-identity understood as an ongoing practice of reflexive self-making, in which cultural participation plays a key role [22,23]. This conceptualisation of social mediation provides a lens through which to interpret how specific cultural fields, such as museums and choral participation, offer clear potential for collective identity creation.

2.4. Existing Scholarship on Digital Cultural Engagement: Museums and Choirs

The literature on digital engagement in the context of the 'participative museum' [24] offers models of best practice and examples of digital interfaces being used effectively to widen participation in pre-pandemic conditions (see [25,26]). Research mapping the transition to online delivery within UK museums during the pandemic tends to focus on operational perspectives, with limited research on how participants justify their online participation during COVID-19 (see [27,28]). Similarly, pre-pandemic literature on collective singing and choir participation is well-trodden (see [29–33]). Such pre-pandemic findings sharpen the question of how justificatory talk shifts when virtual participation is no longer optional or supplementary but becomes the primary mode of cultural continuity. Accounts have emerged exploring online or virtual choirs, particularly as such choirs have grown in prominence through the work of composer Eric Whitacre. Perhaps most notably, Fancourt & Steptoe [34] undertook research into asynchronous virtual choirs, generating the surprising conclusion that participation in virtual choirs is associated with a 'slightly greater feeling of co-presence than participants in live choirs' (p. 1). However, compared with in-person choirs, Fancourt & Steptoe [34] found lower deployment of 'emotion regulation strategies', specifically a lower use of avoidance strategies, including distraction, suppression, or detachment from negative or stressful emotions. This suggests that in pre-pandemic conditions, social presence is mediated relatively effectively in online environments, but emotional regulation is less well emulated. However, this is again reflective of the conditions of participation prior to the socio-biological conditions of a global pandemic and associated lockdowns [6]. While these studies map digital provision and participation across domains, they also point to the need for closer attention to the evaluative vocabularies through which participants themselves legitimate 'online' engagement in crisis conditions.

2.5. Virtual Choirs During COVID-19: Continuity, Sociality, and the Limits of Co-Creation

A more pandemic-centred account of online choir participation is provided by Daffern, Balmer & Brereton [19], a survey study of choir participants during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Following a survey of 3948 respondents between 20 July and 4 August 2020, they captured these key themes:

Choir Continuity, reflecting the responsibility felt to maintain choir activities somehow; *Wellbeing*, with lockdown highlighting to many the importance of in-person choirs to their sense of wellbeing; *Social Aspects*, reflecting a sense of community and social identity; *Musical Elements*, whereby the value of musical experience shifted with the virtual models; *Co-creation through Singing*, with an overwhelming sense of loss of the embodied experience of singing together in real-time, which is unattainable from existing virtual choir models [19]. (p. 1)

These findings are highly instructive and recognise the impacts of continuity, sociality, and technological limitations in online choir mediation. However, there is little discussion of the justificatory regimes used to justify participation, particularly from the pragmatist axiological perspective [35]. Our approach thus emphasises social actors' abilities to provide deliberative justifications, often predicated on situational demands, which can be

formalised into clusters of values or regimes (see [36] (p. 43) and [37]). Put simply, to move from identifying themes to explaining why participation was sustained, it is necessary to examine the justificatory regimes through which actors render mediated participation worthwhile despite acknowledged limitations. This is the task of our empirical analysis.

2.6. Cultural Value Mapping as a Model for Justificatory Clustering

Such a pragmatist axiological orientation directs attention to how value is articulated and clustered in situ, especially where actors must reconcile private motivations with publicly intelligible accounts of cultural worth. Here, one becomes enmeshed in a body of ‘cultural value’ literature that attempts to capture the ‘values’ ascribed to cultural participation [38–44]. A particularly rich mapping occurs in Alan Brown’s capturing of thirty ‘cultural values’ clustered into wider areas such as personal development, human interaction, communal meaning and civic discourse, economic and macro-social benefits, and the imprint of an arts experience [45,46]. Indeed, Brown’s ability to abstract assumed or experienced benefits into these higher-level categorisations provides a model that informs our approach. However, one of the challenges in analysing the attribution of cultural value is the tension between what Heinich deems ‘public values’, those openly expressed in the public domain, and the ‘private values’ which ‘effectively guide actions, but can hardly be publicly claimed because of their lack of consistency with public values’ [47] (p. 86). It is the object of this article to access and record the private values that guide action, value regimes that structure the justification for participating in the ‘inferior’ digitally mediate modes of online cultural participation that would appear to ‘fail’ to replicate all the mediations evident in their co-present manifestations.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sampling and Participant Profile

Our qualitative approach follows from an axiological research objective: to identify the values, justifications, and evaluative criteria through which cultural actors made continued participation meaningful under the disruptive, sub-optimal conditions. This research thus sought to understand categories of cultural valuation, which cultural participants do not normally articulate explicitly. Such an objective required close textual analysis to code and concretise abstract concepts into tangible justifications which could be represented as a typology.

Sampling was purposive at the organisational level (a museum makerspace programme; eight choirs) to capture variation in participation format and technological modality. For the makerspace study, participants were recruited from the Reimagine, Remake, Replay (RRR) programme in Northern Ireland. For the choir case study, participants were recruited from eight choirs affiliated with four distinct choral organisations based in London. The choral organisations were chosen as examples of not only differing technological modalities, but also diverse musical repertoires and levels of musical competency. At the participant level, recruitment relied on voluntary response within each setting: an open invitation posted to the RRR Slack community or invitations circulated through choirs via the choirs’ organisers.

Our dataset was focused on two contrasting modes of cultural participation (RRR and online choirs) purposefully chosen via a maximum variation strategy [48]. Both cases were selected from a larger study of cultural participation because, within the larger study, only these organisations moved to online delivery in response to pandemic restrictions. The comparison rests on a shared axiological problem: the reconstitution of participatory cultural practices whose value had previously been organised around co-presence, routine, shared attention, embodied interaction, and collective cultural activity. This shared

problem renders the cases analytically comparable even if the cultural practices themselves are distinct.

3.2. *Reimagine, Remake, Replay*

Two focus groups (total $N = 12$) were organised between February and March 2021. The focus-group transcripts were thematically coded for participation values and justifications; then, we triangulated the findings with conversations amongst participants on the RRR Slack channel and four semi-structured interviews with RRR staff members.

3.3. *Online Choirs*

A sequence of semi-structured online interviews ($N = 35$) took place in between February and March 2021. We coded for cultural values and repertoires of justification, then triangulated the participant findings with five semi-structured interviews with ‘choir organisers’, including musical directors, administrators, and chairpersons.

3.4. *Data Saturation*

Our qualitative data collection methods generated a substantial qualitative corpus for thematic analysis: approximately 25,000 words (80 pages) for RRR and 90,000 words (135 pages) for the choirs. For the purposes of interpretive thematic analysis, data saturation [48] was reached: our core justificatory repertoires recurred across datasets, with later stages of analysis only producing further elaborations of existing themes rather than wholly new categories.

3.5. *Participant Coding*

We used a code to identify anonymous research participants. For the RRR programmes, focus-group participants (PA) are signified by the codename RRRPA while organisational staff or leaders (L) from the programme are referenced by RRRL. Role codenames are followed by their chosen gender (M/F/N) and an identifying number. The choir study also makes a distinction between participants (PA) and organisers (L), but is further delineated relative to the two archetypal choir models which emerged through analysis:

- (1) MRC: a ‘Mixed-repertoire Recreational Choir’ model comprising popular music and light classical repertoire which does not demand musical competencies such as the ability to read music. These choirs tend to be run on a commercial, for-profit basis and serve a younger and more diverse constituency of singers.
- (2) CC: A ‘semi-professional Classical Choir’ model with a more traditional classical repertoire, often demanding the reading of music and other competencies. These operate on a not-for-profit, charity basis. These choirs are often longstanding institutions and comprise a more homogenous, older constituency of singers.

3.6. *Analytical Approach*

Drawing on the thematic coding approach outlined by Naeem et al. [49], we sought to identify common experiences articulated across the complex data set generated by the two case studies, using assistive qualitative technology to discern themes and codes. This created a sequence of tabulated thematic representations where core themes are associated with (1) experiential disincentives, (2) participation values, and (3) repertoires of justification. Following pragmatic sociologies of valuation, we treat *justification* as participants’ and organisers’ accounts that legitimate continued participation, i.e., statements that answer (implicitly or explicitly) why this practice is worth sustaining under constrained conditions, and what makes it appropriate, meaningful, or necessary.

Analytically, we recognised justificatory talk from (a) descriptive accounts of what happened in an activity combined with (b) experienced outcomes (e.g., feeling calmer). Where respondents described outcomes (e.g., calmness, motivation), we treat these as participants' justification: resources drawn on to legitimate continued engagement rather than as externally verified effects. Statements were also coded as 'justificatory' when they expressed an evaluation ('worth it,' 'needed,' 'important,' 'better than nothing') or linked an outcome to a reason for continuing ('it helped me cope, so I kept going'). Our coding, therefore, focused on evaluative and legitimating formulations and we grouped recurrent justificatory formulations into repertoires through constant comparison across the two cases. These codes were iteratively consolidated into thematic clusters across cases and participant types (participants vs. organisers; makerspace vs. choirs; MRC vs. CC). We then conducted negative case checking for accounts that challenged or contradicted the emerging clusters and triangulated data from interviews, focus groups, organiser accounts, and observation notes.

We considered the level of salience of themes within each thematic cluster as measured through recurrence, distribution, elaboration, and justificatory centrality. That is, we evaluated how often a repertoire appeared, how widely it was distributed across accounts, how fully participants developed it, and how directly it was used to explain the value of continued participation. For this analysis, salience was assessed interpretively (high = frequent across most interviews/focus-group talk; medium = recurrent but not dominant; low = occasional or primarily invoked to mark limits of online participation). This allowed for easier comparison across factors between case studies.

3.7. Ethics

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and the research protocol received favourable ethical approval from the Research Ethics and Integrity Sub-Committee (REISC), Goldsmiths, University of London (Ref. 1600) on 4 February 2021. Research participants gave written informed consent when taking part. For both cases, the resulting samples reflected a subset of participants who continued to engage online during the pandemic despite stated limitations, suggesting an established level of investment in the cultural practice from the outset.

3.8. Limitations

This study is limited to participants who continued to engage in online cultural activity during the pandemic. Consequently, our analysis makes no attempt to explain withdrawal, refusal, or disengagement from digital provision, nor does it claim to represent pandemic cultural participation as a whole. Rather, this article examines a more specific problem: how continued participation was made meaningful when the ordinary conditions through which cultural value is produced were substantially disrupted. The findings should therefore be read as an analysis of *justification*: the value work through which participants rendered compromised forms of online participation sufficiently meaningful to sustain engagement.

4. Results

4.1. Experiential Disincentives

It was clear from the outset that a negative comparison with in-person participation, which can be characterised into certain recognised drawbacks, was present in both cases. Indeed, a choir participant deemed online singing 'absolutely rubbish' [CCPA/M/30], while an RRR respondent characterised online participation as 'stagnated' [RRRPA/F/108]. For choir participants, we captured eight core experiential drawbacks of online participation across 64 stated issues (see Table 1), while for the RRR, we identified six core experiential

drawbacks across 23 stated issues (see Table 2). These negative comparisons are not analysed in this article, as they serve only to underpin our argument that cultural participants found the online versions of their formerly in-person cultural activities to be inferior.

Table 1. Negative Comparisons with In-Person Participation in Virtual Choirs.

Drawback Category	Summary of Negative Comparison (Online Versus In-Person)
Ensemble sound & co-presence	Online formats are framed as lacking the core choral condition: mutual audibility, blend, shared acoustics, synchrony, and ‘being in the room.’
Technical/format limits	Online is positioned as structurally constrained (latency, ‘can’t sing together’, pre-recorded tracks, limited feedback loops), producing a compromised rehearsal ecology.
Sociality & bonding	Participants mark the loss of the social infrastructure of choir (pub/meal rituals, post-rehearsal bonding, informal talk, shared presence).
Self-consciousness & embodiment	Online participation heightens self-monitoring (hearing one’s own voice, being ‘exposed’, feeling like a ‘singleton’), contrasted with being sonically absorbed into the group.
Activity identity & legitimacy	Online is sometimes reclassified as not really choir (e.g., ‘sing along’), with ‘proper’ choir deferred to future face-to-face return.
Value for money & devaluation	Some accounts question whether online delivery warrants fees (ranging from reduced value to ‘valueless’, including scepticism about what is being paid for).
Learning/skill impacts	In-person is framed as pedagogically superior (pitch support, embodied learning, vocal development), with online linked to skill/voice regression or limited calibration.
Zoom fatigue & effort	Online participation is contrasted with the restorative/absorbing quality of ‘going out’ with screen fatigue and friction undermining motivation.

Table 2. Negative Comparisons with In-Person Participation in RRR.

Drawback Category	Summary of Negative Comparison (Online vs. In-Person)
Museum atmosphere	Online participation is experienced as lacking the sensory/affective museum-ness (surroundings, atmosphere, extended presence in the venue).
Sociality & conversational flow	Online interaction is framed as less natural/multi-threaded; Zoom turn-taking and time-bounded sessions reduce spontaneity and informal sociability.
Sharing work & peer collaboration	Online formats make it harder to casually show work-in-progress; sharing becomes formalised (‘uploading’) and peer-to-peer inspiration is perceived as reduced.
Relationship formation & ‘2D’ personhood	Online participation supports contact, but participants describe weaker social grounding: difficulty recognising people IRL (in real life); others experienced as ‘virtual faces’
Material access, tools & hands-on practice	Online delivery limits access to specialist equipment and embodied hands-on making associated with museum workshops and tech labs.
Fatigue, constraints & attrition	Digital fatigue and ‘more structured’ online time produce avoidance and higher dropout compared with in-person programmes.

4.2. Participation Values

Our coding generated a sequence of participation values identified by respondents in both case studies. These could be framed as ‘benefits’ which were leveraged in the face of the experiential disincentives mapped previously. Table 3 provides results for the choir interviews, and Table 4 for RRR interviews. We discuss the ‘participation values’ found here further below, as these inform our findings on justificatory repertoires.

Table 3. Thematic and Coded Responses from Choir Participants.

Participation Value (Choir)	Code	Illustrative Phrases
Continuity and Belonging	Family-like Support and Connection	Family, have that connection, support, only group thing, big family feeling
	Social Bonding and Friendship	Social element, chat sessions, camaraderie, making friends (e.g., drinks after rehearsal, swapping numbers), friends
	Belonging and Togetherness	Being together as a choir, less alone, collective belonging, uplifting connection
Consolidating Time and Normalcy	Temporal Anchoring and Routine	looked forward to it, highlight of the week, weekly routine, helped structure the day
	Time Distortion and Acceleration	Lockdown blurred time, weeks passed quickly, losing track of time
	Continuity and Anticipation	Nostalgia for live events, hope for future return, sense of continuity
Identity and Personal Meaning	Personal Identity as a Singer	A big part of my identity, part of who I am, everyone knows I love singing, huge part of my life, saved me in retirement, mental health benefits
	Creative Fulfilment and Purpose	Performing and self-expression, need to perform, life purpose, sense of achievement, improved well-being, genuinely good for my mental health
	Collective Identity and Pride	Pride in group achievements, part of something big, group reputation/tradition, decades-long discography, sharing choir products with pride, felt proud to send the video to lots of people
Emotional Regulation	Anxiety and Uncertainty	Initial fear and state of shock, confusion about the future, anxiety about return plans, feeling drained, keeping up enthusiasm
	Isolation vs. Connection	Feelings of loneliness vs. less alone online, missing in-person exhilaration, online choir as lifeline in tough times, maintaining friendships to combat isolation
	Joy, Uplift and Nostalgia	Uplifting and satisfying moments, looking forward to sessions, really looked forward to it, happiness and gratitude, it was great, I was very grateful, nostalgia for past live events, nostalgia workshop, reminiscing about recordings, hope for reunion, looking ahead to singing together again
Digital Participation and Adaption	Innovation and Skill Development	Creative solutions, <i>Jamulus</i> platform for real-time singing, multi-track recording projects, virtual choir videos and open mic nights, learning new tech skills, mixing audio/video, personal growth in tech, expanded my knowledge through online projects, guest workshops, vocal coaches, expert talks to enrich sessions
	Expanded Reach and Hybrid Future	Increased accessibility, members joining from afar, larger audiences online, 200+ participants from Oman, USA in virtual events), inclusive participation for those who travel or relocate, plans for hybrid models, permanent digital enhancement of choir, live-streaming concerts, combining live and remote singers, viewing online engagement as a valuable complement going forward.

Table 4. Thematic and Coded Responses from RRR Participants.

Participation Value (RRR)	Code	Illustrative Phrases
Community and Social Connection	Community & Belonging	More of a community thing, feels like a sit down together, feels kind of comfortable
	Friendship & Socialising	Made new friends, talk to new people, remake lost social skills, warm, welcoming environment
	Support & Encouragement	Support network, constantly support you, what you're doing is worthwhile, comfortable enough to jump on
Identity Consolidation	Creative Self-Identity	Consider myself an artist, creative person, helped me establish that, kept me involved in it
	Confidence Building	Gives you the confidence, confidence to call yourself [an artist], if it looks bad, it doesn't matter, ready to have a go
	Leadership & Active Roles	Leading a workshop, facilitating sessions, joined a steering group, co-curated an event
	Opportunities & Growth	Professional experience, other museums have asked me, alternative placement, broadened what I can do
Emotional Regulation and Resilience	Enjoyment & Fun	Highlight of my week, nothing else is as fun, look forward to it, so excited
	Relaxation & Therapeutic Outlet	Calm and chill, just lovely, draw doodles in a sketchbook, healing
	Coping & Motivation (Lockdown)	Escapism, not just alone in your room, something to look forward to, got me dressed for the day
Skill Development	Learning New Skills	Technology aspects, new creative skills, different creative areas, get the hang of it
	Creative Expression	Outlet to say whatever you want, whatever you are feeling, express yourself, creative outlet
	Experimentation & Process-Focus	Try all different types of art, have a go at things, enjoy the process, not stressing about perfection
	Tangible Outcomes	Produced something concrete, tangible, sent the prints we made, make it real (not 100% virtual)
Participation and Time	Voluntary Engagement	More aimed at having fun, out of choice, not forced to go, free course
	Flexibility & Reach	Easier to organise my time, so time efficient, multiple things in one evening, people all across Northern Ireland
	Barriers to Participation	Hard to commit that time, so busy with work, not that confident (in arts), need Wi-Fi and a screen
	Online Format Limitations	Different kind of atmosphere, cautious not to speak over, one person speaking at a time, miss wandering round the museum

4.3. Repertoires of Justification

The tables above are an instructive list of values and themes emerging from the data, and we discuss the commonalities in more detail below. Nevertheless, we note that the generalised coding does not attend to individual differences nor to comparative dimensions across the two case studies. For example, participants in RRR emphasised skill-building and future opportunities linked to identity formation, whereas choir members stressed maintaining existing identities and community bonds. Moreover, the nature of the activity itself did impact this variance: collective singing inherently involves a different emotional dynamic than individual creative workshops, and choir participants tended to place more emphasis on community/belonging, while RRR participants spoke more of personal development. Nonetheless, as previously discussed, the alignment of specific

values reflects deeper social patterns and shared cultural frameworks across the two cases. Our analysis, therefore, aimed to identify broader justificatory mechanisms that transcend individual values and can be understood as structural or discursive repertoires within societal interactions.

Table 5 summarises the six justificatory repertoires identified through our axiological coding and provides a qualitative indication of salience for each case (High/Medium/Low). The ranking in Table 5 reflects the level of salience across the two cases and the prominence within the data.

Table 5. Justificatory Repertoires and Salience across both Case Studies.

Justificatory Repertoire	Participation Values	Short Definition	Salience: RRR	Salience: Choirs
Emotional Regulation	<u>Choirs:</u> Emotional Regulation <u>RRR:</u> Emotional Regulation and Resilience	Online participation legitimised as switching off, calming, coping, and focusing attention away from pandemic anxieties.	High	High
Socialisation	<u>Choirs:</u> Continuity and Belonging <u>RRR:</u> Community and Social Connection	Online participation legitimised as sustaining belonging, companionship, mutual support, and quasi-ritual togetherness.	High	High
Identity	<u>Choirs:</u> Identity and Personal Meaning <u>RRR:</u> Identity Consolidation	Online participation legitimised as sustaining a valued self-conception (e.g., maker, singer) and a sense of productivity/achievement.	High	High
Time	<u>Choirs:</u> Consolidating Time and Normalcy <u>RRR:</u> Participation and Time	Online participation legitimised as structuring time, creating weekly markers, and expanding access across distance and disability.	High	High
Capabilities	<u>Choirs:</u> Digital Participation and Adaption <u>RRR:</u> Skill Development	Online participation seen as enabling skill maintenance/development and prompting creative/musical activity outside sessions.	Medium	Medium
Indexical Continuity	<u>Choirs:</u> Continuity and Belonging; Identity and Personal Meaning; Consolidating Time and Normalcy <u>RRR:</u> Emotional Regulation and Resilience; Community and Social Connection; Participation and Time	Value talk about atmosphere, place, and sensory immediacy; often used to note experiential absences and limits of online formats.	Medium	Medium

Table 5 shows that the first four categories (emotional regulation, socialisation, identity, and time) are more salient and therefore have a more central status as justificatory repertoires across respondent datasets. The final two repertoires are somewhat less salient and are seen as providing secondary or ancillary justifications (here, we do not consider any value repertoires that had low salience in the case studies). What follows is a more detailed analysis of how each repertoire was leveraged to frame the justification for participation in the face of the experiential disincentives outlined earlier.

4.3.1. Emotional Regulation

In this repertoire, participants legitimised continued participation by presenting it as a means of emotional regulation, especially as everyday routines and social supports were disrupted. Ritualised participation in online RRR programmes played a vital role in overcoming pandemic-induced anxieties. The ritualised experience of weekly session attendance on Zoom was clearly valued in focusing and structuring the experience of par-

ticipants who were struggling with the corrosive anxieties of negotiating both a pandemic and the monotony of lockdown.

Similar attention distraction techniques were articulated by research participants from choirs, with avoidance strategies articulated frequently in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Choir members were acutely conscious of the beneficial effects that engagement in the online choir community had on mitigating negative social behaviours. One respondent translated this value into economic terms:

I am pretty sure if [the choir] said it was going to be twice the price, I'll get a loan if I have to because I have to do this. It is definitely something that you are waiting for all week. Just seeing all the little faces there. [MRCPA/F/16]

When a respondent could not afford the subscription cost to attend, and the choir accordingly lowered her fee, she admitted to the interviewer that she cried in 'relief' because of the role that the choir world had played in her coping with the challenges and anxieties of lockdown and a global pandemic. Here, we see the true value of choir participation, despite experiential limitations.

Linked to emotional regulation, continued participation was legitimised in somatic terms, with respondents invoking bodily modulation (e.g., increased energy, endorphin release) as a reason for online attendance. Bodily modulation was articulated most clearly in the choral accounts and appeared less prominently in the RRR material, plausibly reflecting the distinctive physical demands of singing (breath control, posture, exertion, and warm-up routines). The physicality of rehearsal was further legitimised as a welcome counterpoint to sedentary lockdown life, with warm-up practices and controlled breathing framed as mood-lifting resources and endorphin release:

It gets the old endorphins going just like jogging. [MRCPA/F/08]

The endorphin levels in your brain—it clearly has a positive impact on your outlook [...] It was like taking a drug with no side effects, only good side effects. [MRCPA/F/09]

This emphasis on the biological implications of singing and the impacts on lifting one's spirits brings the justifications back full circle, suggesting that the modifications to biochemistry produced through a physical act have implications for emotion regulation. Indeed, while this article has sought to identify different repertoires of justification, it is the interdependence of such justifications that informs much of the close reading of the stated justifications.

4.3.2. Socialisation

Continued participation was also justified as a way of sustaining social connection and a sense of *communitas* when co-present interaction was unavailable or constrained. Significant value was placed on the RRR programme's social role and its value in 'coping with those feelings of loneliness' [RRRPA/F/09]. Such a value was emphasised by all participants across a variety of contexts, ranging from participants who were isolated in university halls to those who had returned to the family home during the pandemic. Beyond socialising with fellow isolated RRR participants, focus-group participants valued the supportive ecosystem that emerged around the programmes: 'It just became like a support network. We were friends already, but we really leant on each other during the beginning of lockdown' [RRRPA/F/09]. Indeed, it was clear that for some respondents, the social ties between RRR participants had strengthened through the adversity of the pandemic, and this was particularly praised for enabling social connections to be forged across Northern Ireland during a period where travel was outlawed.

Turning to choirs, it was clear from the interviews with the choir organisers that sustaining a supportive community and associated ‘belonging’ was a significant motivation for maintaining the choirs (albeit online) during a period of significant upheaval. It is this social connection that many participants framed as a valued and valuable aspect of participating in the online choir. The preservation of communal engagement via choral activities assumes heightened significance amidst prolonged social separation, emphasising the choir’s role as a facilitator of social cohesion, especially for individuals navigating periods of social network disruption. Mirroring the perspectives of RRR respondents, choir members perceived the online choir interactions as instrumental in reinforcing social bonds. These digital manifestations functioned as critical sites for the reaffirmation of social cohesion, serving as a conduit for sharing personal, non-pandemic-related news that further solidified the relational ties within the community.

Participants often expressed a civic concern regarding singing into their devices in the domestic setting because of disturbing neighbours and fellow house occupants. However, a domestic social value emerged where partners and families who were locked down together began attending the remote choir sessions, often off screen. This communal experience was valued for bringing domestic networks closer together in a time of heightened emotion. Moving beyond the space of the home, participants set store by how the online community encompassed a rich diversity of actors, not found in their normal online pandemic interactions with work or friendship networks. The values ascribed to the sociality generated and sustained by the online choir world were, for most participants, the most valued aspect of online participation in the choir. The sociality afforded by the choir online was appreciated not because of the choir’s musical potentialities but rather because the online manifestations leveraged a social network pointedly absent under a global pandemic and associated lockdown. Indeed, it can be proposed that those who chose to participate in online choirs and offered social value as a justification are using the online choir to address a lack of sociality in their lockdown life. This positions choir participation as a resource that can be activated in the wake of loss, separation, or relocation: a low-stakes, repeatable, socially sanctioned setting for rebuilding everyday ties. This supports an interpretation of choirs as a third space of weak-tie formation and re-embedding: they offer routine, co-presence, and low-risk interaction that helps individuals repair social connections after upheaval and stabilise their sociality through a dependable weekly rhythm and collective experience. In short, newcomers are not simply trying out a hobby; many are using online choir participation as a socially intelligible technology of recovery and reattachment at precisely the points where other social circuits (partner networks, workplace intimacy, local friendship ecologies) were lacking.

4.3.3. Identity

Online participation was justified as identity maintenance, enabling individuals to sustain continuity as makers, singers, or cultural participants under crisis conditions. This spectrum of engagement ranges from mere participation in the RRR programme as one aspect of a broader array of leisure practices, many of which were restricted during lockdown, to more defined social identities that coalesce through active involvement in the programme. Some participants took clear pride in remaining part of the RRR community of practice, a social identifier that distinguished them from their peers, many of whom were studying remotely at university and relatively inactive culturally. The programme can be read as a scaffold for self-recomposition: it provides participants with a publicly recognisable role that is repeatedly reinforced through regular attendance, reciprocal conversation, and shared activities. This transforms the uncertainty of social

life during lockdown into a clear story of participation that they can incorporate into their daily routines.

An interesting division emerged for the choir participants regarding the production of identity as a justificatory rationale for participation centred on their relationship to singing and choirs themselves. For seasoned choir practitioners, engaging in online singing during lockdowns was perceived as a means of preserving a crucial facet of their personal identity. These individuals demonstrated an appreciation for virtual singing opportunities while nevertheless reducing them to an inferior compensatory practice. Such participants acknowledged the central role that singing as a manifestation of their sense of self, often having a history of engagement in choral and collective singing dating back to childhood. This centrality manifests itself in constructing self-identity and social cohesion. The enforced absence of public singing due to lockdowns disrupted these social rituals, resulting in emotional distress rooted in the loss of a key social and cultural resource. Although online singing was often perceived as inadequate in replicating the embodied and communal aspects of offline singing, it still served as a form of emotional and social sustenance, maintaining their connection to a central aspect of their social self.

More recent converts to choral singing tended to treat choir participation as a casual hobby or form of entertainment rather than as a deeply personal cultural enrichment, as found among experienced singers. For newcomers, singing played a valued, but not central, role in their identity consolidation as they lacked the longstanding links to a choir/choral identity signifier. However, many choral newcomers were using their participation in pre-pandemic choir activities to overcome certain identity challenges, often initially using the choir to forge new self-identities following a tragedy or upheaval in their lives. One choir organiser notes that membership uptake is patterned by users' life events and social rupture: 'quite a large percentage join when something happens or when they first move to London, or they've lost someone, or they've split up with someone, some kind of life trauma or life event' [MRCL01].

The data suggest that rehearsal is not merely a site of musical learning, but a durable identity scene: returning weekly, being recognised, and sharing an embodied routine produces continuity across otherwise fragmentary weeks. Participants explicitly describe the choir as something they can depend on, a formulation that reads less like leisure consumption than like the maintenance of a coherent self through predictable attachment. These accounts position the choirs as a collective identity scaffold: through recurrent co-presence, shared repertoires, and social recognitions (names, faces, voice parts), individuals become not just attendees but 'choir members', acquiring an affiliative category that travels beyond the rehearsal room into their (limited) social world. For both case studies, participation consolidates identity, converting diffuse aspiration into an enacted, socially ratified role: one that generates belonging, routine, and an active subjectivity that can be carried back into everyday lockdown life.

4.3.4. Time

In this repertoire, continued participation was legitimised as spatial-temporal anchoring: a routinised appointment that structured time, stabilised everyday life, and re-made a usable cultural 'place' at a distance. As a respondent noted, during a period where 'time has kind of ceased to exist, RRR is marker' [RRRPA/F/09]. Such notions were clearly present in the responses of other RRR participants. Participation was credited for being something to look forward to across the week, again countering the monotony of lockdown existence:

Spending so much time in your general environment and there is so little variety in life and in your day that you need to spice it up with your course and the sessions. [RRRPA/F/02]

The ability to carve out a moment of creativity within the week was often highlighted as a justificatory value with one participant noting ‘I don’t think I would take the time out of the day’ [RRRPA/F/01] to undertake cultural or creative activities without the motivator of RRR’s online programmes. The time efficiency of online activities was seen as a key value: ‘I think you can be so time efficient when everything is online. You are not darting between physical places, you can do multiple things in one evening.’ [RRRPA/F/07]. This ability to transcend spatial limitations was praised unanimously with respondents advocating a blended programme for the future. This value was endorsed by RRR staff who celebrated how remote access enabled guests and programme leaders to be located internationally and thus broadening the potential pool of contributors.

The in-person RRR programmes took place in various physical locations with participants attending geographically proximate museums and makerspaces as opposed to a centralised RRR hub. The shift to remote delivery resulted in the centralisation of the programming activities and the ability to socialise with participants from a wider geographical area. Thus, online programmes were valued for their ability to forge connections across Northern Ireland: ‘I think it was nice to connect with people all across Northern Ireland and not just in my area which I found really beneficial’ [RRRPA/F/05]) and beyond. The ability to host online sessions with professional contributors, such as Manchester’s *Shy Bairns Collective* in England, was celebrated by RRR leaders, and noted as a benefit of online platforms by respondents. Moreover, the online programmes were valued for their ability to sustain networks between RRR participants and the wider creative ecosystem in Northern Ireland, which was somewhat dormant during successive lockdowns.

Choir members also valued how continued participation in the choir rehearsals on certain nights each week existed as a valued marker of time during lockdown. Closely associated with the structuring of time provided by the choir was the notion, often attributed to watching programmes on live television or participating in live exercise training on YouTube, of temporal synchronicity across members:

I was so happy when they announced the virtual choir session because it was still like something in the diary, something to look forward to, something that brings joy. It was good to connect, you know that there are people in other households doing the same thing. [MRCPA/F/12]

The value ascribed to temporal synchronicity was deemed as one reason why broadcast-only performances, such as those on YouTube, were not popular—such experiences were consumed at different times and thereby lacked temporal synchronicity. It may be that the absence of co-present relational synchronicity in online iterations is somewhat countered by a focus on temporal synchronicity.

Under the time-related value repertoire, choirs, like RRR, also valued the digitally mediated environment’s ability to re-make usable cultural places at a distance, as travel costs fell away. Online operation was valued by choir participants who recognised the potential for transcending localities and attaining a new international reach. This was particularly noted in reference to *Come and Sings*, open invitation sessions for non-choir members, now undertaken online:

We did one and we had people joining us from Canada, America, a lot of people joined from all over the place. So that has been a positive of being able to join online, getting people to join from further afield. [CCPA/F/26]

Choir participants were themselves geographically spread, some accessing the online choir worlds from the other side of the Atlantic, and many advocated the continuation of a 'blended' model in the future to maximise the potential of remote access. There was a recognition of the access affordances of online choir worlds, which included time but went beyond it: 'it is just great that people from around the world can join or people that have access difficulties and can't reach for disability reasons or whatever, I think it really adds to it' [MRCPA/F/16].

4.3.5. Capabilities and Skills

In this repertoire, online participation was legitimised through claims about capability-building, such as maintaining or developing skills, confidence, and competence despite restricted access to shared spaces and resources. For RRR, participants explicitly narrate participation as a catalytic creative boost that spills beyond the session itself into expanded repertoires of practice (writing songs, painting, and initiating projects that would not have occurred otherwise), thereby reframing online engagement as a generator of new capacities rather than a second-best substitute for in-person access:

I've written a load of songs and would have never written songs before. I always played music, but I wouldn't have written any songs. And, as well, I started painting randomly, buying loads and loads of canvases. [RRRPA/F/07]

In the choir data, a parallel justificatory logic appears as maintenance work, in that online rehearsal is treated as maintaining an instrument with participants foregrounding the vulnerability of embodied skill to rapid decline if not routinely exercised. As one participant concluded,

We are all very aware that we have to keep our voices going because if you don't, you lose it. I really notice a quick deterioration if I don't sing. [CCPA/F/04]

However, this capability repertoire was not limited to technical proficiency, it extended to cognitive and psychosocial stimulation and preventative self-care:

You know when they say, you know when you get older you ought to do something to keep your intellect going, stop dementia and all the rest of it. [MRCPA/F/05]

These accounts show how actors perform pragmatic justification for online cultural participation by translating it into a broader discourse of self-improvement: online spaces become legitimate when they can be narrated as producing transversal personal capacities (creative agency, vocal upkeep, cognitive exercise) even when the traditional experiences of in-person participation are constrained.

4.3.6. Indexical Continuity

In this repertoire, participants legitimised continued engagement by invoking the 'feel' of co-present participation—the atmosphere, absorption, and embodied sense of being-with-others—even when mediated through online interfaces. The term 'indexical' implies a 'pointing to' or to put it more plainly, an indexical sign serves as a direct indicator of a specific experience. In this way, participants value elements of the online experience that point to former, in-person experience. Rather than justifying online engagement through convenience or access, interviewees foreground certain cues that emulated the 'realness' of participation: the micro-interactional texture of making together, the simultaneity of practice and moments when digital mediation recedes from consciousness. Even when the museum as a place cannot be reproduced, participants expressed how the interactional logics of physical co-presence can be partially reconstructed, through shared time, reciprocal responsiveness, and an affective repertoire that sustains absorption akin to pre-pandemic

conditions. For the online choirs, the replication of the experience of the choir rehearsal was equally important to justify participation online:

It seems to create a level of energy that is super-similar to singing in the pub. Apart from we are not dancing and clinking glasses and stuff, it is almost the same. [MRCPA/F/09]

This choir quotation extends this logic into a different indexical value, showing how participants recognise and valorise the reproduction of rehearsal-night ‘energy’ as an indexical analogue. Such justifications evidence a distinct valuation grammar: online participation is defended because it can still deliver the ‘felt’ qualities that index co-presence, which, as noted, include a sense of togetherness, shared rhythm, and atmospheres of comfort and collective effervescence. This sense of indexicality traverses many of the earlier repertoires which are also valued as links to co-present experience, the sociality of participation not just valued for its literal social experience but for its ability to indexically transport actors to a pre-pandemic experience.

5. Discussion

5.1. *Reimagine, Remake, Replay*

Participants consistently reported a range of justificatory values, such as distraction from the COVID-19 environment, the ability to structure time during monotonous lockdowns, the ability to transcend spatial limitations, the consolidation of identity, the acquisition of creative and technological skills, and the agency and legitimacy to create during lockdowns, which we have clustered into six justificatory repertoires. These clusters of justificatory values—emotional, social, identity, temporal, capacity and indexical continuity—did not operate in conflict or tension with each other but rather existed in an overlapping and mutually sustaining plurality.

A minor fault line in justificatory values did emerge, however, regarding the extent to which online experience was valued as a platform for social or creative practices. In contrast to participants who prioritised the social affordances of online activities, others criticised the lack of organic, improvisational co-creation on teleconferencing platforms, deploying an axiological grammar more focused on informal creative experience. However, those expressing disappointment at the formality of online experience employed other value clusters to counteract such disincentives, or negative values, resolving a potentially detrimental value conflict. Indeed, participants cited a lack of co-present co-creation, the inability to access RRR hardware, such as 3D printers and scanners, and the impossibility of undertaking activities in the spatial surrounds of a museum as demotivating factors which had been overcome to legitimise participation in remote RRR programmes. Nevertheless, a plurality of justificatory benefits, which largely sat comfortably together, were deployed by RRR participants to justify participation despite such limitations. Participative values can be presented hierarchically based on implicit relative prioritisation, with socialisation perhaps most valued as a justification for attending online. Ultimately, however, such justifications are collectively constituted as part of a broader socio-emotional resource that seeks to counter a coherent, universal set of pandemic absences.

5.2. *Online Choirs*

Echoing the RRR case study, a plurality of justificatory values emerge when looking at participants in online choir worlds. Most of these are strongly associated with counteracting the impacts of COVID-19 through ritualised practices that were de-territorialised and moved to the online realm. Like RRR participants, such justifications occupy several spaces of value production: emotional, social, identity, temporal, capacity, and indexicality. Parti-

pants routinely deployed several of these to rationalise a mode of cultural participation that is deemed unsatisfactory when compared to offline, co-present singing.

It is notable that value justifications appear with relative coherence within individual choir types. For the more open, recreational choirs, the values of fun, silliness, and self-expression were important:

In my choir, it is all so silly in a way, it is not taken so seriously so it doesn't feel like a huge pressure, it doesn't feel like you have to study to learn the songs or anything, it is sort of a fun way of doing things. [MRCPA/F/10]

However, as one moves towards the more formal, classical choirs, the values of proficiency, intellectualism, and professionalism become increasingly dominant: 'The music is amazing, and the quality of the musicianship is very high. I get a kick out of that' [CCPA/M/27]. Such a tension could be read in terms of two contrasting value grammars—one framing choir participation as a more ludic undertaking and the other predicated on a conception of the choir as an intellectual endeavour. Indeed, the former would appear to value the online choir experience as more directly ameliorating the universal set of absences generated by the pandemic moment, while the latter is centred on skill retention and continued practice.

Unlike RRR (which was offered at no cost to participants), choir members needed to pay a subscription fee to sing with a given choir. Value for money is a traditional index of perceived value and, understandably, most participants who had overcome the disincentives of online participation deemed online choirs 'value for money'. Despite its experiential drawbacks, online participation in the choir was, for many, considered as 'priceless', particularly when viewed as a resource to ameliorate the socio-emotional impacts of lockdown. However, those who were more critical of the online experience expressed concerns about subscription costs (even when these were reduced) but continued to pay in order to preserve the choir for a return to offline operation post-pandemic. For a few participants, online participation was also rationalised through values of continuity and obligation, rather than satisfaction or enjoyment. That is, these participants refused to perform online but attended online sessions to be seen to support the choir.

Despite these differences (on ludic/intellectual values and value for money), for most research participants across both choir types, online participation was justified as a socio-emotional resource that enabled a valued aspect of their pre-pandemic cultural life to continue during a period of unprecedented upheaval, albeit in a radically different digital form. And as with RRR, participants drew on a plurality of value repertoires in justifying their participation in forced-to-online cultural activities.

6. Conclusions

This study has aimed to understand valuation-in-action in suboptimal situations, using a pragmatic approach—'the empirical analysis of actions in context' [50] (p. 318)—which links actors' behaviours to their expressed judgements in specific contexts, with the aim of inferring actors' axiological principles. We argue that valuation-in-action encompasses the situated practice through which actors render cultural participation intelligible as worthwhile, appropriate or needed through their actions and their stated interpretation of these actions (see [47,50]). In this way, the value of cultural participation is articulated and legitimised through repertoires of justification, which can be plural. In other words, value is not a fixed attribute of cultural activities; instead, it is found, empirically, in the interaction of an actor's actions and verbalised statements within a given context.

Across two distinct cultural contexts—a participatory museum makerspace and online choir worlds—research participants articulated predominantly convergent repertoires for sustaining participation in digitally mediated cultural activities, despite their documented

views that the online versions are inferior. Our findings show that online participation was most consistently legitimised thorough justificatory repertoires that encompassed (1) emotional regulation, (2) social connection and communitas, (3) identity consolidation, and (4) temporal structuring. We also found two additional repertoires, (5) capability and capacity building, and (6) indexing of off-line experiences, which operated as secondary or contingent justificatory frameworks. In both a museum makerspace and in different types of choirs, actors legitimated digitally mediated participation through shared justificatory repertoires that re-assembled value to render online practice simultaneously narratable as experientially inferior to co-presence and yet morally and emotionally indispensable under the constraint of the moment.

These six repertoires of justification function less as a catalogue of outcomes than as a *map of valuation-in-action*. The pandemic conditions are significant analytically because lockdowns and fear of contagion compressed choice and removed many preferred alternatives, thereby bringing ordinarily backgrounded justificatory repertoires to the surface. These repertoires were not unique to the pandemic, but the pandemic made them observable. We argue that they provide potentially generalisable insights into how social actors justify their cultural engagements.

Our findings provide scholars with a pragmatic language for diagnosing what audiences treat as valuable. Given the prevalence and level of salience of these justificatory repertoires across different contexts, we suggest that it is likely that these repertoires will be found in cultural consumption in other contexts. Future research in other realms could be instructive. Further, given both the increase in digital (and hybrid) provision of cultural materials and experiences, and the fact that young people (and those with mobility issues) may prefer to engage on-screen rather than in-person, our research provides a timely strategy to understand how participants value digitally mediated culture participation, potentially shedding light on domestic consumption and everyday cultural practices.

Belfiore [44] points to the ‘negotiated and often antagonistic nature of cultural value’ (p. 394). We found only a few, minor instances where research participants proposed contradictory justifications relative to other participants across the sample. The main justificatory repertoires worked smoothly in parallel, rather than in tension, with each other, with most participants articulating justifications from several repertoires. We propose that any tension or conflicts in justificatory values would be more apparent in a study of supply-side cultural production or policy, where cultural values explicitly compete for singular (or zero-sum) justificatory legitimacy.

Research on ‘cultural value’ [38–43] aims to understand why art and culture matter and how to measure this cultural value, with the goal of making more informed and effective arguments for government funding of the creative and cultural sector. Our research contributes to this literature in a few ways. From a policy perspective, we suggest that evaluation and funding should register these more pragmatic justificatory repertoires (belonging, routine, identity continuity, perceived capability) rather than defaulting to access metrics or static value hierarchies, which often privilege exceptional or optimal experiences. Indeed, our findings contribute to the cultural value debate by taking suboptimal participation seriously: illustrating the value of ‘good-enough’ cultural practices that were justified, not despite their limits, but by the value they could still deliver in a suboptimal form.

Kaszynska [41] writes,

The question of why cultural engagement matters (‘What is the significance for society and individuals of arts participation?’) has become conflated with the question of how public money is allocated ... and accounted-for. (p. 6)

She argues that all three aspects are important but nevertheless calls for a ‘wider lens to look at the value of ... voluntary arts participation’ (p. 6). This study contributes

to this wider lens, specifically the question of the significance for individuals of arts participation. Our case study looked at suboptimal conditions, in order to tap into broader justificatory repertoires. Attending to quotidian justificatory grammars through which active participation is sustained (and, perhaps in other contexts, contested) allows policy makers and cultural producers to develop evaluation and support infrastructures that reflect such value criteria. Heinich [47] argues that ‘not all values stand on the same level regarding their ability to be justified’ (p. 86). In recent decades, British cultural policy has tended to be justified relative to instrumental values, especially economic impact [38,42,44]. The repertoires this study finds are more akin to ‘private values’, and in this way, may be harder to justify in policy terms [47] (p. 86), but they are no less important.

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Appendix A. Glossary

Axiological repertoire	A patterned vocabulary of value. Here, the term refers to the shared ways participants name, rank, and defend what matters about cultural participation.
Axiology	The study of value and valuation. In this article, axiology refers to how participants named, prioritised, and justified the forms of value they associated with continued online cultural participation.
Co-presence	The shared physical, temporal, and affective condition of being together with others in the same setting. The article treats co-presence as one of the key conditions disrupted by pandemic restrictions.
Deterritorialisation	The displacement of a practice from its usual site or setting. Here, it refers to the movement of participatory cultural activity from museums, studios, rehearsal rooms, or community spaces into domestic and digital environments.
Digitally mediated participation	Cultural participation facilitated through digital platforms or online formats, where interaction, embodiment, attention, and collective experience are technically mediated rather than physically co-present.
Indexical continuity	The way participants used online manifestations of the original, co-present activity (such as familiar voices, rituals, objects, faces, routines, or institutional settings) to sustain a sense of connection to the pre-pandemic co-present cultural practice during online participation.
Indexicality	The capacity of a text, object, image, voice, gesture, or routine to carry semiotic meaning across time and space. In this article, indexicality describes how online participation could carry traces of pre-pandemic experience (as in <i>indexical continuity</i> , above).

Participation values	The forms of worth that participants attached to cultural participation: what they experience as beneficial, meaningful, sustaining, or necessary. <i>Repertoires of justification</i> , by contrast, refer to the patterned ways participants accounted for those values and used them to defend continued engagement. The distinction is therefore between the value and the justificatory form through which that value is made intelligible.
Repertoires of justification	The recurring models of axiological evaluation through which participants explain, defend, or legitimise continued participation. In the present article, this occurs under the compromised conditions of the pandemic which reframed <i>participation values</i> .
Salience	The qualitative prominence of a repertoire within the data, assessed through recurrence, distribution, elaboration, and justificatory centrality rather than simple frequency.
Social mediation	The relational process through which cultural participation becomes meaningful and valuable through interaction, recognition, shared attention, and collective belonging.
Suboptimal participation	Participation that experientially compromised but still worthy of engagement. In the present study, suboptimal participation refers to modes of cultural activity that are perceived as not equivalent to in-person cultural practice, yet still sufficiently valuable to sustain engagement online.
Valuation-in-action	The situated process through which participants actively produce, test, and remake the value of cultural participation, rather than simply reporting value as a fixed property of the activity itself.

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