

Physical or Virtual? - A Qualitative Inquiry Into Youth Perception and Preference for Safe Spaces

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Abstract

Background

Control measures from the COVID-19 pandemic had far-reaching and multifaceted consequences on the physical and mental health of youths. In particular, youths experienced a lack of safe space to turn to in times of need. Safe spaces, be it physical or virtual, provide social support and connection for youths, which are important for one's mental health.

Methods

We conducted a qualitative study in Singapore to investigate how youths interpreted what safe spaces meant to them and how these spaces positively impacted their wellbeing. 48 youths were purposively recruited and took part in a one-on-one interview over Zoom that lasted between 45 minutes to 60 minutes each. Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed, and data were thematically analysed.

Results

Findings from our study indicated that participants found three different interpretations for what made a space safe for them - namely as an absence of a negative experience, a neutral space where they could just be themselves, or an affirmative place to receive what they need. Youths preferred safe spaces that were physical in nature due to the relational aspects of the space which provided comfort and preferred safe spaces that were virtual in nature due to the logistical benefits of the space which allowed them to expand their social network.

Conclusions

Based on our findings, we propose to address youth mental health not only through schools and families, but adopting multi-sectoral public health approach, using physical and virtual safe spaces as both preventive and therapeutic strategies to address often hidden mental health challenges youth face in Singapore. When designing safe spaces for youths, it is important to consider the medium, content and audience involved to maximise youth engagement and in turn, improve the state of mental wellness for youths.

Background

Situation of Youth mental health globally and in Singapore

Defined by the United Nations (UN) as any young persons between the ages of 15 to 24 ((1), youths can be best understood as experiencing a period of "transition from the dependency of childhood to

adulthood's independence". Within this 10-year time frame, many youths often find themselves experiencing a wide range of emotions and having varying levels of well-being due to them leaving education, finding their first job and experiencing major milestones and losses for the first time such as through deaths or heartbreaks (2).

With the ongoing coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, significant global disruptions have further impacted youths at this crucial point in their lives ((3, 4). Most physical and social activities for youths have been disrupted due to government enforced measures such as social distancing and isolation to control the spread of the virus (5). Globally, some form of nationwide school closure has been implemented by 192 countries since March 2020, affecting over 90% of the global student population (6). Such control measures have far-reaching and multifaceted consequences on the physical and mental health of youths. Prior evidence indicates that children, adolescents, and young adults experience greater vulnerability to social, emotional, and psychological consequences of mass adversity (7, 8). During the COVID-19 pandemic, an increase in depression and anxiety symptoms has been reported in youths globally (9–11). Further disruptions to youth mental and socio-emotional well-being include declining physical activity ((12), increased screen time ((13, 14), poor sleep patterns (15), as well as limited social and physical interactions (16).

In Singapore, students from the age of 7 to 18 were affected from school closure and the halting of after school activities when lockdown measures were in place from April to June 2020 limiting the ability of youths to socialise both within and outside of educational settings (17). This state of physical isolation from peers, teachers, extended family, and other community networks took a toll on the mental health of youths. More than half of the participants in a youth mental health survey in Singapore conducted in October 2021 expressed that they had become more fearful and less sociable because of the pandemic (18). The pandemic had also aggravated suicide-related stressors and led to a spike in youth suicides among 10–29 year olds, with 2021 seeing the highest number of suicides among youths in Singapore since 2000 (19). While the government had announced plans to allocate more resources towards improving youth mental wellbeing (20), more could be done from the ground-up to ensure that the needs of youths are met and that youths in crisis are not left in isolation and struggling with poor mental health.

Safe Spaces and Mental Health Among Youths

Historically, safe spaces were physical places that anyone, particularly individuals who were oppressed, marginalised or victims of violence, could go to for refuge and safety in times of need (21). In recent years, the definition of safe spaces had been broadened to include spaces that provide a nurturing, welcoming and supportive environment for those experiencing psychological distress (22), not merely catering to those who experience physical violence or oppression in schools or at home. In today's context post-pandemic where youths are experiencing various transitions through distressing times, safe spaces provide hope and reassurance for individuals who feel anxious about sensitive and controversial issues that they have a safe avenue to share their thoughts and feelings (23). Having a safe space is even more crucial for youths today as one tangible effect of COVID-19 control measures is the lack of a

safe space for youths to go to in times of need (24). Yet, literature has shown that youths who have a safe space to turn to tend to experience less anxiety, more positive feelings and tend to have a higher level of wellbeing (25).

However, a designated physical space is not sufficient for a space to be considered a safe space. Literature has shown that one of the main factors which makes a space safe lie in the role of social support (26). Youths feel safe in spaces where they are not in isolation and can connect with their family, friends and others in the world, be it tangibly, emotionally or informationally (27). This can be in the form of self-help groups (28), a space for “feelings to be articulated” (29), or simply just a space where youths can form good supportive relationships and “not feel threatened” (30). Context also matters when it comes to how social support is administered. For instance, studies have shown that for indigenous youths who are traditionally taught to not express pain outwardly, a safe space would be one which is separate from other youths and somewhere where they can engage with each other and be free to talk about their trauma openly (31). These studies lend nuances to the concept of safe spaces and social support in differing cultural contexts and thus would be beneficial to explore what this means in the specific context among Singaporean youths.

Recently, safe spaces have emerged as a key ingredient towards helping youths build resilience as part of the mental health recovery process. By being a place where all three human factors which promote mental health recovery - connection, control, and acceptance - can be found (32), safe spaces help address factors which lead to mental health issues such as powerlessness, disconnection and stigma. In Ontario, Canada, youths with mental health issues are involved in the co-design process together with service providers and hospitals to design spaces in which youths can be meaningfully engaged in a bid to reduce youth suicide attempts (33). While there had been attempts at involving youths in the creation of safe spaces, there is a dearth of research about how youths engage with safe spaces in Asia. It is the hope of this study to fill the gap of understanding how safe spaces help Singaporean youths in their mental health recovery process.

Beyond the physical boundaries of a space, virtual spaces on the Internet have also been emerging as spaces in which youths consider to be safe. Literature has shown that the peer interaction happening in the virtual space has helped youths overcome social anxiety and feel comfortable and secure talking about what they have been through without fear of judgement (34). For youths who identify as transgender individuals, emergent evidence suggests that the internet may offer safety, support and community - all factors which constitute safe space (22, 30). Pre-COVID, many platforms (such as www.bigwhitewall.com) have also emerged on the internet claiming to be a “safe online community” for youths (35). In Vietnam, internet interventions have also been proven to be effective when managing youth mental health concerns (36). The convenience of the virtual space has also made online therapy more acceptable to youths and is effective in helping youths in need receive the mental health support they need (34). Yet, while the virtual space has started gaining traction among youths pre-pandemic, it is even more crucial now to understand the preferences among youths for such spaces post-pandemic and the effectiveness of virtual spaces in relation to the mental wellbeing of youths.

Study rationale and objective

Against this backdrop of a dearth of research about safe spaces among Asian youths and mental health related concerns among youths in Singapore, particularly in establishing support and spaces in which youths could turn to in times of need, we developed this study to investigate how youths in Singapore interpreted what safe spaces meant to them and how these safe spaces positively impacted their wellbeing. In particular, traditional notions of safe spaces may no longer be relevant to the hidden needs of today's youths. Thus, it is critical to explore the pressing needs for safe spaces in today's youths and to explore how society at large can address these needs in times where social interactions are limited.

Methods

Study design and sampling

We conducted one-on-one interviews over Zoom with 48 participants that lasted between 45 minutes to 60 minutes each. Participants were recruited via an online flyer that was distributed among the study team's social media platforms including Facebook and Instagram. In addition, the flyer was also published in a Telegram channel titled "SG Research Lobang", which was set up as a space for Singaporean researchers to publish their studies to a pool of 4000 subscribers who were interested to take part in academic research studies. Eligibility criteria were being between 15 to 25 years old and being Singaporean citizens or permanent residents at the point of recruitment. Participants below the age of 21 had to have written parental consent before taking part in the study. Participants were purposively recruited via strata by stage of life categories as follows: secondary school, junior college/pre-university or polytechnic or vocational institute, university, working youths. Within each group, we recruited a diverse range of participants by gender, ethnicity, and housing type.

Data collection

Ethics approval was obtained from the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health Department Ethics Review Committee (Ref. NUS-IRB-2020-450). Eligibility was assessed by asking interested participants to complete a screener questionnaire. All participants aged 21 and above provided documented informed consent, while participants below the age of 21 provided assent with their parents providing informed consent before participating. Each interview was led by a main interviewer with one observer present to take notes for the purpose of recall and supplementing the transcript. Topics covered in the interview included measurements of wellbeing, highlights, and lowlights that participants had experienced in their life and how that affected their wellbeing, exposure to self-harm/suicide, safe spaces, help-seeking behaviours, and coping mechanisms. Specific to safe spaces, youths were asked for examples of what safe spaces were to them, their preferences for virtual or physical spaces as safe spaces and whether safe spaces could increase their sense of wellbeing, and if so, how Singapore could help create more of these safe spaces for youths.

Analysis and reflexivity

Data were analysed by the lead author, adopting Braun and Clarke's six steps of reflexive thematic analysis (TA) (37, 38). Both semantic and latent codes and themes were derived from the data without a pre-existing framework. Following the first two stages of familiarisation and identifying preliminary codes in classic TA, the lead author then noted patterns in what participants described a safe space meant to them. The lead author then reviewed themes with co-authors to ensure that codes and developing themes were authentic to the data generated (39). Next, the lead author continued to code according to TA procedures, creating a thematic map and drawing links between various interpretations of safe space and the factors underpinning them. At this stage, a typology of interpretations of how safe spaces of different mediums contribute to youth wellbeing was developed by grouping themes along two broad axes based on the medium of safe space and perceived benefit of each safe space. All data were organised and analysed using Dedoose Version 9.0.46 (40).

Results

Types of Safe Spaces

Participants highlighted three broad categories of what made a space safe for them (Fig. 1). To the participants, a safe space could either be somewhere that consists of an absence of a negative experience, a neutral space where they could just be themselves, or an affirmative place to receive what they need.

A place where there is an absence of a negative experience

Participants mentioned that a safe space for them is somewhere that is free of judgement, harassment, and discrimination. For instance, one such place would be in the company of trusted friends, where participants feel that what is being disclosed would not be leaked elsewhere.

I think a safe space is where people can come and just mention their worries without feeling like they are being judged and at the same time, there is no serious implication [regarding whatever they say] to the people around them. Somewhere where confidentiality is very important, and people can come to listen with pure intentions... for me my close friends and my boyfriend are a space where I can share what I feel without being judged. (Betty)

This sense of having a space that is free from negative experiences such as judgement and discrimination need not only happen in real life. Participants also felt that if matched with the right person and given the right setting, such a safe space can also be found online.

I feel that a safe space is one where they know that they won't be exposed to any negative factors like discrimination or harassment or any sort of harm in any way, and they can get help from other members as well... this can exist virtually - through video calls or messages, depending on the preference of how they want to tell their issues to other people. (Jerold)

One participant highlighted how such safe spaces can be intentionally created, especially at big events, so that youths who are experiencing mental health struggles have a physical space to go to that is free from judgement, harassment, and discrimination.

I've encountered this a lot in the UK, where at the start of events, people will give an announcement and mention that if you are not comfortable with anything that is being said or presented here, there is a separate room that you can go to at the side of the auditorium that is designated as a safe space. You can go there and no questions will be asked... this shaped my idea of safe space as being a place where people can go if they are uncomfortable with a certain situation, like in a certain social or academic situation. Potentially to be able to extricate themselves from the situation without having any questions asked. (Kenny)

A neutral place to be myself

Participants mentioned a safe space as a place where they could just be themselves and express their thoughts and emotions freely. For some participants, this came in the form of a physical space like their room or their home.

I think it is at night, on my computer and on my bed. At night, because it is so quiet and peaceful and nice. At the computer because I will type out my emotions [in a document] and lock it away and not look at it again. On my bed because I can escape in my own world where I just get to be myself... and it does not involve anyone else. (Celeste)

My home is where I am most comfortable and where I can really be myself. And I mean it's not the same for everyone, for some people home is not a safe space because they have a lot of family conflicts and family issues. But for me, it's a place I can be myself. (Alex)

For others, this safe space to be themselves did not take a physical form. If they were with close family and friends that they trusted, the space was considered safe. Some participants also mentioned community groups that they were a part of, such as their church community which consisted of people they trusted, hence making the space safe for them.

A safe space is where I can share my thoughts, feelings, everything, comfortably and confidently with confidentiality. You know, being able to sort of vent my anger, my sadness, my everything and just be myself... For me it's not really a space, it's more the people I'm around, like my family and friends. (Walter)

My safe space is my church... the environment is very supportive, and it feels like a community and to be among friends my age. I feel like everybody cares for each other and I can be myself. So, I don't feel hesitant if there's something I want to bring up. (Matthew)

An affirmative place to receive what is needed

Another form of safe space is somewhere where youths can go to receive encouragement and seek assistance. Surprisingly, while a couple of youths mentioned such places as the counsellor's office or with

a trusted adult, most youths who interpreted a safe space as such thought of virtual spaces.

The first thing that came to my mind was a space where youths like myself can go to share our troubles in our head. A place where other people can comment on what you type and encourage you, like an online community. (Lara)

I guess I would think of Instagram and YouTube as safe spaces... when you're in a really bad place, you go there, and you just read these comments and you start crying. Like why am I crying? What happened?... When you read people being sweet to you, even though they don't know you, it's very overwhelming and humbling at the same time. (Ilse)

One youth commented that eventually she turned towards virtual spaces to get what she needed because the traditional ways of receiving help such as counselling hotlines were not available to her.

For me, in my dark period, I actually tried looking for helplines. But it was very limited because whenever I have dark thoughts, it is usually late at night... I kept calling but nobody picked up... For me, I feel like a safe space is having someone to talk to when I need it, so eventually I just went to an online forum which was more immediate. (Serene)

Preference for Physical vs Virtual Safe Spaces

Participants were also asked whether they preferred a physical or virtual safe space (summarised in Fig. 2). 34 out of 48 participants (70.83%) preferred a physical space over a virtual space. Among the 14 participants who preferred safe spaces to be virtual, 5 of them mentioned that it was a temporary preference due to COVID-19 restrictions, which made physical spaces less accessible. 3 other participants mentioned that physical spaces and virtual spaces each had their own benefits, but ultimately physical spaces were “safer” due to the relational benefits of physical spaces (such as the ability to read another person’s body language) which virtual spaces lacked.

Based on our analysis of interview transcripts, we generated a list (see Table 1) documenting the preference youths had for each safe space, categorised by the medium of the space (whether it is physical or virtual) and the perceived benefit of the safe space (whether it was due to the relational benefits derived from the space or logistical benefits derived from the format of the space).

Table 1
Summary of four types of perceived benefits of safe spaces interpreted by participants

Medium of Safe Space / Perceived Benefit of Safe Space	Physical	Virtual
Relational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Messages will not be taken out of context ● Ability to read another's body language ● "More intimacy" ● "Greater trust" ● "Less judgement" ● Importance of being able to give and receive physical contact 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Meet new people easily ● Able to connect with overseas support on stigmatised issues ● "Not wanting to impose on friends"
Logistical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Refuge away from home (especially if home is not a safe space) ● Break from usual routine and thought patterns ● "No permanence of message" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Convenience ● Physically safer (at night) ● Able to connect with people at anytime

Preference for physical spaces due to relational benefits

Participants cited the material benefits of being able to relate to another person in the flesh as one of the top reasons why physical spaces are preferred when it comes to choosing a medium for safe space. Of particular concern was how unlike virtual spaces, what was being shared in a physical space will not be taken out of context due to the ability to physically see the listener's body language. Participants also stated how because of the ability to meet another person physically, "no message is lost in translation" which happens in some virtual spaces such as online messaging boards and forums where one has to interpret tone and context from reading text off a screen.

I think it's not possible for everything to be virtual because sometimes it is not easy to express whatever you want to say in terms of text. It is actually easier to say it out. Because you know when verbal information is translated to textual information, there are certain things that are missing, and you don't capture the whole picture of the person's problem. (Betty)

In addition, participants also stated "greater trust", "more intimacy" and "less judgement" as reasons why physical spaces are their preferred choice of safe space. By knowing who is on the receiving end listening to what they have to share, participants felt that they could open up more, especially when it comes to

sensitive issues affecting their emotional wellbeing. Some participants also stated the importance of physical contact, and how being able to physically hug someone is crucial in making them feel safe.

Physical spaces are more intimate. I will give you an example. Let's say you want to confess [your feelings] to someone [you like]. If you confess it through text and confess it face-to-face, it is very different. Through text you can never really tell the intonation, the facial features and how the person reacts. Are you genuine or not? Even if you can hear the person's voice or see a video, it might also be just a front. One of the best things about having physical interactions is that you will be able to hug... I believe that hugging calms a person down and more often than not, we all need a hug. That's why you always see social experiments of people giving hugs on the streets, cause we all go through tough times, and you know, a hug makes it not that bad. (Zikiri)

Preference for physical spaces due to logistical benefits

The logistical benefits of being in a physical space was also what prompted participants to choose physical spaces as their safe space of choice. While physical safe spaces are sometimes said to be "inconvenient" due to the nature of the space usually requiring one to physically leave one's home to enter into it, participants shared that this was actually seen as a plus point, especially if home is not a safe space for them. In particular, participants said that they preferred to leave their homes and go somewhere else because these other physical spaces were a "refuge away from home" for them and could provide a "break from [their] usual routine and thought patterns" so that they will "not get trapped in [their] own thoughts". (Tina)

One participant also shared that unlike virtual spaces where chat logs and transcripts of messages remain even after the conversation is over, physical spaces are safer and more private as there is "no permanence of message" if the conversation was not recorded.

I prefer physical spaces because nothing on the internet is safe at all - even to your closest friends. Once you post a picture or a tweet or an Instagram post, it is going to be there forever... Facebook or Instagram database will still be able to trace it somehow. (Bob)

Preference for virtual spaces due to relational benefits

Those who chose virtual spaces as their preferred medium of safe space cited similar relational benefits that virtual spaces could offer over physical spaces. Majority of participants who preferred virtual spaces enjoyed the lack of physical boundaries that virtual spaces offered - being online meant that participants could meet and interact with those who are overseas, which was limiting for physical spaces. This was especially prominent for participants who felt that they had concerns affecting their wellbeing that were stigmatised locally. These included youths who identified with the LGBTQ + community (which is a minority in Singapore), youths who struggled with alcoholism and did not want their parents to find out in a conservative society like Singapore and youths who wanted to be anonymous because their parents did not know that they were under medication for their mental health conditions.

Youths who preferred virtual spaces also cited “not wanting to impose on [their] friends” as a reason for choosing support from online. A few participants mentioned their friends in real life having problems of their own and felt that they could not hold space for them. One participant shared how she did not want to “pressure others to reply” and wanted to respect her friends’ time.

I do not want to impose on other people. So, if the person replies, then it is of their own accord. I'm not forcing them to reply to me. But if I'm approaching my friends, and say, hey I'm sad, talk to me, then it feels like it's taking away their time without their permission. (June)

Preference for virtual spaces due to logistical benefits

Finally, some participants also chose virtual spaces as their preferred medium of safe space due to logistical benefits such as convenience and physical safety, especially at night. One participant shared that most physical venues are closed at night, and it is easier to turn to online virtual spaces to speak to someone as there is always “someone awake somewhere in the world” (Jerold). Among the 14 participants who preferred safe spaces to be virtual, 5 of them also mentioned that it was a temporary preference due to COVID-19 restrictions, which made physical spaces less accessible.

Discussion

This present study set out to understand how youths interpreted what safe spaces meant to them and how these safe spaces impacted their wellbeing. We found that youths in Singapore interpreted safe spaces in three different ways, namely as an absence of a negative experience, a neutral space where they could just be themselves, or an affirmative place to receive what they need. These interpretations are consistent with recent scholarship that posits that safe spaces are somewhere that youths feel physically safe (22), welcomed and supported emotionally (26).

Our study also illustrates the youth hermeneutical dimension of both physical and virtual environment as safe spaces, particularly through the twin engines of relational and logistical benefits conferred by both mediums. Literature shows that the core characteristic of a physical space is not the physical nature but the focus on social support (26). Our study indicates that the preference for physical spaces is marked by a relational desire for intimacy, trust, and authenticity in the safe space, i.e., the comfort of being able to physically hug another person, read the body language without filter, etc. These experiences of the physical space facilitates authentic connection and the creation of good supportive relationship (30) which contribute to the creation of safe spaces for youths.

Conversely, the preference for virtual spaces stemmed from logistical benefits arising from the nature of virtual spaces, i.e., the convenience and accessibility of virtual spaces that allowed participants to venture out of their otherwise limited (by proximity) social circles. Literature has demonstrated the emergence of virtual spaces as spaces considered to be safe for youth. In particular, it offers safe spaces for youths who may find physical safe spaces less accessible due to mental health concerns (34) or fear of stigma (22, 30). Our findings support existing literature in showing that virtual spaces provided the opportunity

logistically for participants to feel safe interacting with people they would otherwise find it difficult meeting in the flesh, expanding their network to other like-minded individuals around the world or to receive the support that they need (36). Understanding the hermeneutic lens adopted by youths towards safe spaces allows the suitable selection of a medium based on the context of the encounter/gathering, including the relationship of the parties, the reason for the gathering as well as other logistical challenges.

Regardless of the medium, youth participants interpreted that both mediums of spaces allow them a neutral space to be themselves, share their stories and struggles without judgement (absence of a negative experience) and served as an affirmative place for them to receive what they need in the journey ahead (such as encouragement, comfort etc.) (29). However, with the stressors and disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (3–5), most of the participants reported a preference for physical spaces over virtual spaces. The findings of this study reveal that this is partly due to the perception that virtual spaces were seen as a temporary measure during the pandemic. Furthermore, with the disruption to physical and social activities to youths (5), there is a longing for relational benefits such as physical touch and presence due to the isolation caused by social distancing measures.

The findings of this study also have implications on youth mental health awareness, prevention, and promotion. Understanding these preferences provide youth workers, policymakers, and community workers opportunities to propose interventions and strategies that may enable conversations to take place in the safest way possible for youths in need. We recommend that decision makers take into account the 1) medium (i.e. in-person or online), 2) content (i.e. what is the topic discussed?, are youths looking for comfort or to expand their social connections?) and 3) audience (i.e. are the group of youths stigmatised in the local context, are their homes a safe space for them?) when designing safe spaces for youths to ensure appropriate utilisation of the space and meaningful engagement with youths on their mental health journey.

Further, situated against the regional context of exploring youth perceptions in South-east Asia as well as the temporal context of being on the recovery from COVID-19, the implications of the study take on great urgency. Since the interpretation of safe spaces is so deeply cultural and ingrained in one's consciousness of society (31), decision makers are tasked to evaluate the local cultural context in selecting and designing safe spaces for youths. This will differ across various countries in South-east Asia as the cultural dimensions also differ. The nuances captured by the finding will help decision-makers determine the micro-factors for safety in the varying contexts (41). Separately, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought fresh impetus to the need for safe spaces. The notion of safe spaces is no longer restricted to refugees or for victims of physical violence (22). With the stressors of the pandemic, youth participants have expressed a need to feel connected, safe, and heard (24). As the pandemic continues to adversely impact mental health and relational patterns, decision makers will do well to cater sufficient attention to the creation of safe spaces that will buttress the mental health landscape of the youths.

One of the strengths of this article is that it reflects a synthesis of findings through direct conversations via qualitative interviews with youths to understand how youths interpret what safe spaces mean to them. Literature has shown that youths can be meaningfully engaged to design safe spaces (33). Understanding how Asian youths interpret and appropriate safe spaces is an initial step towards the co-creation of safe spaces. Therefore, given the scarcity of research on this topic in the region and the alarming statistics of youth suicide in recent years, this study elucidated the importance of safe spaces for all who are youths in these distressing times – even those who are not evidently exposed to the apparent risks of violence, abuse, bullying and harassment etc. are still seeking for the need for a safe and comfortable space outside of their homes and schools and are looking for greater support to improve their wellbeing. Through a dynamic framework to understand the different benefits of safe spaces (logistical and relational) across various mediums (physical and virtual), the findings of this study provide insights into designing better spaces that could improve youth wellbeing.

However, we are also mindful of several limitations in this study. First, as participants were recruited via social media, the research team has most likely missed out on a segment of youths who were not as digitally-savvy. Next, as much as the authors had tried to achieve an accurate representation of the population through purposive sampling across housing type, age, stage of life, ethnicity etc., there were youth subsets that this study may have missed out on (such as youths with disabilities, gender non-conforming youths, incarcerated youths etc.) which we hope that future studies would be able to explore.

Conclusion

In sum, having a safe space to turn to is closely linked to the state of mental wellness for youths. Regardless of whether these spaces were physical or virtual, youth participants in this study found three different interpretations for what made a space safe for them - namely as an absence of a negative experience, a neutral space where they could just be themselves, or an affirmative place to receive what they need. Both physical and virtual safe spaces are important to youths as youths relate to them in different ways under different circumstances. Considering the recent global spotlight on mental wellbeing in this post-pandemic context, when designing safe spaces for youths, it is important to consider the medium, content and audience involved so as to maximise youth engagement and in turn, improve the state of mental wellness for youths.

Declarations

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Figures

TYPES OF SAFE SPACES

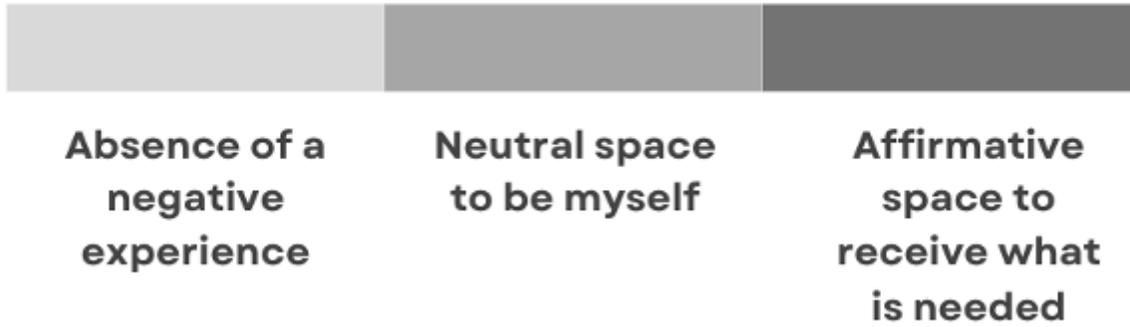


Figure 1

Types of Safe Spaces as interpreted by youths

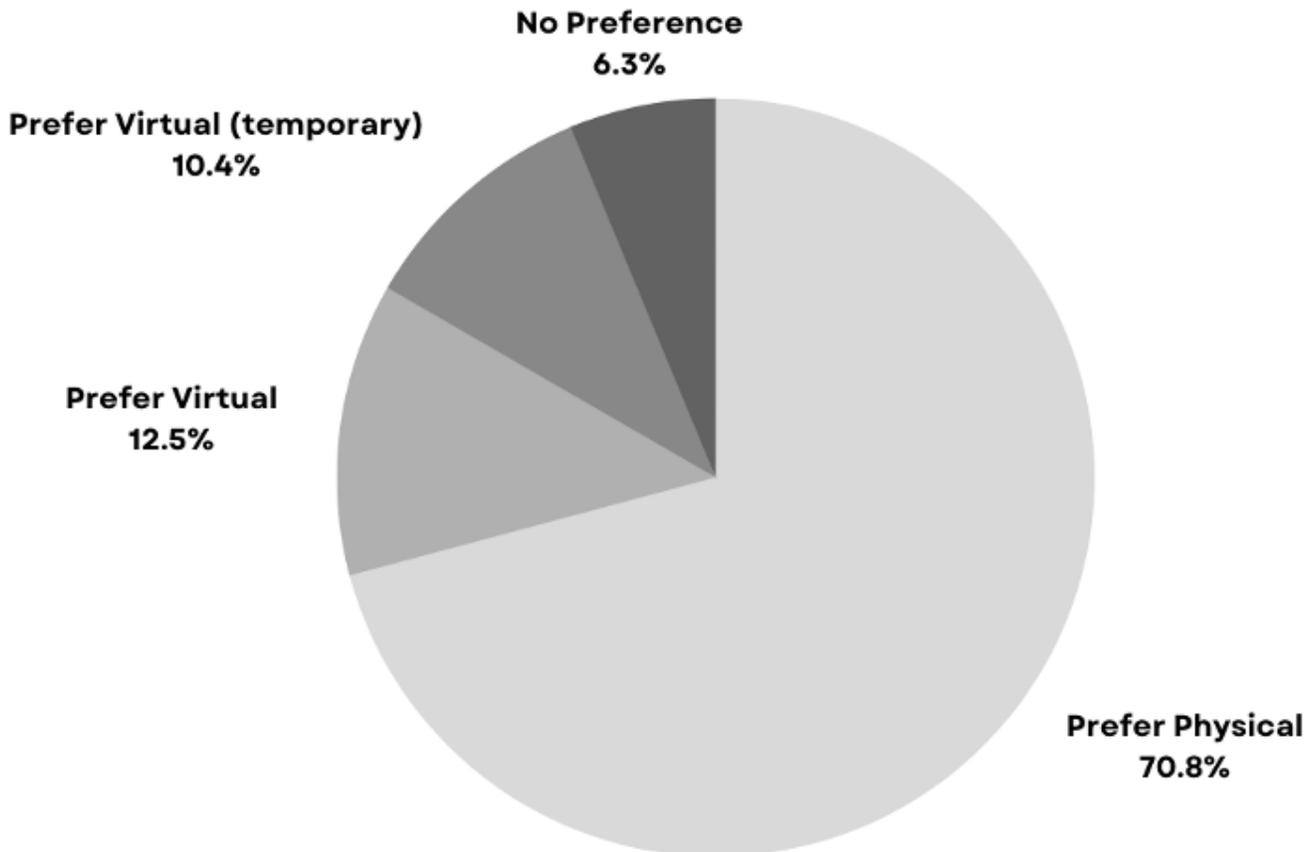


Figure 2

Preferences for Safe Spaces as interpreted by youths