

SUPSI

Design for Wellbeing. An Open Access Toolkit for managing stress and anxiety in performance context

Axis 7 – The role of arts in life and well-being of citizens and their communities

Interview with Vanessa De Luca, joint project director



Tell us briefly about the project, starting with the problem tackled.

The aim of this project is to identify and organize practical strategies for anxiety management and, by using design methodologies make them accessible and sharable.

The project focuses on the positive routines that people can apply in order to improve their self-learning skills on how to handle pre-performance anxiety. By 'anxiety', we mean a multidimensional somatic, behavioural, cognitive and emotional state found particularly in the artistic sector, and which is also a model for many other social and professional contexts. In the performing arts, in the medical, sports and academic sectors, anxiety management is an essential factor for health development and enhancement, and also especially for the quality of a professional performance, at any level.

The problem is not new, and is associated with the challenges generated by a society that is becoming more and more demanding. The pressure exerted by social expectations and by self-judgement impact increasingly on the performers' emotional, psychological and physiological balance. According to the 'World Happiness report 2017', even in Switzerland, one of the happiest countries in the world, one fifth of health problems are related to malfunctions caused by overload, depression or anxiety. The project therefore arose from the idea that some people naturally develop their own strategies for dealing positively with anxiety situations, and that these behaviours, structured and illustrated by means of design, may be useful in many educational and professional contexts. By combining design with the world of performing arts and behavioural studies, the project aims to reach two main objectives:

firstly, design a tool to make accessible and usable an exceptionally rich set of strategies and techniques for managing stress, anxiety and positive emotions can be made accessible and usable. This digital toolkit will be created by a participatory design approach. A second objective consists of identifying future design scenarios that integrate technologies for behavioural health.

We view this project as an opening contribution to the design for wellbeing interdisciplinary research area, aimed at stimulating users experiences and interactions that can improve the quality of life.

What initial results have been obtained?

The project is just at its beginning. According to a very early investigation conducted by means of a number of specifically-designed playing cards, we have identified the macro behavioural



patterns for managing pre-performance stress: these patterns consist of physical practices, social activities and the use of objects and symbols of mediation. This early collection will be extended and refined within the project, and contextualised in the area of the arts. We have already assembled some experiences, by means of the Performance Simulators in both Lugano and London, and thanks to a number of international partners who are working in related research areas.

What are the strong points of the project? And the problems?

One of the project's uniqueness is the methodology adopted. Various design activities make it possible to direct the development of the open access toolkit for self-learning. While the first phase involves the collaboration with a number of schools regarding the identification of best practices, the project phase will be conducted in a participatory manner, or, in other words, together with the users. Then again the structure of an informal knowledge, because, although the topic is powerfully perceived by performers, it is not always included in educational programmes.

Do you remember anything interesting, amusing or unusual that occurred during the project?

I remember the case of a person who, when asked: "Before an important test or performance, what makes you stronger?", replied: "My girlfriend, because she is a psychologist and she always knows how to deal with me."

Could other projects develop from this one?

Definitely, as well as the healthcare and education sectors, a potential direction for future project development would be to explore the technological implementation of this research area in order to identify new design scenarios. In this case, a successful project would require the presence of both aspects: design and user experience.



Apart from you, who else was on the project team?

Working together with me is Aaron Williamon, scientific director and professor at CSI, at the SUPSI Master of Artistic Research and at the London Royal College of Music. The team is interdisciplinary and involves researchers and teaching staff from SUPSI DACD (Laboratory of Visual Culture), DEASS and the affiliate schools ATD and CSI.

Project type: internal SUPSI project

Financing body/ies: internal SUPSI funds

Project partners: Laboratory of Visual Culture (LCV), Department of Business Economics, Health and Social Care (DEASS), Conservatorio della Svizzera italiana, Accademia Teatro Dimitri (ATD), Royal College of Music (RCM).