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Those who love art, I love them: creative expressive arts as a pathway to belonging and safety for migrants and locals

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Abstract

Migration is increasing while a sense of belonging is threatened within diverse communities. The Social Identity Approach presents a pathway towards belonging, and Allport's Contact Hypothesis outlines necessary conditions for positive contact amongst culturally diverse groups. The present study extends these theories by exploring the impact of creative expressive contact in the development of intercultural shared social identity. Fifteen community members of select Give Something Back to Berlin programs participated in semi-structured interviews and an art activity about their experiences within social inclusion projects which utilize Expressive-Arts. The interviews were analyzed using realist, hybrid deductive inductive Reflexive Thematic Analysis. The projects were found to enable safety, cooperation, and value for community members with creative contact as the tool and medium. These findings suggest two additional conditions of contact for Allport's Hypothesis: consistency and creative approach. These additions could lead to more collaborative "safe" spaces which allow for belonging within diversity.

Keywords Social identity approach · Contact hypothesis · Creative expressive approach · Belonging · Well-being · Social inclusion · Migration · Safe spaces

Migration is increasing and becoming a critical factor shaping social society. In January 2022, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) recorded 108.4 million refugees worldwide, breaking *all* records and determining that 1 in every 78 people had been forced to flee home (2022). In April 2023, the World Development Report stated 184 million people live outside their country of nationality (2023). These statistics signify that culturally, plural communities will continue to emerge and grow. This rise in diversity is matched with a dangerous rise in xenophobia and nationalism (OHCHR, 2023). As migrants enter a new community, their own and their neighbors' beliefs of one another can become distorted by the socio-political world around them. Perceptions can be shaped by narratives claiming migrants are invaluable, or worse, pose a threat to host stability. When intergroup contact is not facilitated in a positive way, division is cultivated. This division strengthens the existing boundary between 'us' and 'them' and results in majority groups dominating the symbolic and/or material resources, contributing to cycles of discrimination and oppression (Simonsen, 2016, p.375).

Migrants already endure an array of acculturative stressors upon displacement, this further division can inhibit them from finding a sense of belonging, which is crucial for individual well-being. Host communities suffer when migrants are unable to socially integrate. Conversely, when migrants can integrate, research shows tremendous benefits for collective society (World Bank, 2023). Therefore, it is imperative that more comprehensive social inclusion programs exist; ones that combat negative narratives around migrants and offer a space for intercultural belonging.

There is a growing body of research which claims Expressive-Arts practices lead to improved health and well-being. Creative Art Therapy has become a popular method in social psychological work with migrants because of its ability to overcome cultural barriers, restore agency, and integrate experiences and emotions (Grzymała-Moszczyńska

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& Różańska-Mglej, 2023; Silove, 2013; Dieterich-Hartwell & Koch, 2017). Creative Art Therapy techniques also promote the fundamental feelings of belonging. As societies struggle to accommodate the rapid increase of migration and intergroup division, could social inclusion programs that utilize creative methods be one answer to fostering a sense of belonging within culturally plural communities? The German non-profit association, Give Something Back to Berlin, is tackling this question. Many of their projects engage migrants and locals together around creative-expressive activities. If organizations like these provide a sense of belonging, they could be instrumental in the curation and maintenance of peaceful, healthy intercultural communities.

The aim of this qualitative research study is to explore if and how social inclusion programs which incorporate Expressive-Arts can provide a sense of belonging through shared social identity and influence well-being. This paper begins with a review of relevant literature, first by defining the need and benefits of belonging. Then, introducing the key theories, and acknowledging a significant gap in the research to introduce the present study.

Need for belonging

The need for belonging is described as the necessity for valuable personal involvement within a larger system (Salami et al., 2019). Belonging brings about positive emotions such as increased self-worth, validation, resilience, and security (Roffey, 2013; Majors, 2012). Researchers claim this need reflects "an innate adaptive tendency that is crucial for survival" (Lambert et al., 2013, p.1418). In other words, our relations are necessary to achieve optimal health and well-being. With an understanding of what is meant by a psychological need for belonging, we can begin to understand its benefits.

First, acquiring a sense of belonging helps to establish meaning in life. Although life's meaning may not *inherently* depend on social connections, in practice it is likely that people do find meaning through their relations with others (Stillman et al., 2009). Research suggests those who are socially rejected enter a state of "cognitive deconstruction", which is marked by a decrease in meaningful thought (Twenge et al., 2003). When we make connections, feelings of inclusion help to avoid episodes of existential dread which have the potential to erode our self-worth and bring about meaninglessness. Social inclusion contributes to a reduction in feelings of subjective uncertainty (Lambert et al., 2013). Roffey (2013) argues that individuals who feel a sense of belonging and connection to others are more likely to cope with adversity and maintain a positive outlook on life. See Appendix 1 for more.

Second, a sense of belonging can unlock a range of curative psychological resources with positive implications for health (Bowe et al., 2020). One notable resource is social capital, defined as the collective gains that come from the expansion of social networks (Woolcock, 1998). This includes access to information and knowledge, influence and power, emotional support, employment opportunities, financial resources, and services. Social capital can help with individual goals, as it grants more stability and the possibility to pursue higher order collective goals through collaboration and support (Lambert et al., 2013; see also Roffey, 2013; Hacking et al., 2006; Haslam et al., 2009; Tajfel, 1978).

Belonging for displaced populations

As migration and displacement increase, the threat of prolonged exclusion for migrants is exacerbated by rises in nationalism and xenophobia. While the need for belonging is universal, displaced populations have potentially more at risk when they are excluded. Although the motivation for migration (i.e., voluntary versus involuntary) has an impact on the resources available, most displaced people endure some levels of acculturative stress. Acculturation is a dual process of psychological and cultural change that occurs as two cultures come in contact (Berry, 2005). Therefore, acculturative stress is the psychological and emotional strain experienced by individuals when encountering or attempting to adapt to a new culture (Berry, 1997). This stress is caused by language barriers, cultural differences, employment and integration barriers, lack of ethnocultural diversity within community organizations and experiences of discrimination (Salami et al., 2019).

The severity of the acculturative stress is heavily related to the attitudes of the host society. Ideally, host societies would welcome migrants, giving access to the necessary resources for integration. However, migrants are often viewed at best as burdensome and at worst as a threat. Negative host attitudes frequently lead to prejudice and discrimination, furthering feelings of social exclusion for migrants (Verkuyten, 2021). Perceived discrimination has numerous consequences for health and wellbeing. It impacts self-worth and can lead to feelings of "shame, anger, distancing, privatizing, and stereotyping, as well as envy, resentment, compassion, contempt, pride, deference, and condescension" (Lamont, 2009, p.152). Not only does this diminish migrants' physical and mental health, but it may shape their attitudes and behaviors towards host communities, promoting division.

While acculturative stress is common for all migrants, there are distinct challenges for those who are forced to

migrate. Involuntary migrants may have additional elements of unhealed traumas, identity loss and homesickness (Dieterich-Hartwell & Koch, 2017). Depending on experience and personal attributes, the burden of trauma may be carried into host communities. Research shows grave trauma can inhibit the five core adaptive systems: safety, attachment, justice, identity role and existential meaning. Silove (2013) explains, "These systems are essential in the process of integration and can hinder an individual's daily well-being as well as their trust and participation in society" (p.1). Involuntary migrants may take on either an adaptive or non-adaptive approach to coping with such trauma. Non-adaptive coping amplifies the acculturative stressors, and if it persists can lead to reactions that are chronic and pathological such as illness or criminal behavior (Grzymała-Moszczyńska & Różańska-Mglej, 2023). The outcomes of such lead to further isolation and long-term suffering.

The loss of social identities that often accompanies forced migration can cause adverse psychological, psychiatric, and social outcomes including a sense of alienation and loss of sense of belonging (Silove, 2013). Hence, before involuntary migrants even begin to attempt integration, they are experiencing an internal loss of belonging. Although homesickness is common amongst all migrants, for those forced to leave the nature of their loss can result in a "nostalgic disorientation and incomprehensible gap" (Dieterich-Hartwell & Koch, 2017, p.2). Even if home is safe to return to, forced migrants can risk losing their legal status if they exit the host country. Therefore, the homesickness experienced by this population can encompass feelings of helplessness and captivity. To counter these difficult feelings, it is crucial for forced migrants to find belonging.

Finding belonging through shared social identity

Belonging through social inclusion is crucial for well-being. The Social Identity Approach (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) argues the pivotal psychological process that connects social relations with health and well-being is meaningful group memberships. This approach describes qualitative changes in cognition, emotion, and behavior when a person self-defines as a group member versus as an individual (Häusser, Junker & van Dick, 2020). The more an individual identifies with a group, the more support they receive and feel compelled to give (Häusser, Junker & van Dick, 2020). Importantly, shared support increases collective efficacy, which is the belief that one's group can overcome challenges due to sufficient resources. A shared social identity will result in stress-buffering through mutual social support and increased collective efficacy (Häusser, Junker & van Dick, 2020).

Jetten and colleagues (2017) have examined the capacity of shared identities to provide psychological resources. Because they can provide meaning, purpose and belonging, shared identities keep us grounded through various identity-relevant challenges and threats. Four types of resources are gained through shared social identity: connection, meaning, social support and agency. Connection elicits trust in others, meaning brings purpose and worth, social support involves both benevolent giving and receiving, and agency refers to collective efficacy and power (Jetten et al., 2017). These resources illustrate both the benefits of acquiring shared social identity and the positive effects of belonging. Recent research has found social identity formation to be crucial for psychosocial development, particularly in migrating adults. Overcoming social identity challenges equips migrants with sociocultural adaptation skills that lead to more authentic social integration (Hu & Cheung, 2024).

Finding belonging in culturally plural settings

As the rise in migration is met with a rise in xenophobia, members of diverse communities face increased obstacles to belonging. Negative narratives about migrants can exacerbate prejudice and the resulting social exclusion can deter migrants from engaging. This raises the question: how can people of different cultures form authentic, harmonious relations in a hostile environment? (Berry, 2005). A possible answer is positive contact, which can reduce prejudice through the development of out-group trust (Christ et al., 2014). The leading theory behind positive intergroup contact is Allport's Contact Hypothesis (1954). Allport explains that when certain conditions are met, contact between those who are culturally different can achieve mutual acceptance (Berry, 2020). These conditions are: equal status, cooperation, common goal and support by social and institutional authorities. If social inclusion projects are aligned with these conditions, positive intercultural contact could combat exclusion and lead to a shared social identity. However, this rarely occurs as the migrant resettlement process is frequently viewed as a one-sided process, not requiring active engagement of host communities.

Arts based approach to well-being

In multicultural settings, individuals can find belonging through a shared social identity developed via positive intergroup contact following Allport's aforementioned conditions. A notable way to create belonging is through shared activity such as Expressive-Arts. Expressive-Arts is any form of creative, artistic, or expressive activity used to provide a means for self-development, exploration, or

connection with others. It is derived from Creative Art Therapy, an approach which utilizes the process of artmaking to improve psychological and social well-being. It typically involves practices of dance/movement, music, art, or drama. While Creative Art Therapy is a reputable form of therapeutic intervention, to label an activity as a 'therapy' requires licensing, thus contributing to barriers for practice and access. For this reason, the present study reframes these techniques and methods as Expressive-Arts.

Expressive-Arts can have a healing and protective effect on mental well-being (Leckey, p.501, 2011). The art-making process can facilitate feelings of relaxation, mindfulness, empowerment, achievement, self-expression, and grant access to the highly beneficial and pleasurable 'flow state' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Huotilainen et al., 2018). Creative expression can allow us to fail then handle negative emotions safely, contributing to the development of a highly useful growth mindset (Huotilainen et al., 2018). It has also been empirically shown to reduce stress, anxiety, and lower blood pressure, all whilst providing a safe, non-verbal way to deal with difficult emotions. These processes may even facilitate interaction of mind and body and stimulate the growth of new neuron networks in the brain (Caddy et al., 2012). This means learning and therapeutic change can rewire our brain and have meaningful, long-lasting effects on our quality of life (Huotilainen et al., 2018).

Expressive-arts for displaced populations

Expressive-Arts can be a highly effective tool for those adapting to new environments because of its ability to reach people regardless of cultural backgrounds (Dieterich-Hartwell & Koch, 2017). This is due largely to its independence from language. Language barriers contribute to significant misunderstandings and isolation for migrants. Expressive-Arts presents an escape from this acculturative burden. According to psychotherapist Dokter (1998), creative expression also helps to maintain cultural identity, especially in circumstances where some of this identity may be lost or in conflict with the dominant culture. This is especially beneficial when considering the maintenance of heritage identity which is a vital aspect to achieve integration (Berry, 2005). These activities have gained attention in therapy settings due to their advantage of bypassing the limitations of verbal expression, paving the way to more culturally sensitive practices (Scott & Williams, 2024). Recent research claims that Expressive-Arts can foster intercultural sensitivity, empathy and social bonding faster than other methods. Allowing migrants to become leaders and knowledge holders in the expression of their cultural identities in a detailed and transformative way (MacFarlane et al., 2024).

For involuntary migrants, Expressive-Arts has the potential to: integrate experiences and emotions, reconstruct lost identities, encourage hope, restore agency, and allow dilemmas and complex experiences to be articulated (Grzymała-Moszczyńska & Różańska-Mglej, 2023; Silove, 2013). The process and outcomes of Expressive-Arts can reveal to host communities the forced migrants' capacity for meaningful contribution (Grzymała-Moszczyńska & Różańska-Mglej, 2023, p.23). This can help to alter the negative narrative of migrants upheld in many societies. Expressive-Arts can also combat homesickness. As previously mentioned, while feelings of homesickness impact all migrants, involuntary migrants experience feelings of longing coupled with fear, doubt, and ambiguity. Expressive-Arts have been described to act as a "temporary home" for forced migrants, one which they construct themselves and which protects them against aversive environmental conditions (Dieterich-Hartwell & Koch, 2017). The process of creative expression, as well as the end product, offer protection and agency for involuntary migrants.

Present study

In summary, belonging through social inclusion is crucial for well-being and is acquired through shared identity. Positive intergroup contact can be achieved following Allport's conditions and is exceptionally valuable in multicultural settings. Participation in Expressive-Arts has numerous positive health outcomes and can serve as a tool for displaced populations to cope with new surroundings. As global migration increases, there is a need to establish avenues for successful social integration within culturally pluralistic communities. There is abundant research on the benefits of shared identity and intergroup contact for the reduction of prejudice, and for the health benefits of Expressive-Arts. However, there is a gap in understanding how Expressive-Arts can be used as a contact method to form shared social identity across cultures. Here we ask, could an Expressive-Arts approach to intercultural contact help cultivate shared social identity and improve both migrant and locals' well-being?

The overall aim of this study is to explore how social inclusion programs which incorporate Expressive-Arts can influence belonging for participants of diverse cultural and migration backgrounds. This was done through 15 semi-structured interviews and an art activity with community members of Give Something Back to Berlin's (GSBTB) Open Music School (Music-School) program and Open Art Space (Art-Space) project. First, the study aims to explore the feeling of belonging with Music-School and Art-Space. Second, it aims to explore the impact of belonging on individual well-being. And finally, it explores the impact of

creative expressive intergroup contact on individual belonging and well-being.

Method

Design

The present study was conducted through a one-hour, semi-structured interview and art activity with 15 community members of GSBTB. The research question and aims were co-designed with the GSBTB team. The interviews were analyzed using realist, deductive and inductive Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

Data collection context: GSBTB and Berlin

GSBTB has five programs, each hosting several weekly, free volunteer-run projects to nurture spaces where new and established Berliners can work together to foster individual and collective creativity (Who we are, 2022). The present study recruited community members from Music-School and Art-Space. GSBTB maintains a non-hierarchical approach positioning all as community members instead of volunteers or participants. Although volunteers have assigned tasks, the nature of the work requires mutual skill sharing, hence the line between the two is heavily blurred.

There were several instances in the interviews where Berlin came up as an undesirable environment for forming sustainable, reliable relationships due to its individualistic, transient nature and harsh winter climate. As this analysis is done through Reflexive Thematic Analysis, it is important to highlight the conditions of Berlin as it forms the context which impacts all data.

Table 1 Co-researcher information

#	Project	Time	Subgroup, Origin	Gender, Age	Time in Berlin
0	Music	6 yr	Voluntary, New Zealand	Male, 38	6.5 yr
1	Art	4 yr	Involuntary, Syria	Female, 60s	4 yr
2	Art	1 yr	Involuntary, Ukraine	Female, 20s	1.25 yr
3	Art	6 yr	Involuntary, Iraq	Female, 23	10 yr
4	Art/Music	7 mon	Involuntary, Ukraine	Female, 19	1 yr
5	Music	4 yr	Voluntary, Spain	Female, 40s	14 yr
6	Art/Music	5 yr	Voluntary, Ireland	Female, 31	6 yr
7	Music	8 mon	German native	Female, 50s	20 yr
8	Art	1 yr	Voluntary, Canada	Female, 34	5 yr
9	Music	1 yr	Voluntary, Spain	Male, 30s	6.5 yr
10	Art	6 mon	Voluntary, Poland	Male, 18	6 mon
11	Art	1.3 yr	Voluntary, Georgia	Female, 20s	1.7 yr
12	Music	1.3 yr	German native	Male, 30s	10 yr
13	Music	1 yr	German native	Male, 30	3 yr
14	Music	6 mon	German native	Female, 21	21 yr

Co-researchers

Each co-researcher had participated in either Music-School, Art-Space, or both, for a minimum of six months to maximum of six years. Co-researchers have at least B1 English, with the ability to communicate personal experiences and emotions. There are ten females and five males, ranging in age from 18 to mid-60s. Co-researchers were identified as belonging to one of three sub-groups: German born native ($n=4$), involuntarily migrant ($n=4$) or voluntarily migrant ($n=7$), see Table 1. Distinction between volunteer and participant status was deemed irrelevant due to GSBTB's organizational structure and the research aims. This sample size is sufficient as it allows for a relatively even distribution of sub-group membership whilst being representative of GSBTB demographics.

The recruitment and interview procedures were consistent for all three sub-groups. As the study was designed in collaboration with the GSBTB team, program managers had an active voice in review of the study materials as well as the co-researcher selection process. Initial contact with the co-researchers occurred through the managers. Managers explained the aim of the study, benefits and requirements of participation and allowed the potential co-researcher time to consider. Once confirmation was received, the first author contacted the co-researcher via text messaging to coordinate interview times and sent a digital copy of the Participant Information Sheet, Ethical Consent Form and Research Privacy Notice.

Positionality statement

The first author is a 27-year-old, white woman born and raised in the United States currently residing in Berlin for less than a year as a voluntary migrant. Although she operated as an independent researcher during data collection, she was an intern and active community member of GSBTB's programs for six months prior to data collection and continues to be active post-research. All three authors hold liberal political beliefs and would be considered relatively middle class. It is important to acknowledge our engagement with the data is through the lens of our social, cultural, political, and ideological positionings (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

Procedure

This study consisted of one-hour semi-structured interviews, with each co-researcher interviewed only once. Interviews were held in one of GSBTB's Project Spaces; either where the projects themselves occurred or in a spare GSBTB art room within the same building. The interview followed an interview guide and included an arts activity (Table 2).

Upon arrival, co-researchers were given hard copies of Participant Information Sheet, Ethical Consent Form and Research Privacy Notice and asked to sign the Ethical Consent Form. A brief introduction included: thanking the co-researcher, reminding them they may stop the interview at any time and the first author emphasized that she was no longer an intern for GSBTB. The aim of the study was repeated, stressing that although there was an overarching

Table 2 Artwork description

Co-Researcher	Art Description
0	The bottom left corner of the page has brown, blue and green diagonal stripes. The word "Herman Platz" is written across in brown. The top right corner of the page there are bright, wiggling lines of pink, orange, yellow and green. The letters "OMS", for Open Music School, are written across. Materials: pastel, crayon
1	On the left side there is a tree, with large branches stretching across the top of the page. The branches have many leaves and colorful circles. Below the branches there are four houses in different colors, followed by two more small trees. Materials: marker
2	In the center of the page, there is an abstract cloud shape sketched in light blue. Inside the shape there is a blend of pink, yellow and blue colors. The shape is surrounded by pink and orange stripes radiating outwards. Materials: crayon and colored pencil
3	In the center of the page, there is an outline of a human torso and chest. In the center of the chest, there is a green opening through which green and red flowers and plants are growing outwards. Materials: crayon, marker, pen, color pencil
4	A small cylinder scene, with five people playing various instruments. The people are sitting or standing surrounded by artwork and are contained in a small space, filled with many different colors. The page is cut around the scene, mimicking the shape of the space. Materials: color pencil, scissors
5	In the center of the page, there are six human-like figures made of many different yellow, blue and red layers melting down to the bottom of the page. There are three large squares above the figures and many wiggling lines of blue, green, orange and yellow filling the page. Materials: pencil, pen, marker, watercolor paint
6	Abstract shapes originating from the edges of the page, in various colors, stretch across and overlap one another. They almost resemble hands and are all different sizes. Materials: pastel
7	The entire page is covered in pink, red, orange and yellow circles of different sizes. There are paint splatters in green, blue and gold glitter. Materials: watercolor paint, glitter
8	Two sides of the page have pink and orange shapes consisting of consecutive lines. Some shapes resemble leaves or waves, interacting with one another. The center of the page is empty. Materials: marker
9	The upper left corner of the page has a brown torso and head figure, with six pink dots on the face. The upper half of the page is covered in blocks of yellow, pink, green, brown, blue and orange shapes. The bottom half of the page is empty. Materials: watercolor paint, crayon, marker
10	There is a large, oval table in the center of the page surrounded by eleven black stick figures of various sizes and appearance. Surrounded by the table and figures there are fourteen wiggling lines in various colors, pointing towards the table and away from the table. Materials: marker
11	The page is covered in squares, rectangles, circles and squiggles in various colors. Each shape is colored in and some overlap one another. Materials: watercolor paint, acrylic paint, marker
12	In the left, center of the page there are 9 figures surrounding a rectangle. All the figures have the arms stretched above their heads. The three in the center are blue, red and green, above their heads there are yellow lines pointed downwards, like a spotlight. The corners of the page are black and green. Materials: watercolor paint
13	In the center of the page there is a black table with a red keyboard on top. The table is surrounded by two figures, and the table and futures are underneath a blue and green structure resembling walls and a roof. Materials: acrylic paint
14	The entirety of the page is covered in streaks, shapes and lines of different colors. There are paint splatters and various markings throughout. Materials: watercolor and acrylic paint

goal, the conversation was meant to focus on their personal experiences. After verbal consent of the audio recording was granted, interviews were recorded on an iPhone, with data turned off to ensure privacy.

The first half of the interview, usually around 30–40 min, followed the interview guide. Afterwards, co-researchers were asked to create a piece of art. They were then given one A3, 11.7 by 16.5 cm sheet of sketch paper and art materials and encouraged to create a visual representation of something which resonated with them during the interview. This activity lasted between 10 and 20 min. The product of the art activity is not analyzed, as the purpose was to enable co-researchers to become more comfortable and engage, reflect, or respond on a deeper level. It was included as a "participatory act" to allow meanings that are difficult to articulate due to limits of spoken language (Walsh et al., 2013; Brailas, 2020; van der Vaart, van Haven & Huigen, 2018). Shortly after participation, co-researchers were sent the Debrief Form.

Analytical approach

This study was conducted using Reflexive Thematic Analysis, an approach that entails a real sense of "dwelling with the data" (Ho et al., 2017, p.1760). With this approach, researchers identify codes and then *through* these codes develop themes, and possibly sub-themes. Coding is not a "mechanical" task for uncovering preconceived themes, but is instead a *process* which demands time, creativity, and deep engagement (Braun & Clarke, 2020, p.5). The themes represent patterns of meaning from within the data set which relate to the research question. Researchers embrace six phases of data immersion, described to be unstructured and organic, which result in a thoughtful analysis.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis can be conducted through a variety, or even combination, of orientations. The present study begins by drawing on theory, a deductive orientation, and then relies on data, an inductive orientation. Considering study aims to unveil realities that are current and existent, it takes on a realist approach. Theoretically, the study relies on Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Approach which seeks to explore the connection between social relations and well-being. Given that the aim is to explore the impact of creative social inclusion projects on community members' belonging and well-being, this theoretical approach is highly suitable. The study also relies on Allport's (1954) Contact Hypothesis, which is suitable due to the intercultural nature and organizational goals of the research context. This approach was essential for addressing the research questions, as it allowed for exploration of individual experiences while also allowing codes to be data driven (Bowe et al., 2020).

Reflexive Thematic Analysis is a philosophically and structurally unique approach. There are several distinct reasons for its selection for this study. First, it recognizes researcher subjectivity as a resource for knowledge production rather than a threat to credibility (Braun & Clarke, 2020, p.7). This is important because of the first author's personal connections to the context and co-researchers. Reflexive Thematic Analysis also allows for creativity and engagement which results in complex themes which could not be anticipated prior to analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020, p.5). This means the analysis will more accurately represent the perspectives of the co-researchers and raise their voices instead of placing assumptions before lived experience.

Analysis

Data were analyzed using a six step Reflexive Thematic Analysis (as described by Braun & Clarke, 2006). **Phase 1 Data Familiarization**: Interviews were transcribed verbatim through the caption function of private YouTube then edited. **Phase 2 Code Generating**: Transcripts were combed for anything related to the research questions. Instances were assigned a code according to the first author's understanding of the statement's meaning. **Phase 3 Initial Theme Generating**: All codes were collected and examined for similarities. The initial theme generation captured patterns of meaning and resulted in seven themes, each with three to four subthemes. Themes were then checked against codes. This process revealed a significant overlap across the themes. **Phase 4 Theme Development and Review**: Upon review, the initial themes were rejected as topic summaries instead of a comprehensive theme. Then the themes were written in the voice of the co-researchers. Returning to the transcriptions was useful at this stage. **Phase 5 Theme Naming and Defining**: Theme names were constructed to concisely define the statement. For example, "I feel safe in this space" means the codes within this theme represent the concept of "Safe Space". Upon completion there were four themes, two with three subthemes and two with four subthemes. **Phase 6 Report Writing**: A thematic map revealed that the connections between subthemes did not disrupt the main themes, and excerpts and small in-text quotations were pulled from the interviews. The final analysis contains four themes with three subthemes each.

Results

Four themes were developed from the data. They demonstrate that within GSBTB's Music-School and Art-Space projects there is (a) a sense of safety and comfort, (b)

cooperation amongst community members, (c) valuable social support being exchanged, and (d) a sense that Expressive-Arts acts as both a useful tool and medium.

Theme 1: I am safe in this space

This first theme explores the question "What makes this space safe?" and illustrates a sense of comfort, inclusivity, and positive relations. The below quotes introduce important features of safety for community members' belonging.

> Just having a space where people can show up as they are and be creative however they want to be and feel safe doing it and maybe even connecting with people while doing it and just *being*. Yeah, I think, I think we all have creativity flowing through us and we don't always have the opportunity or almost like the *permission* to let that flow externally -um and so I really like that magic of Art-Space. (8, Art-Space, voluntary migrant)
>
> It's very open for everybody and it's very good because it's like uh refugees, people who can't find like a place to belong in uh Germany, in Berlin, yet they can come there and, like everybody, like nobody will say that they're not happy to see you; they *will* be happy to see you. (4, Art-Space/Music-School, involuntary migrant)

Co-researcher 8 discusses the allowance of creative freedom, illustrating a sense of agency which the projects aim to restore. Co-researcher 4 echoes this sentiment through its 'openness' but highlights the importance of safety for refugees who may struggle to find safety elsewhere, highlighting that safe space has different significance for the different subgroups.

Subtheme 1.1: Protection and comfort

This subtheme describes the sense of protection from outside stressors and feelings of calmness, warmth, relaxation, and peace.

> Yeah here– so I and I forgot everything about outside when, I was, I'm here. I forgot everything *everything*. (1, Art-Space, involuntary migrant)

Co-researcher 1 denotes a clear distinction of 'outside' and 'here'. The space acts as a boundary, as well as an escape. Within the project, co-researchers report feeling "comfortable" (3), and "really warm and like protective" (2). For some, this allows them to "push aside the workday" (8), but for others this means rest from acculturative stress.

> I don't feel home [in Berlin]. Like it's nice, it's really nice, but I don't feel home. Like I always like those eight years, I always felt like I'm like someone new walking around like everything is new for me, everything. Even the air is different. (3, Art-Space, involuntary migrant)

The barrier between 'outside' and 'here' is especially important when considering the feelings of exclusion which 'outside' may present to migrants, as illustrated above. Despite years living in Berlin a lack of belonging persists and access to a safe space is crucial.

Subtheme 1.2: Unconditional acceptance

Co-researchers reported low expectations on emotional states, attendance, and skill improvement. They also reported feeling no judgment because of cultural background, age, or skill level. Below, co-researcher 2 explains how the flexibility of attendance and allowance to "just chill" is beneficial. Even just knowing the space "exists somewhere" can elicit a sense of safety.

> Just like really nice to know that for example if I have too much going on in my life and I can't, like, handle it and I don't have time to come here like I can let myself go and don't come. And then, I can come spontaneously, and it will be totally fine. And so it's really recognized to bear in mind just this subconscious idea that 'Yes, it exists somewhere' and at some point of time when [community members] really need and they really want– I can come back but like it's not pressured and it's not mandatory […] sometimes it's very helpful and super nice just to come and not even paint something but just to sit and chill. (2, Art-Space, involuntary migrant)

The projects "allows [one] to be whatever at the moment" (2) placing no pressure on emotional state. A co-researcher from Art-Space explains, "I never feel, I'm never really feeling poorly or judged or like I haven't done enough" (10). Skill level or improvement is also not a defining factor or requirement towards participation. One co-researcher reflects while she's "sometimes in, sometimes out, but I still feel a part of the Art-Space" (11). Despite the absence a sense of belonging and identity remains due to the low pressure of expectation.

There is also no judgment on the basis of cultural background, "What is their background, no matter what is their culture, their religion […] It's a safe place, like calm place to bring people together and to make arts" (3). This absence of judgment illustrates both acceptance and inclusivity. These

notions are important for all but especially for migrants, as much of the acculturative experience involves feeling they must prove their value and contributions.

Subtheme 1.3: Sense of attachments

This subtheme addresses feelings of attachment which are both made possible because of and contribute to feelings of safety. While the depth of the attachments varied by personal experience and definition, many participants spoke of a genuine sense of mutual care.

> The last jam session we had with them I, I actually was super vulnerable. There's something beautiful about making music with other people, especially always with the same group like we get to know each other better and better with every session and sometimes we'd also go out for beers […] They give me such a family feeling and it's, I I'm always so happy when I see them and I feel super comfortable with them and […] we give each other so beautiful feedback and uh compliments and we boost each other and it's such a beautiful environment to grow that and to build that with people. (14, Music-School, German native)

Co-researcher 14 participated in a band coaching project, which required weekly attendance for collaboration on a song later showcased at a Social Performance Night. Her experience demonstrates the depth of attachments which can be accessed through creative "safe" spaces. The attachments encourage vulnerability, growth and elicit a "family feeling". A co-researcher from Art-Space expressed similar references to attachment, "I feel that this is my, my home and I'm attached to everybody here yeah and I feel [Program Manager] is like my daughter" (1).

However, other conversations highlighted qualities such as: care, respect, hospitable, close "enough" relationships (4). These attachments follow the group-membership pathway with co-researchers bonding due to shared interests, as illustrated below.

> I don't think [the guitar teachers] like hang out outside of this […] Don't need to, right? […] Maybe they're not friends but they're like, they somehow– there's this mutual respect of like we're both doing the same thing probably have different reasons for it maybe but at the end we're still like, we're like having a similar influence" (0, Music-School, voluntary migrant).

The attachments accessible to community members may vary in purpose, however, they represent a sense of trust in others. This sense of trust is comparable to Jetten et al. (2017) psychological resource of connection, which is found via a shared social identity.

Theme 2: We create this space, together

The second theme explores the question "How is this space created?". This theme examines role and responsibility, as well as cooperation. It demonstrates how the feeling of safety from theme 1 is made possible only because of member synergy. This synergy is captured in the below quote.

> I like the, the here, the soul of shareness and uh friends that they have the same hobby - not the same same hobby but art. Who loves art: I love them […] I like too that they can teach us- that one can teach the other 'yeah do this, you can do this'. […] So I find here everybody is ready to to teach. (1, Art-Space, involuntary migrant)

Co-researcher 1 showcases the potential of 'sharedness' to create social identity in creative settings and demonstrates how mutual social support can impact individual experience.

Subtheme 2.1: Mutual understanding and engagement

There is a mutual understanding of project aims and of the necessary engagement to collectively achieve such aims. While art making is the common activity, the common goal is safety. Community members enact shared norms through practicing the proscribed attitudes and behaviors, and by 'giving something back'. They understand they are 'giving' because, in return, they 'receive'.

> I feel responsible too about the space and the agreement without giving any label on me and I try out to take part in the cleaning or something, but it's not about that 'I have this task' it's just about how I feel - I feel responsible! [laughs] (11, Art-Space, voluntary migrant).

Co-researchers feel they have a role which contributes to the maintenance of the space. They explain it is the community members themselves who create the space; without the people the space would be an empty building.

> You're just like staying there and you're creating the space, like people are the most part of the space. (4, Art-Space, involuntary migrant)

When discussing role and identity, co-researchers used terms such as "facilitator, kind of like holder of space" (6), "a space contributor" (8), "a co-creator" (10), "an important

part of the project" (3). This reflects not only a sense of equality, collaboration and meaning but "some sort of ownership" (10).

> And people *care* […] when somebody's going towards the bathroom or the kitchen, right like, and they bring water it's not like they're bringing the clean, like the clean water to themselves only– they're bringing it to everybody. And when you stand up its kind of natural that you ask whether okay I'm bringing myself cookies "Anybody else cookies?" Right? This sort of "Okay, we're in this together" like we're all doing our own thing but um I might as well bring another tea and I feel very welcomed, and I felt very welcome the first time. (10, Art-Space, voluntary migrant)

The above quote exemplifies both this mutual understanding and engagement, inferring solidarity amongst community members. The spaces are sustained through engagement of space creation and, therefore, a shared understanding of the accepted behaviors or norms of the space. This subtheme embodies norm enactment which can indicate a shared identity. Even in the outlier case, where the co-researcher did not feel close attachments or social fulfillment, he reported "I don't know about the others but um after the classes I develop a feeling that I have to actually give something back" (9). The identity 'community member' comes with an understanding of shared norms towards mutual support.

Subtheme 2.2: Reliability

Although consistency was not anticipated to be a main contributor towards a sense of cooperation, it was heavily recurring across interviews. This subtheme addresses the importance of trust amongst community members, established through a reliable schedule and company.

> I find, myself, living in this city it can be really hard to maintain friendships […] You're more motivated when there's an activity […] There's these consistent times where something specific is happening and people are welcome to come, and that thing is happening the same– like the same time every week and a lot of the same people come back every week. So, it's this consistency, um and people and activity altogether that that just makes it easier to form those communities because […] its regular and it's consistent, it's reliable. (6, Art-Space/Music-School, voluntary migrant)

As illustrated above, co-researchers regard the context of Berlin as an inhibiting factor for forming sustainable social relations. Even the German native co-researchers expressed great difficulty in finding reliable networks. The framework of the projects gives clear and stable expectations. Co-researchers report that knowing each week they will see familiar faces, built reliability. These shared feelings of reliability represent trust in others and the space. In the only outlier case, a lack of consistency was reported as the defining factor in why the co-researcher did not feel a sense of connection.

> And then next time not everybody is back there from the last time […] I couldn't believe how many different people I got to see, not *got to know* […] There was no bond so to say [because of] those two factors. First of all different people everyday, also everyone says goodbye and that's it. (9, Music-School, voluntary migrant)

Subtheme 2.3: Common goal

As mentioned in subtheme 2.1, the common goal is safety. The mutual agreement towards this goal influences community members' behaviors towards one another.

> [Co-researcher is describing an almost negative encounter with a new, older German community member] I remember I was like a bit [mimics being scared] like because I said something and the way [he] answer […] It came like some kind of a stereotypes to my [mind] and I was almost going to react differently but then somehow it was like a "Come on we're here! That person is sure super nice, he has understood me wrong" and then I completely switched, and he was nice, he was super nice! And I think it's because we are there and everybody knows that what means being there, he knows that too, I'm sure. (5, Music-School, voluntary migrant)

The above quote emphasizes that community members feel a responsibility to lean into a shared identity and abide by certain attitudes. In this space it is "we", and here we are "nice". Co-researcher 14 of the Music-School band coaching reflects their goal "was more than just that performance, we all knew that it's not we're not going to aim for this performance we're actually going to aim for creating a safe space to all get along" (14). The common goal stretched far beyond creating artwork or perfecting a chord, co-researchers spoke instead of a collective effort towards the development of a "community […] with a purpose" (6).

Theme 3: This space is valuable to me

This theme explores the question "Why do people keep coming?". It more concretely illustrates the social support, which is developed, exchanged and significant. The giving and positive reception of social support is an indicator of social identity, and sheds light into the depth of connections. The following quote highlights access to supplies, skill development, benefits of interaction in creative settings and significant personal achievement from participation.

> I think I wanted to find uh like friends and I wanted to, like, be better at guitar and painting because I have had my [art] portfolio and I had *nothing* for my portfolio made and I saw that it will like lead me a little bit closer to that point where it's finished […] Yes and it helped me it actually *helped* me. That's because like I was much more confident in drawing uh because I didn't think too much because at the same time, I was like talking to people and plus it's like all the materials are free I'm not going to ruin anything like I can ruin everything I want. (4, Music-School/Art-Space, involuntary migrant)

Subtheme 3.1: Access

This subtheme examines how access to resources and low barriers for entry impacted the value of the space. Co-researchers report access to supplies, meeting place, skill improvement, creative collaborations, and intercultural encounters. All available free of cost with no registration and no required skill level.

> I didn't have like *any* money back then, […] I didn't have really money for materials and everything, and also like I thought that if I'll look like maybe there will be a creative community it will be also easier to draw and to create stuff because you know– people who you surround you really influence you and the way you feel and the way you like, if I'll be surrounded by uh alcoholics I'll be an alcoholic, if I'll be surrounded by artists I'll be artists. (4, Art-Space/Music-School, involuntary migrant)

Access to supplies is valuable, with many co-researchers reporting lack of funds inhibiting their pursuit of creative interests. Many noted the value of resources increases when found in the company of others. Co-researcher 4, above, describes the importance of accessing resources alongside positive influences. These influences can shape one's identity and impact experiences beyond practice. This easy access even helped in the establishment of *new* identities. Co-researcher 3 explains she discovered her passion through Art-Space and now even sells artwork, "I believed in myself because of them, the people here really supported me in a lot of ways" (3). She credits her progress to the encouragement of other community members as she did not identify as an artist prior to participation.

When considering the loss involved in forced migration, access takes on a different meaning. A co-researcher of Art-Space explains, "I find everything I need here" (1). Art has been her lifelong hobby, following forced migration she seeks out spaces where she can continue to pursue this practice. Access enables her to maintain this identity of artist, and benefit from the therapeutic effects of practice (see theme 4). She also explained that because her friends do not live close, "Here, we meet here" (1). The projects allow access to space for cultural communities to gather, further advancing the opportunity to retain agency in identity and connect with otherwise isolated significant relationships.

There was a unanimous appreciation for the exposure to intercultural encounters. This exposure helped to expand their perspectives and creativity and was reported difficult to find elsewhere.

> So many cultures are coming together here and it's also like really cool to communicate with such different people from such different countries and I think like in daily life and in in the bubbles where like I tend to hang out maybe it will be impossible to encounter like such different people, from different communities, and different backgrounds, and really broadens your mind. (2, Art-Space, involuntary migrant)

Co-researcher 2 explains the value of extending one's social circle and gaining access to new perspectives and intercultural relations. Co-researcher 10 reflects "maybe I would met them but where else would we, you know, paint side by side" (10). Similarly, a co-researcher of German background tells "it makes me really happy, and it also gives me inspiration um and more hope about the world also and interesting experience, people I would have never met otherwise" (7).

Subtheme 3.2: Structure and feelings of achievement

Participation gave co-researchers routine and structure, alongside a sense of achievement and productivity. This sense of achievement was not related to product or outcome but instead attendance itself. Interacting with others or just being present in the space made them feel productive and "useful" (4).

> I want to feel to fill my week to fill my life in something because it's a new land for us. For me nothing to do I I looked for a job but it's - difficult yeah so I wanted to find the place where can I paint and create yeah - because when I paint I think. (1, Art-Space, involuntary migrant)

Productivity has different value to different subgroups. Many involuntary migrants, as illustrated above, reflected on their loss of "places" and difficulty in finding things to do upon arrival in Berlin. The routine helped to combat feelings of loneliness; "I feel relieved […] that I went somewhere, and I did something, and I actually have a place to go because when you don't have like a place you can go to, it feels just lonely" (4). German natives and voluntary migrants often spoke of this as fulfilling a "need" for "more structure in Berlin" (10). They explain, "It also helps me to stay on top of my life somehow" (13).

Subtheme 3.3: Mood improvement and re-energizing

Co-researchers expressed an improvement of mood, maintenance of good mood, or more energy during and after attendance.

> I was not in a good mood on my way here and um it's not even the project but just coming to the place and seeing you and other people who I know already makes all right I already feel better […] If I'm, if I'm feeling low or have low energy or some or tired or anything like that and I come to one of the projects I always leave with more energy and feeling a lot better like without fail basically and during there's always just such a calm feeling. (6, Music-School/Art-Space, voluntary migrant)

The above quote shows mood improvement from just being within the physical spaces and was a recurring sentiment. Attendance in the projects also enhanced energy, "I *always always always*, when I go, come out completely energized" (12). These positive emotions represent social support produced and exchanged through participation.

Theme 4: Expressive-arts is beneficial for me

Theme 4 explores the impact of the Expressive-Arts approach. A sense of belonging brings safety, connection, and resources to members; so how does creativity enhance these benefits? This theme answers the question "Why is Expressive-Arts valuable?". The following quote presents a convincing argument for the benefits of Expressive-Arts.

> Music is uh for me about connection - about, music is connection to my own feelings to parts of myself. Music is connection, to the world to feelings emotions um yeah to coping skills but also music is connection to others and other countries and other influences. (7, Music-School, German native)

Subtheme 4.1: Connection without linguistic boundaries

Expressive-Arts is free from language. Beneficial both for connection with personal emotions that may be inaccessible by vocabulary, or intercultural connection inaccessible by shared language.

> To have a connection to people without language, without talking, without verbal, this is also interesting. Yeah, that it's really like Universal the language of music […] also I think as a psychologist that um verbal expression is really like limited. Yes, it's limited what you can express even in your mother tongue, it's limited what you can express. (7, Music-School, German native)

Co-researcher 7 describes the ability of music to build connection, while explaining how self-expression can be limited even in one's native vocabulary. Hence, art making serves as a facet of deeper exploration and expression. Co-researcher 10 from Art-Space claims art making challenges us to delve into ourselves, "Some people might not be so well spoken or know fancy words to describe their difficult emotions […] the ground gets very equalized […] you are forced to express yourself through, like, very simple means" (10). This demonstrates the potential for bridging connections across cultures, as well as presenting an opportunity for vulnerability in a community setting.

The practice of Expressive-Arts was also notably useful in helping co-researchers process, cope or acknowledge emotional states.

> I really love painting and I think it's really helpful for me just to process some emotional states and because at that point of time I was really overwhelmed and it was like too much happening and uh yeah I felt this need to like to express it somehow and with different colors through painting […] It has been always like a self-help uh mechanism for me just to see it and paint and to process something and then go back to uh outside world […] Painting really helps me to but like okay now I'm focused on the paper. (2, Art-Space, involuntary migrant)

Expressive-Arts was reported to be useful in "expressing what's trapped inside" (9) "like a coping strategy for stress" (7). Expressive-Arts aided in accessing "strong feelings" (6), allowing them to "heal kind of part of myself" (10). It acted as a "main kind of transmitter of emotions" (10) for some, described as "therapeutic, like medication" (14). All of this demonstrates that Expressive-Arts has restorative impacts on community members.

Subtheme 4.2: Medium for connection

Through Expressive-Arts methods, co-researchers were able to both connect deeper with themselves and with other community members. They describe how a shared activity allows for easier interaction, conversations, and connection.

> I think music is [pause] comes second, it is um even though this is the main reason we go there, it's more about coming together once per week […] Doesn't really matter where you're coming from; whether you are a person like me who is basically born and raised here more or less than 10 years German native speaker, or if you're just recently like I don't know were fleeing from Ukraine. Like this is a spot, the place where everybody can come together […] it's more the community and music is the tool to connect. (12, Music-School, German native)

Co-researcher 12 describes inclusivity, and that music acts as the medium for community. Co-researcher 14 echoes this sentiment, "We were from all different countries, different cultures, different languages, but music is what we all have in common" (14). Art making serves as a unifier of identities, highlighting the similarities of community members instead of differences. The art making was described as a "kind of vessel to, like, get you going" (13), or a "common activity" through which you can "dig deeper[…] this is a gateway nonetheless right, like it starts from there" (10). Shared practice gets individuals in the door, which enables them to engage with others under a shared identity. As discussed previously, it also allows for more vulnerability, further deepening the connections and space.

Subtheme 4.3: Mood improvement

Expressive-Arts had a significant impact on co-researchers' mood during and after participation in the projects.

> "*Reborn* every time when I make art: reborn. It's the same when I go to therapy afterwards, I'm like or after yoga I'm like - it's the same with painting or making music: I'm Reborn. Fresh mind from the start the beginning from scratch [The art-making process is the same outcome as therapy?] The same, even better sometimes. I love it makes me feel so connected with myself and like, this [refers to painting] is I created, small [her name] would be proud" (14, Music-School, German native).

The literature indicates the therapeutic benefits of Expressive-Arts, these were mirrored in the conversations with co-researchers. They state Expressive-Arts can help to "at least set a mood where I can think […] after it feels like better" (13). They reflect, "I don't [paint] because I'm good. I do it because it makes me feel good" (14). Expressive-Arts grants comfort, familiarity, exploration, and the chance to improve or sustain one's positive mood.

See Fig. 1 for the thematic map and connections with one another.

Discussion

This qualitative study explored the influence of Expressive-Arts utilized in GSBTB's Music-School program and Art-Space project. Based on both the Social Identity Approach and Allport's Contact Hypothesis, it was anticipated that GSBTB community members would find a sense of belonging through the projects. This belonging would be possible through intergroup contact and shared social identity, and was expected to positively impact their well-being. The use of Expressive-Arts was anticipated to have positive effects for individual community members, especially those who were displaced.

The study found that Music-School and Art-Space grant community members (a) a safe space (b) built through equal cooperation (c) which offers significant value. Safety comes from protection against outside stressors, unconditional acceptance, and feelings of attachment towards others. Cooperation is made possible through mutual understanding and engagement, consistency, and a common goal. Value is described through easy access to resources, feelings of routine and productivity, and mood improvement. This study also found (d) the use of Expressive-Arts brought benefits for the individual and their relations. Expressive-Arts helps with processing emotions and mood improvement and acts as a medium for deeper connection and expression independent of language. Therefore, the Expressive-Arts approach appears to enhance safety, allow for deeper bonds through cooperation, and increase the value of the projects through addition of its therapeutic effects. In the present study, the utilization of Expressive-Arts in the interview also yielded positive effects, allowing co-researchers to expand and recall deeper on project experiences.

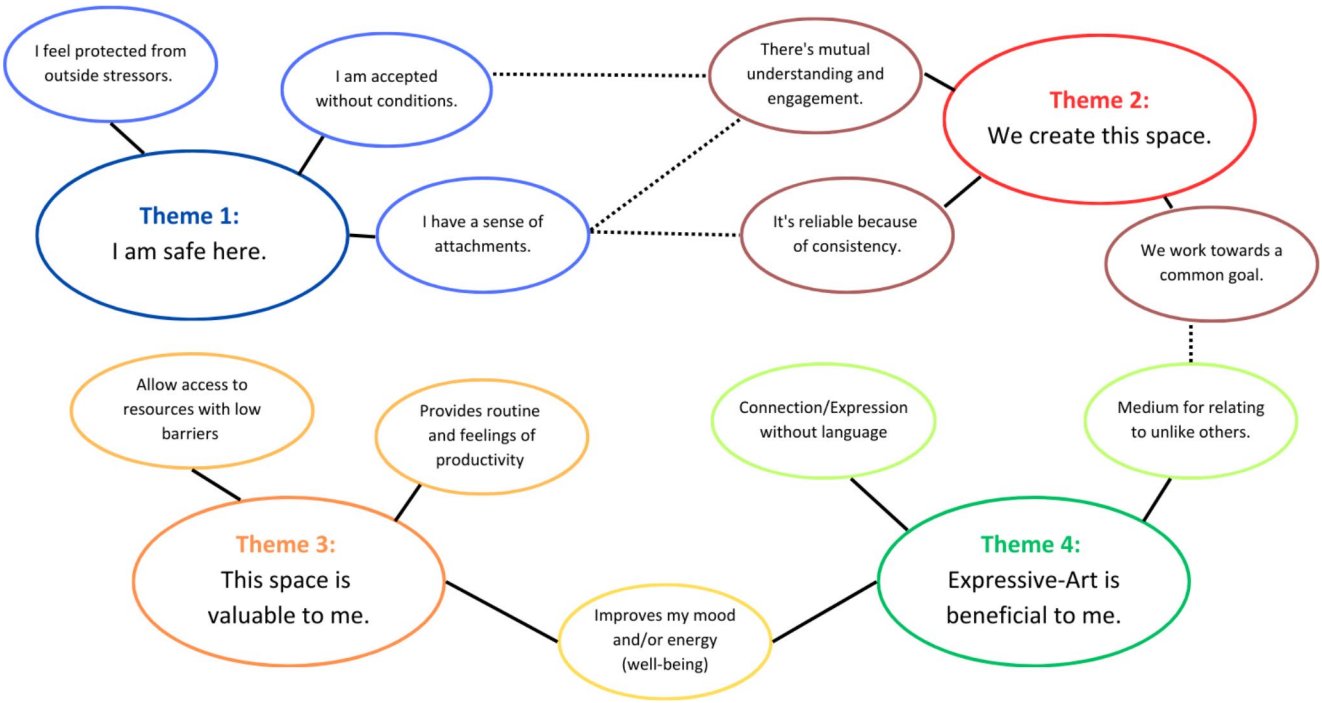

Fig. 1 Thematic map illustrating data analysis

These findings have strong theoretical implications, particularly in the expansion of Allport's Contact Hypothesis. Allport states that intergroup contact via equal status, cooperation, a common goal, and social support will lead to better relations. Art-Space and Music-School offer intergroup cooperation towards a common goal, whilst supported by the larger, reputable GSBTB association. However, a defining feature of the projects was the establishment of safety. This "safe" space was the context for cooperation, shared social identity and support, and was made possible via two additional conditions: consistency and creative expression. Through consistency, community members were able to rely and build on their attachments with others, extending the positive impact of contact through a sense of trust. Community members were also able to rely on the framework of the projects, as they run on consistent, weekly schedules which allow routine and stability. The incorporation of the creative expressive activity enabled more meaningful intergroup contact as it allowed for both non-linguistic connection, and vulnerability. Participation in Expressive-Arts gave community members a starting point for conversations and connection, allowing for the establishment of a shared identity without shared language. Because of the therapeutic effects of Expressive-Arts, incorporation of this activity also helped to break down emotional barriers which allowed for vulnerability and deeper attachments. While Allport's original conditions set the groundwork for positive intergroup contact, they do not establish a "safe" space. A sense of safety is tremendously important when the contact involves migrants, who face daily acculturative stress and potentially trauma. Due to the increasingly negative narrative promoting xenophobia, distrust is heightened between host and migrant communities. For contact to be effective it needs to address this barrier. Consistency and creative expressive participation have helped to overcome this obstacle for the community members of GSBTB.

The findings also support a modification to the original theoretical accounts that 'the need to belong' requires frequent interactions with *close* others. Recent studies show even minimal social ties can have a significant impact towards a sense of belonging (Hirsch & Clark, 2018). Social connections that involve less contact, lower emotional intensity and limited intimacy can yield substantial results for wellbeing and life quality. Researchers Sandstorm and Dunn (2014) exemplify this through the analogy of a financial portfolio. The more diverse a portfolio you have, the more likely you are to be protected from market fluctuations. The same is true for your social network; the more connections you have, the more access to information and support (p. 920). Co-researchers' statements aligned with this modification, as even those who reported minimal relations with other community members felt a sense of safety and belonging. In the study's outlier case, with the co-researcher feeling no level of intimate connections towards others, there were still signs of a shared social identity.

Practically speaking, these findings can advise on the conditions for the establishment and evaluation of effective Expressive-Arts social inclusion projects. Community

organizations should aim to support the implementation of programs which require equal status, cooperation and a common goal. They would benefit if such projects operate on a consistent basis and center activities around creative expression. If the structure can be properly replicated, the growing demand for access to belonging in multicultural settings can be fulfilled utilizing the skills of migrants and locals. Evaluation procedures that incorporate participant experiences would yield more authentic insight in terms of exclusion or inclusion conditions. Broader implications of this study emphasize the importance of participatory research practices. Excluding people from research that concerns them perpetuates social exclusion (MacFarlane et al., 2024). Through the co-development of research aims and analysis, with both the GSBTB team and co-researchers, this study ensured the outcomes included authentic community perspectives. Co-design and participatory methods remain a rare practice in the realm of qualitative research.

Limitations

The present study has some notable limitations. First is the first author's relationship with both the research context and co-researchers. While the participation within GSBTB's programming and relations with community members both enabled and enhanced the data collection and analysis, it may have led to co-researchers' social desirability bias. Co-researchers may have responded in a favorable way either due to relations with the first author, or out of gratitude towards the projects. The first authors' own opinions of the organization may have led to researcher bias. Second, GSBTB could be an echo chamber which attracts a particular type of migrant and local. The projects potentially attract people who are more open minded or socially inclined, impacting the possible outcomes of participation. Third, the present study may have attracted only 'high identifying' community members, meaning those that felt especially called to 'give back'. Following the Social Identity Approach, those who strongly identify as 'community members' might perceive more benevolent social support and report more positive outcomes from GSBTB projects than those who do not strongly identify (Häusser et al., 2020). Fourth, although the sample size was deemed appropriate for the capacities of this study, having only four involuntary migrants is not ideal. While it is impossible to speak to the diversity of forced migration experiences, and is dangerous to generalize these stories, having more co-researchers of this subgroup would have been beneficial. Inclusion of more involuntary migrants was found challenging due to community member availability, however inclusion of only four German natives was representative of the diversity within GSBTB programming.

Future research

While the study yielded fruitful results in the aim of the research question, future studies have the potential to delve even deeper in the participatory research practice and work towards impacting broader aspects of this field such as community organizational strategies and migration policy. Future studies would benefit from including more co-researchers from the various subgroups, as well as more organizations either within the same or different regions. A comparison across participants as well as contexts would yield valuable data. We encourage future research to continue incorporation of art-based data collection methods but include an analysis of the artistic creations to deepen the understanding of co-researcher perspectives. To make analysis more widespread and impactful to community well-being, the artistic creations could be shared through the curation of an exhibition. Further studies could be conducted longitudinally to better understand how Expressive-Arts approaches change relations over time or see the long-term effects for individual well-being. These findings could advocate for improved interventions overall while emphasizing the importance of the social dimension of acculturation.

Conclusion

Only halfway through 2023, the International Centre for Migration and Policy Development warns that the EU is facing the most challenging times since the second World War both in terms of geopolitics and displacement. We have found ourselves in a state of "global polycrisis" with migration challenges becoming more complex, and host communities more overwhelmed (2023). From widespread political instability to severe climate catastrophes, to the instrumentalization of migration, the demand for inclusion has never been greater. This study presents a possible pathway to intercultural belonging through shared social identity. Findings suggest that if social inclusion projects follow Allport's conditions, with the addition of consistency and a Expressive-Arts approach, they can establish a sense of safety for participants. Within this "safe" space, cultures can meet and relations can form. Through these relations, both intimate and minimal, participants can access the benefits of belonging. While the global issue of migration should be at the forefront of policy change, the growing xenophobia and political divides are blinding those in power and halting progress. The power of inclusion lies in the hands of community organizations, those who recognize that not only does everybody desire and deserve belonging, but everybody has something to give back.

Appendix 1

Literature review extension

Need for belonging

A sense of belonging also has the potential to expand our sense of self. researchers propose that having social relations, whether this be with just one other (e.g., partner) or with a wide group (e.g., community), can allow you to "transcend" the limitations of your body and "expand the capacities and boundaries" of your sense of self (Aron & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2001). Some might refer to this as being part of 'something bigger'. While finding meaning through inclusion can help one to establish purpose in life, reimagining the boundaries of your sense of self can lead to efforts towards self development and exploration.

Psychologists are urging for a more holistic understanding of what leads to a fulfilled sense of belonging. The concept of belonging, however, is not limited to this field; geographers have even noted the relationship of physical place to emotion, affect and belonging (Pile, 2010; Wright, 2014). The concept of atmosphere emphasizes how places are not defined only by the physical space but co-produced by people and things (Sumartojo & Pink, 2018). This all to say, a sense of belonging is "not just related to close relations, cognitive, conversation or mutual understanding, but also material and physical places, things and practices that convey a sense of social participation and belonging" (Parsons, 2022, p.4).

Finding belonging through shared social identity

Originally, SIA was thought to examine group-level processes and was heavily correlated with intergroup relations, such as discrimination and prejudice (Jetten et al., 2017, p.2). However, recent studies argue the health-promoting effects of shared social identity are instead "due to a complex interplay between individual-level and group-level effects" (Haüsser, Junker & van Dick, 2019, p.730). Although social support is an intergroup phenomenon, it is the specific intra-individual mechanisms (i.e. individual feelings of collective self efficacy) which contribute to the "psychological partnership between shared social identity and social support" (Häusser et al., 2020, p. 727). In other words, a "positive sense of social identity" is an individual's experience, despite the requirement of a group to identify with (Jetten et al., 2017, p.1). SIA has been cleverly nicknamed the "Social Cure". However, when the right conditions are not met it can become a "social curse". Incongruence of each member's level of identification with the group seems to present a threat to genuine mutual social support. Another threat is when high identification occurs with a disadvantaged group, which can make one more susceptible to discrimination and prejudice, because of an inability to separate personal experiences from the experience of the group as a whole (Jetten et al., 2017).

Appendix 2

Data collection context

Give something back to Berlin (GSBTB)

GSBTB is an association which seeks to challenge the way integration is viewed by engaging locals, migrants and refugees in building a more open and inclusive society. GSBTB originated from a 2012 Facebook post written by founder Annamaria Olsson. Her post called the local community to take action in creating a space where those facing migration could be seen as active and valuable members. She, like many people at the time, had become alarmed by the rise of nationalism, xenophobia and populist discourse in Europe. Olsson knew that migrants, like herself, could positively contribute to their communities and take a peaceful stand against negative narratives. The post went viral, and ten years later GSBTB is an award winning organization with over twenty free and inclusive events every, single week (*Our Story*, 2022). The organizational values of GSBTB include: diversity, empowerment, creativity, innovation and solidarity. They work from three thematic areas: Urban integration and intercultural dialogue, Diversity, equity and anti-racism, and Education and skill sharing.

Open music school (music-school) and open art space (art-space)

Music-School offers free volunteer taught music lessons, instruments included. Music-School hopes to empower migrants and marginalized populations who are in search of a positive social network in Berlin (*Open Music School*, 2022). Art-Space, one of four projects within Open Hearts Space, is a weekly "art oasis" where members create while sharing snacks, tea and stories. This project aims to create a safer space for connection through creativity, acceptance and presence (*Open Hearts Space*, 2022).

GSBTB is physically housed within Refugio, an organization in the district of Neukölln which serves as a café, share house, office/venue rental, and artist studios. Following World War II, Neukölln was bordered by the Berlin Wall and became an isolated and undesirable area to live. Rental prices were low so most of the residents were immigrants, predominantly guest workers from Turkey. The district gained a reputation of being one of Berlin's "problemkieze" or problem neighborhood (Porter, 2019). Today it is still well associated with Turkish and Arab cultures, and is often poorly represented in the German media. However, it's known to be one of Berlin's most diverse neighborhoods, and has become home to many grassroots organizations and creative projects. Considering the historical and cultural context of this corner of Berlin is vital for understanding the role of GSBTB's projects.

Data availability Due to their sensitive nature the research data are not shared.

Declarations

Conflict of interest There are no conflicts of interest related to this study.

Ethical approval The study received ethical approval from the Education Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee, University of Limerick, Ireland.

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