Report

The 2021 Synergy Expert Meeting: Our online experience

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The annual Synergy Expert Meeting (EM) is organised to provide an opportunity for synergistic discussion between EHPS members conducting research in core fields within health psychology. This year, the online EHPS conference programme was scheduled for five days to make it feasible to attend for people in most time zones. This meant that the Synergy EM needed to be held in the week before the conference. The topic of the 2021 Synergy EM was 'Open Digital Health: Accelerating health promotion and treatment during and after the COVID-19 pandemic', and was facilitated by Dominika Kwasnicka and Robbert Sanderman, two of the founders of the Open Digital Health initiative (http://www.opendigitalhealth.org/).

To ensure that the additional days online were manageable for participants, the programme was limited to two two-hour timeslots on the Thursday and Friday each. On both days, the meetings were scheduled from 9am to 11am, and 12pm to 2pm CEST. Between the two timeslots, participants were encouraged to have 'active breaks' away from their desks. With participants' countries of residence ranging from the UK to Israel, these timeslots were the most suitable for all, except our facilitator Dominika in Perth, Australia, who had to stay focused until 10pm local time. We are therefore all very grateful to her for remaining as involved as she did. Seventeen experts participated in the Expert Meeting. Six of these were employed in the UK, four in the Netherlands, three in Germany, two in Finland, and one each in Israel and Kenya. The participants' career stage ranged from PhD student to full professor, with the majority being postdocs or assistant professors/lecturers.

The four two-hour sessions had clearly defined topics and goals. In the first session on Thursday, we discussed what are the best methods in our health psychology research toolkit for testing and evaluating digital health tools. During Thursday's second session, we discussed the main advantages and disadvantages of sharing (i.e., openly publishing) data, content, codes, and design features of digital health tools. Friday morning started with a discussion of the most feasible strategies to reuse digital health tools across contexts, populations, and settings, followed by the final session in which we discussed how to best move the Open Digital Health field forward. All sessions consisted of an introduction, a smaller group brainstorm or discussion (some using Miro boards, https://miro.com/), and plenary summaries and discussions.

The two facilitators were assisted by four co-facilitators, who are also co-founders and directors of the Open Digital Health initiative: Gill ten Hoor, Jan Keller, Olga Perski, and Sebastian Potthoff. Involving co-facilitators proved to be hugely beneficial, as the subgroup discussions were accelerated by these co-facilitators chairing, taking minutes, and reporting the main findings back to the larger group. The minutes and notes, taken throughout the EM, were invaluable. The "White Paper", co-authored by all who attended, was submitted at a record speed of three weeks after the EM. The "White Paper" is currently under review and addresses the key gaps in the literature pertaining to the development, evaluation, and scaling of evidence-based open digital health tools,

and makes suggestions for how to fill these gaps.

In a face-to-face conference scenario, the Synergy EM starts with an informal networking event on the night before the official programme, which usually takes place in a bar or restaurant on location. Networking between experts all working on the same topic is an important aspect of the EM, and as an added bonus, this saves time on the first day of the EM as most people have already met their fellow participants. As we have probably all experienced, online informal networking is, for most of us, much more challenging. Instead of a natural flow of conversations in pairs or small groups, all participants tend to be in the same virtual room, mostly with their microphones switched off. This year we scheduled an hour-long online informal meeting the night before the EM, and we asked all participants to introduce themselves to the group. Even though this wasn't as lively as a face-to-face event, and conversations could not be as in-depth, we did learn more about fellow participants which meant the ice was broken before the start of the first session on Thursday.

We requested that all participants keep their camera on during the meeting, and to mute their microphone unless they were talking. Meetings where we can see everyone are much more engaging; however, background noise can often disturb the meeting flow. Interestingly, this allowed us to see some participant's home life. We met one participant's new-born baby, along with some adorable cats and dogs. Some participants were doing some light stretching, walking, or standing up from their chairs – all very health appropriate. The official programme on Friday was followed by a social event from 2 to 3pm CEST. We suggested participants fetch their favourite drink and snack, and join the event from their couch or garden. To get the conversation flowing, we asked for the worst, most interesting, or most original health app they knew. Zombies Run (https://zombiesrungame.com) and Ring Fit Adventure (https://www.nintendo.com/products/detail/ring-fit-adventure-switch/) were some of the fun examples mentioned.

Participants evaluated the EM well. The overall quality of the sessions was rated as 4.6 (out of 5); the experience of the online format was rated as 4.7. Understandably, the opportunity to interact and network was rated lower than in previous years (3.9). Participants' suggestions for improvement included using wonder.me (https://www.wonder.me/) or gather.town (https://www.gather.town/) for networking, which Synergy arranged for delegates during the conference week. One participant mentioned that they really enjoyed the mix of small group discussions and plenary debriefings/discussions, since as an introvert this allowed them to contribute more easily.

Compared to a traditional EM, we can see both pros and cons to a virtual EM. The main disadvantage was of course the lack of networking and informal discussions over coffee, lunch, dinner, and drinks. As interaction through a screen is more tiring than face-to-face, additional time for less structured discussion was limited. However, the types of discussions this year's facilitators arranged, their alternations of activities in small and large groups, and the use of Miro boards in smaller group discussions, made this EM more efficient than the previous EMs. Another benefit was that it usually takes a while to lure participants away from their coffee break or lunch discussions back to the meeting room, something which only takes seconds in online meetings.

My overall experience of the online conference was that I enjoyed it more than I thought I would; however, at the same time it was also more exhausting than I expected, even without spending most nights networking in bars. Let us all hope that the 2022 conference will finally be in Bratislava (no matter how much we enjoy Rado Masaryk's promotional videos!). In case we ever have to attend an online conference again, I would like to refer you to fellow Synergy board member Marie Kotzur's article in this journal pointing out

very useful tips and tricks on how to deal with and enjoy an online (EHPS) conference (Kotzur, 2020).

Finally, the Synergy Board would like to sincerely thank the EHPS organising team and the EasyConference team, with a special thanks to Christos, for the supportive communication, for being present throughout the entire EM, and for helping out with the very few technical issues that occurred. The author would like to thank the members of the Synergy Board and the members of the Open Digital Health initiative for their helpful reviews of this report.

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