Kelly Strayhorn **Affinity**

Kelly Strayhorn Theater is a performing arts center located in the East Liberty neighborhood of Pittsburgh, committed to providing a platform for emerging artists, community producers, and progressive arts and cultural experiences that address contemporary isses.

During the pandemic, meeting and connecting with new people over similar interests is really hard. The “lobby party” vibe that KST had is lost with virtual performances. People miss being able to connect with other theatergoers and virtual interactions as is do not facilitate the kind of warm community they strive for.

Therefore, this research project focuses on the central question: **How might we translate the physical experience to a remote one that engages the user, fosters community and inclusion, is accessible, and enhances the experience?**

User-Centered Research & Evaluation

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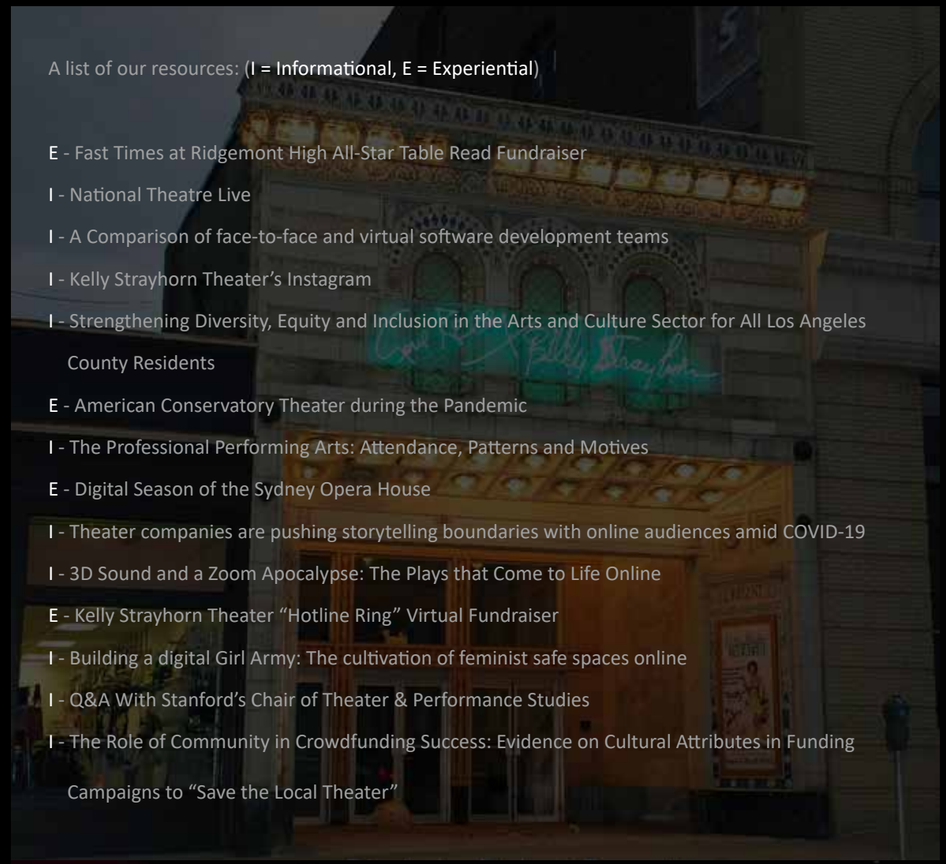
BACKGROUND RESEARCH

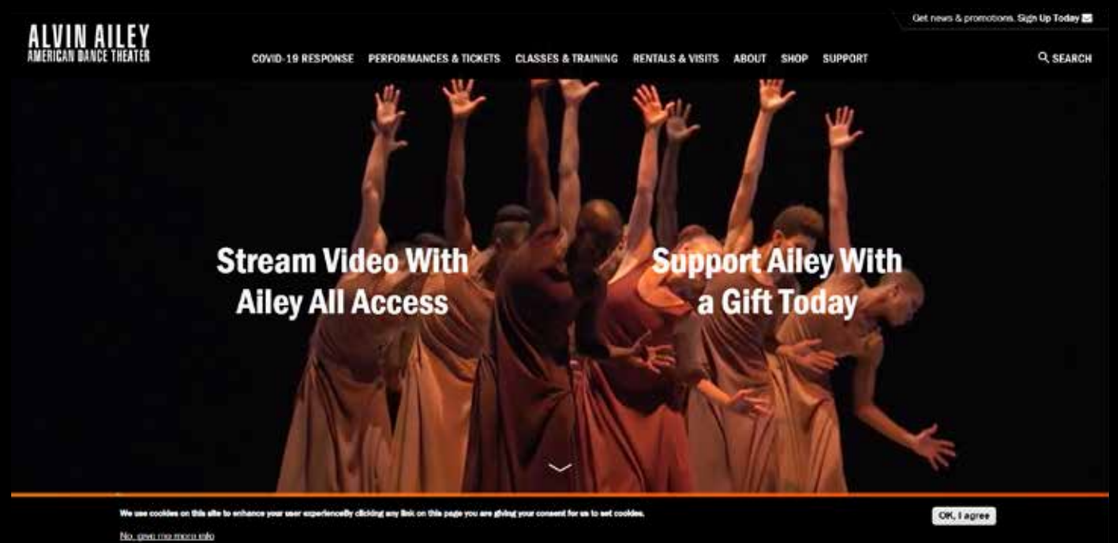
- In the first phase of our research project, we did some background analysis, with both **informational and experiential** sources, to cover topics that broadly surround to the main factors of this project:
  - Understanding how attendees get involved in the theater experience.
  - Figuring out how we might transfer the theater experience online
  - Curating an experience and space that is comfortable and inviting, both online and in person.

- **Our major insights include:**
  - 1. Ensuring that there is comfort for getting people involved and feeling like they can enjoy it is crucial for encouraging engagement with theater experiences and online communities.
  - 2. Recreating in-person, authentic experiences in an online format is difficult, but formats that combine live performances and interactive experiences with pre-recorded sections can create a more engaging experience.
  - 3. Informal video chat-based communication platforms, such as Zoom, are not conducive to engaging performances for many audience members.
  - 4. Crowdsourcing and fundraising efforts in local theaters can lead to longer lasting audience engagement and emotional attachment within a community.
  - 5. One benefit of the online experience is the ability to utilize different technologies to create different angles throughout the experience and curate more intimate environments to craft a unique attendee experience.
  - 6. The social media of the KST reflects their values, beliefs, and their presentations accurately, but is a stark contrast to their website which seems detached from their identity.
  - 7. There is a noticeable increase in the variety of technologies and applications that attendees use to consume content, find and engage with creators and organizations, and to share these experiences with others, as well as the integrated donation formats through these technologies.
  - 8. There is a large increase in the questions about privacy and security with these new technologies and the large shift to online experiences.



A list of our resources: (I = Informational, E = Experiential)

E - Fast Times at Ridgemont High All-Star Table Read Fundraiser
I - National Theatre Live
I - A Comparison of face-to-face and virtual software development teams
I - Kelly Strayhorn Theater's Instagram
I - Strengthening Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in the Arts and Culture Sector for All Los Angeles County Residents
E - American Conservatory Theater during the Pandemic
I - The Professional Performing Arts: Attendance, Patterns and Motives
E - Digital Season of the Sydney Opera House
I - Theater companies are pushing storytelling boundaries with online audiences amid COVID-19
I - 3D Sound and a Zoom Apocalypse: The Plays that Come to Life Online
E - Kelly Strayhorn Theater "Hotline Ring" Virtual Fundraiser
I - Building a digital Girl Army: The cultivation of feminist safe spaces online
I - Q&A With Stanford's Chair of Theater & Performance Studies
I - The Role of Community in Crowdfunding Success: Evidence on Cultural Attributes in Funding Campaigns to "Save the Local Theater"



Alvin Ailey website homepage

An example of findings collected on Miro

THINK ALOUD PROTOCOL

In this phase, we conducted five generative competitive think-aloud studies on the New York-based dance theater, Alvin Ailey, with five individuals that we recruited. We had each participant follow a series of tasks that engaged them in different aspects of Alvin Ailey's site: **an online performance, online Zoom dance class, and their donations page**.

Based on these studies, we discovered several commonalities between subjects. These include the observation of **a general anxiety** around signing up or participating in online activities without clear descriptions, the need for **a degree of personal or emotional connection** to a theater for prolonged engagement, and users' preference to **pay to view online performances** in lieu of traditional donations.

The evidence primarily came from candid conversations with our participants after they had completed each specific task, such as expressing strong opinions on their value of video production quality, their anxiety of participating in online classes, and hesitancy of commiting to monthly donations without a close tie to a theater.

As for takeaway actions, we believe taking steps such as bringing clarity to online events, adding options for theater attendees to connect with the theater on a deeper level, and connecting donations and financial contribution to something the user receives, such as a class or performance.

TAP

Task 1. Register for a live online dance class that fits your schedule on Friday October 23rd.

Task 2. Stream the show "Chroma" by Wayne McGregor.

Task3. Give a one-time $10 donation.

CONTEXTUAL INQUIRY

This phase of research is centered on understanding the deep context in which the problem space sits. To understand what affects the target user group and how to transfer understandings from online communities to the Kelly Strayhorn Theater problem space, we need to immerse ourselves in the user's context. This, in particular, helps us address the "Why?" and "How?" of our research questions:

What makes these online communities inclusive, welcoming, and engaging, and what about them is valuable to their members?

We conducted **four intercept interviews and two artifact analyses** in our research. We had a variety of participants and events that we observed or partook in with the participants that provided a wide range of contexts but also many overlapping pieces of insight:

1. Active interaction between group members creates value in experience.
2. While some degree of selectivity and specificity brings structure to a group, it also presents dangers of toxicity and tribalism.
3. Having shared interests and common focal points aids in open conversation in online communities.
4. Connection and positivity is important in virtual group settings but may not necessarily require active group member interaction/conversation.
5. People enjoy the perks that online or remote communication brings, but realize that there are a unique set of challenges and barriers that detract from meaningful and authentic connection.

CONTEXTUAL INQUIRY

- Introduction (~5 minutes)

Tell me about the event you just attended. Tell me what happened and what you did.
How did you feel during this session?

- Community Engagement (5-10 minutes)

Which factors of your activity, if any, helped build community and encouraged involvement from you?
Were there any parts of this community that encouraged/discouraged you to get involved?
What is valuable about this community to you? How does it bring value into your life?

- Inclusivity & Accessibility (~5 minutes)

Did you have any difficulty with the online platform through which this activity was conducted?
Do you think this activity caused some people to feel like they don't belong?
Do you think any aspect of this event was more difficult for some people to understand or engage with?

- Comparison to Non-Virtual (5-10 minutes)

Were any aspects of this virtual activity missing when compared when it takes place in-person?
What pain points do you experience in trying to connect with others virtually?
How do these pain points differ if the connection was in-person?

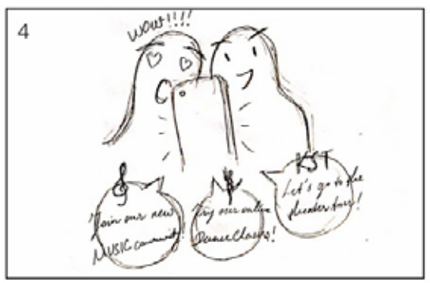
- Final Thoughts (~3 minutes)

Do you have any other thoughts about this topic? About community? About inclusivity in groups?
Do you have any questions for us about this topic or research we are doing?

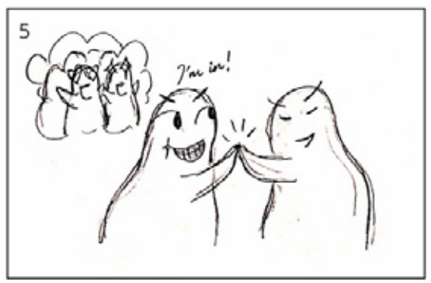
Eric has been quarantined for 3 months due to covid...
--Eric: "It's so boring...what is one way to have fun with some people?"

His roommate, Daniel, suggests a mobile app called "Around You" to Eric.
--Eric: "Daniel, what are you doing?"
--Daniel: "I just found this super cool app. Let me show you!"

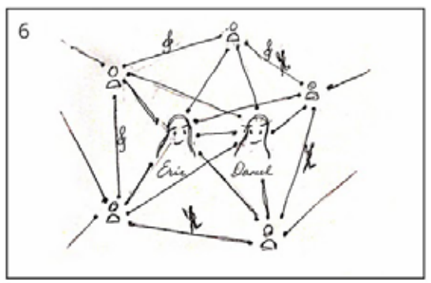
This app connects people to others around them and allows them to build their own communities...
--Daniel: "Look, I just met Kraig, Sarah, and Preethi through this app. I'm surprised they live so close to me!"



Through this app, people can not only find someone who share interests/hobbies with them, but also attend activities/events together...
--Daniel: "Look, I just planned to go to KST with Kraig, Sarah, and Preethi this Saturday...We also planned out some post-show activities."
--Eric: " WOW!!!"

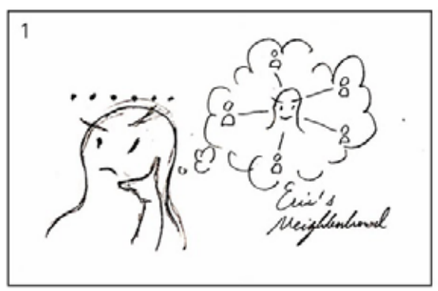


Eric is pleased by this app and wishes to use this app to find and build his communities...
--Eric: "This looks so LIT! Let me download it now so that we can go to KST together!"



With the help of "Around You", a closer bond is formed around Eric and Daniel's community...And the days of quarantine no longer seem dull and boring...

Example Storyboards on "Engagement between Members of the Community"



Eric wanted to know how to get connected with people around him...

He found this thing called "Weekly Community Day"--a new function provided by Zoom that gives a chance to hold weekly Zoom meetings for people in the same community.

Eric attended the Weekly Community Day. He met new people in his community and they had fun conversations together. Eric thought this was a good way to form bonds and connections within the community.

STORYBOARD & SPEED DATING

In this session, we presented storyboards to participants and used the storyboards to provoke conversation surrounding their needs, discovering how potential ideas may address those needs as well as how some ideas and concepts mix into the participants lives. We used leading questions to inquire about the user's needs and asked follow up questions on every storyboard to dive deeper into the background reasons.

In our Speed Dating sessions, several themes became evident. In large consensus, participants:

- Emphasized the need for **similar interests** in the activities they participate in, such as discussion on the last theater performance they attended.
- Showed excitement and desire for structure in these activities and opportunities for engagement, such as **moderation**, **structured conversation**, as well as **smaller group size** and **potential matching** between attendees who have similar interests.
- Were more excited and interested in ideas and activities that were similar to the things that they have done before, such as **group Zoom discussions**, or that were recurring and more familiar.
- Said that **discussion based activities** were highly valuable and interesting, and the activities that were unrelated to connection with other members or the theater performance were confusing, uninteresting and seemed disjointed from the goal of forming community with others.
- Differed in their potential willingness or motivation to participate in these activities, possibly based on their internal introverted- or extroverted-ness.

PROTOTYPE & EVALUATION

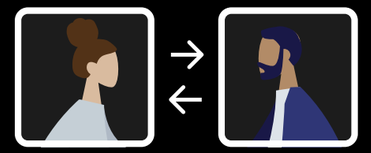
Taking cues from the latent need for social comfort when meeting strangers, we have developed a system for fostering community engagement through the use of focused online group meetings, wherein **each participant is matched up with a "buddy" with mutual interests**. This buddy is intended to act as a social safety net that helps users feel comfortable throughout the discussion and promotes connection.

At the beginning of each group meeting, participants are sent to breakout rooms with their buddy for one-**on-one conversations** with "**conversation cards**" (a Google slide deck with discussion questions based on the shared interests as well as common "low-stakes" questions) to encourage discussion. These questions are entirely optional, and buddies were free to use them as they see fit. After having some time to talk and to get to know each other, buddies are then paired up with another set of buddies for **group discussion** with a new set of conversation cards. There will be a **moderator** who will explain the system, relieve ambiguity, and share the discussion points set for the meeting. The participants will be invited to join an online group (Facebook, Slack) for continued engagement after the meeting.

After prototype sessions with our participants, we felt that the Bodystorming exercise was accurate and matched the fidelity and form of our prototype - we received high-quality feedback from our participants and were able to make changes that fine-tuned and improve the overall experience. If we had another chance to do the experience prototyping, we would aim to have a more representative participant group and focus on the same content and discussion that KST would have, if they implemented this prototype in their own.

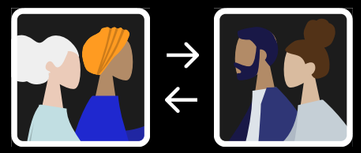
At the beginning and end of each group meeting, participants gather for about 10 minutes for **informal mingling**.

1 ~10 minutes



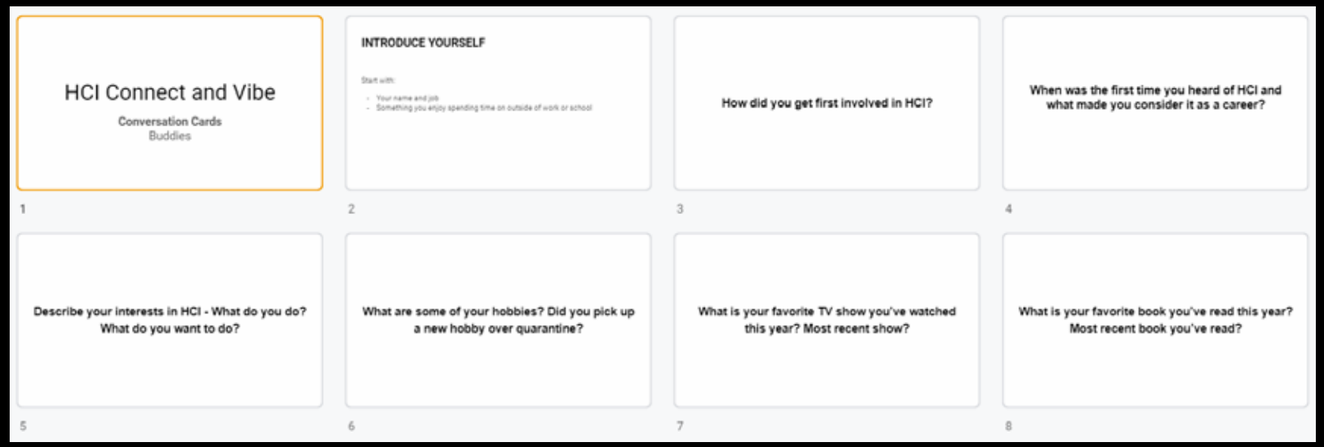
Participants are then sent to breakout rooms with their buddy for **one-on-one conversations** with "conversation cards" to encourage discussion.

2 ~15 minutes



After having some time to talk and to get to know each other, buddies are then paired up with another set of buddies for **group discussion** with a new set of conversation cards.

3 ~15 minutes

▲ Explanation of the "Buddy" System

▼ Google Slide Conversation Cards