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# Engaging Offline Communities Online Amid COVID-19: A Case Study of Independent Theaters

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## ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has been detrimental to small businesses like independent theaters that exist to engage with the public offline. Independent theaters across the US have temporarily closed their doors and turned to various technologies to increase their virtual presence and (re)connect with their communities online. We present an investigation into theaters' strategies of 1) attracting existing patrons, 2) encouraging commitment, and 3) fostering contribution in an unforeseen public health crisis where face-to-face interactions are no longer possible. Our results suggest that emphasizing shared identity and relying on technologies to facilitate new forms of interactions that were not available offline are critical to the migration of offline community to online settings.

## INTRODUCTION

Independent movie theaters stand in contrast to multiplex mainstream cinemas as smaller, often historic venues that cultivate and curate films to local close-knit offline communities [6]. These theaters provide a common space for individuals to watch and discuss art house films and commune with fellow patrons who share similar interests [4].

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*CSCW '20 Companion, October 17–21, 2020, Virtual Event, USA*

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ACM ISBN 978-1-4503-8059-1/20/10.

<https://doi.org/10.1145/3406865.3418323>



Figure 1: Interaction on Instagram

Table 1: Discourse Analysis of Exhibitors. Data retrieved on June 19, 2020

State	Region	#COVID-19 Cases	#Theaters
NY	West Coast	386,990	16
CA	East Coast	157,015	28
MI	Midwest	66,497	6

<sup>1</sup><https://www.arthouseconvergence.org/index.php/art-houses-in-north-america/>

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of cinemas in the US, including independent theaters, temporarily closed by mid-March, 2020. Most independent theaters took to their websites or social media platforms to discuss their imminent closures, with the Onyx cinema in Nevada City, California speaking for all cinemas with their sign off, “*We don’t take this decision lightly. We wanted to offer you a respite (...) a place to spend a couple of hours having a new experience, seeing different worlds and perspectives on screen, or simply being entertained*” [8]. With face-to-face engagement currently not an option, independent theaters are in the precarious position of retaining their roles as vectors for culture and entertainment and to sustain their businesses while remaining closed. As such, the existing offline bond-based film patron communities were forced to migrate online with little to no preparation in the context of a public health crisis. Prior CSCW and HCI research has investigated developing online communities based on shared passions and values [7, 9] and offline identities [10], and how online and offline interactions mutually shape each other [1, 2]. However, we have limited knowledge about how online communities that rely on existing offline ties are developed when offline engagement is unavailable, and how technologies can facilitate this process.

This paper contributes insights to the past CSCW research on engaging offline communities online by presenting a case study of how collaborative technologies support (and fail to support) the transition from offline bond-based communities to online settings, while the original offline interactions among individuals and communities are no longer possible due to COVID-19. At the same time, this work aims to shed light on how small businesses, especially those that rely on local communities, can utilize technologies to sustain and thrive during critical and uncertain times and transitions [6].

## METHODS

To understand independent theaters’ use of technologies in engaging with patron communities during COVID-19, we conducted 1) a preliminary discourse analysis and 2) interviews with key informants.

**Preliminary Discourse Analysis.** For the preliminary discourse analysis, we first identified 50 independent cinemas within three US states through the nonprofit Art House Convergence and their database of film exhibitors in North America.<sup>1</sup> New York, California, and Michigan were purposely selected due to their high infection rate in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, their geolocations in different regions within the US, and their above-average number of independent cinemas (see Table 1 for details). We then collected our archive by retrieving news articles, blog posts, and social media presences (i.e., Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram) of each cinema, to identify discourse around the use of technologies and community engagements from March 11, 2020, when the World Health Organization assessed COVID-19 as a pandemic, onward until June 11, 2020.

**Key Informant Interviews.** To understand theaters’ situated use of technologies, we also interviewed key informants, each representing a different independent cinema in the US. We recruited our informants by sending emails to the sampled cinemas, with 5 informants responding in time for

**Table 2: Sample Questions Asked**

- What were the challenges of ramping up or increasing your online engagements?
- What aspects of these new technologies make an engagement successful or not successful?
- Has your work during the pandemic informed how you will use technology to engage with your community going forward?

**Table 3: Strategies Breakdown**

Action	Count
<b>Attracting Members</b>	
Follow social media accounts	22
Sign up for email updates	15
<b>Encouraging Commitment</b>	
Virtual cinema	32
Virtual film festivals	2
<b>Fostering Contribution</b>	
Online Q&A session	15
Post-film discussion forum	6
Virtual watch party	5
Call for donation	5

this work. We asked participants about their experiences relating to collaborative systems and online engagement during COVID-19 (see Table 2 for sample questions). Finally, the collected archive and interview data were then coded to identify major strategies for engaging community members.

### PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

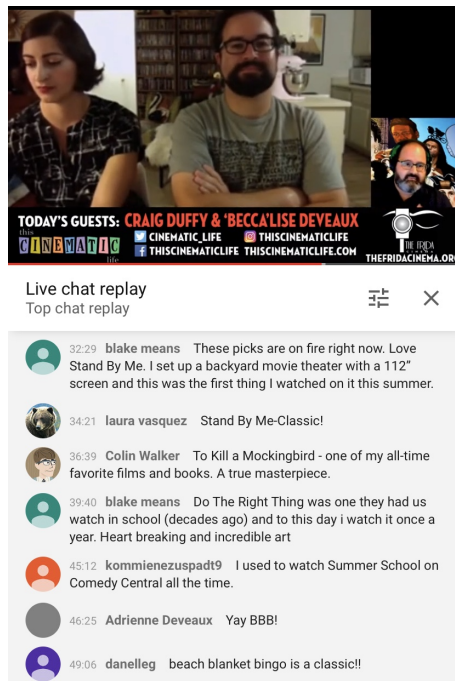
Overall, three major strategies were adopted by independent theaters to engage with the existing patron community online in the hope of retaining solvency amid COVID-19.

**Attracting Members.** Of the 50 independent theaters analyzed, 42 had at least one mention of the COVID-19 pandemic on their online accounts and all 42 theaters made calls to action to their respective communities. To initiate connections with community members, most of these theaters (N=26) extended request-based calls, which serve the purpose of attracting early members of the community based on the common identity and shared goals (see Table 3 for details).

**Encouraging Commitment.** Another major strategy adopted by theaters to foster community members' stickiness to the online community was to distribute content that would have otherwise been accessible offline prior to COVID-19. To achieve this, 32 theaters begun "virtual cinema" collaborations and initiatives made available to their online communities, which allowed community members to rent new and repertory titles for a set rate, with a portion of the proceeds going to the theater. However, the sudden transition to virtual cinemas has received mixed reviews from our participants, with P2 deeming the concept flawed: "*People don't watch our movies through online platforms, it's a whole new way of asking your guests to interact with you.*" All participants suggested that the in-person theatrical experience was unique and could not be replicated online via virtual cinemas. On this end, participants suggested that the concept of virtual cinemas has been perceived by some patrons as functionally similar to streaming services that they are already paying for, like Netflix. Meanwhile, theaters experienced limited time and capacity to offer patrons with a smooth transitional experience. Our participants discussed the problems their patrons have had with the various platforms' user interfaces, with P1 saying the confusion came from "*the fact that every distributor came to us with their own streaming service, and there was no standard operating model.*"

**Fostering Contribution.** We found that theaters fostered community members' contributions by taking advantage of technologies' unique affordances that could not be possible offline. These affordances could enhance retention by way of increasing the community's affective commitment. For example, over half of our participants highlighted the success of post-film Q&A discussion sessions (see Figure 2). Whereas theaters often face difficulties in inviting filmmakers and crew members to attend Q&As offline, online events can feature them regardless of geographic barriers.

Besides post-film Q&A discussion, five theaters organized online watch parties of past titles, in which community members could all begin a film found digitally (on virtual cinemas or other streaming services) at the same time from their homes, with *real-time* group commentary on communication sites



**Figure 2: Live-streaming with interactive comments**

like Zoom, Twitch, or Discord. Such real-time group interaction that was otherwise challenging offline provided a new way for patrons to communicate their opinions and feelings, which can potentially further strengthen the bonds within the community. As one participant suggested, *"the best silver lining [...] during the pandemic is [...] how much our audience appreciates this kind of [real-time] interaction. I think that these kinds of [interactions] will continue to be organized after our doors reopen."*

In addition, participants stressed that the appearance of exclusivity was key to encouraging contribution. P1 said that advertising an event as for the general public would make the event less successful than an event advertised as for *"members only"* since *"they've felt more 'special' and unique [...] [it] presents more obligation to attend."* Taken together, aligning with past findings [3], our results reveal that new forms of interpersonal engagements and the emphasis on exclusive membership in the online settings can effectively foster bond-based contribution among patrons and in turn support the transition from offline to online.

### Conclusion and Next Steps

Our preliminary results illustrate three major strategies adopted by independent theaters to migrate offline close-knit patron communities online in order to mitigate the ongoing disruptions brought about by COVID-19. In comparison to prior CSCW research that investigates purposefully designed online communities (e.g., [1, 2, 9, 10]), our work provides insights into online communities that formed under unforeseen public health crisis circumstances. Our results suggest that when the existing face-to-face interactions that are critical to bond the community are no longer available, simply replicating these offline activities online could not guarantee the successful migration of the community online. Instead, 1) emphasizing shared identity and common interests that community members value and 2) relying on digital technologies' unique affordances to create new forms of interactions, such as real-time commentary and Q&A sessions with filmmakers, can potentially strengthen the bond within the community and thereby encourage community commitment and contribution. That being said, theaters that already have a successful offline community (in terms of size and bond strength) could be further advantaged in sustaining online contributions from the community.

Going forward, our future research will unpack questions that arose. Can theaters sustain online engagement and utilize aspects of the sharing economy and parlay that engagement into offline success [5]? What do theater patrons themselves think of the transition to online settings and how technologies support (and fail to support) this process? More importantly, how could independent theaters and other small businesses benefit from online communities in the post-COVID world? The collaboration between small businesses like independent theaters and their respective communities has never been more significant. The lessons learned in regards to online engagement during this period will continue to inform the future, post-pandemic.

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