



# Alleviating Migrant Loneliness Through Culturally Immersive VR Experiences

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Figure 1: iBelongVR: Sri Lankan migrants connect with their cultural identity through objects, spaces and activities.

## Abstract

Loneliness is a subjective condition arising from unmet expectations in social relationships. For migrants, it often stems from the absence of familiar cultural elements, family, and identity. This leads to feel a lack of belonging in their new surroundings, hindering formation of meaningful relationships, causing voluntary social disconnection. Existing interventions lack cultural sensitivity and often require initial community connection, which conflicts with behaviors of lonely migrants. This research explores how culturally sensitive Social VR experiences can support migrant adults alleviate their loneliness. We present findings from requirement gathering and analysis with culturally disconnected migrants and expert stakeholders, which informed the development of iBelongVR—a culturally sensitive Social VR intervention that simulates familiar cultural spaces, objects, and activities. The system encourages on reflection and identity reconstruction in the host country. Currently undergoing user studies, iBelongVR will be evaluated in its impact on migrant wellbeing to inform future design improvements.

## CCS Concepts

• Human-centered computing → Virtual reality; • User Centered Design; • Requirement Specification; • Thematic Analysis;

## Keywords

Loneliness, Migrant Loneliness, Social VR, HCI

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## 1 Introduction

Loneliness is an emotional state that is subjective to each person; some people may feel content with minimal social connections, while others may experience profound loneliness despite having a large social circle [2, 23, 29]. Short-term loneliness may not pose significant health risks, but prolonged state can severely impact an individual’s mental and physical well-being, which can lead to mental illnesses such as depression and schizophrenia; physical illnesses such as high blood pressure and obesity; and even negative lifestyle habits such as poor sleep, smoking and physical inactivity [9, 28]. A common response to loneliness for some individuals is to voluntarily withdraw from social contacts, which further intensifies their feelings of isolation and helplessness [9]. In 2023 the WHO declared loneliness a global public health concern [24]. The U.S. Surgeon General has warned about a pandemic of loneliness [23]. New Zealand statistics identifies loneliness as one of the four primary drivers of individual well-being in New Zealand [31].

In New Zealand, being a migrant is one of the risk factors associated with experiencing higher levels of loneliness [29, 31]. Statistics further report that migrants are the second most lonely group in the country and there is an increase in loneliness among migrants in recent years [32]. Acculturation, missing family and cultural identity have lead migrants to decrease their sense of belonging making them feel emotionally lonely. Having a limited number of people from the same ethnicity, language barriers, culture shock and negative experiences have lead migrants to be unable to build



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meaningful relationships which makes them feel socially lonely [30]. Due to stigma and fear lonely migrants tend to practice a voluntary social disconnection behaviour [29].

Most of the existing loneliness interventions lack cultural sensitivity which reduces the sense of belonging for migrants [26]. Most interventions require an initial community connection which conflicts with their voluntary social disconnection behaviour. Existing research on loneliness is framed through individualistic cultural lenses, highlighting a significant gap in our understanding of loneliness within diverse ethnic communities [13]. Research is mainly conducted from a Western perspective while clustering diverse ethnic backgrounds into single categories with a predominant focus on older adults (65+ aged) [13]. Limited exploration of the use of Virtual Reality (VR) to reduce feelings of loneliness has been carried out [27]. However, existing VR applications lack significant cultural tailoring and the extensive use of high amount of fictional and non-human representations and environments have proved disconnection for many users [15].

The primary goal of this research is to find a way to alleviate emotional and social cognition states occurred due to feeling lonely (e.g. grief, distress, disconnection, abandonment), and promote coping strategies (e.g. creating sense of belonging, establishing meaningful relationships, and enhancing social engagement) of migrant adults. To achieve this, a literature review was conducted exploring VR elements and game mechanics that can be used with culture to alleviate migrant loneliness. Consultations were conducted with experts in loneliness, counselling, nursing, and digital mental health to guide the project's mental health and wellbeing perspectives. For cultural input, participant recruitment, and safeguarding wellbeing during user studies, we are working with a Sri Lankan cultural representative and a senior clinical psychology professional. Then, requirement gathering was done through surveys, one-on-one interviews and focus group sessions with (1) migrants who are feeling lonely or experiencing cultural disconnection; and with (2) professionals who work with or study migrant communities and/or mental health. Based on empirical and theoretical studies, this research tries to investigate whether (1) a triggered sense of belonging by celebrating one's identity; (2) a space to generate meaningful relationships among people with similar interests; and (3) reflecting on opportunities to socially connect; can help a lonely migrant alleviate their loneliness. Both theoretical and empirical studies were used to gain knowledge about culturally adapting these strategies and designing the intervention. iBelongVR is a VR experience designed to recreate culturally relevant objects, spaces, and activities that foster nostalgia, facilitate self-reflection, and promote new possibilities of cultural adaptation. Currently, focusing on the Sri Lankan migrant ethnic communities, this paper details the design rationale, user research, theoretical underpinnings, and implementation of iBelongVR. As a migrant, the researcher's experiences of cultural disconnection and loneliness have strongly influenced the motivation and direction of this research. Although this insider perspective helps ensure cultural authenticity in iBelongVR, the potential for bias is recognized and therefore to balance and enrich the design, the researcher has engaged with diverse migrant and professional voices through surveys, interviews, and focus groups, and consulted experts in psychology, counselling, and cultural representation.

## 2 Background and Related Work

### 2.1 Migrant Loneliness

Migration presents both excitement and emotional challenge. While many migrants find joy in exploring new environments, forming new friendships, and settling into a different country, they often carry a profound sense of loss of their family, familiar routines, cultural practices, and homeland. This emotional and social gap can lead to significant feelings of loneliness, some experiencing during the initial stages of settlement and some even after several years of settlement. New Zealand statistics indicate a growing trend of loneliness among recent migrants. When looking at most recent wellbeing statistics in 2018, 2021 and 2023, it is clear that the percentage of migrants reporting some level of loneliness and those feeling lonely most or all of the time have been constantly increasing [32]. Recent migrants are consistently more likely to experience loneliness than longer-term migrants or New Zealand-born residents, with Asian migrants identified as particularly vulnerable [11, 20, 32].

Loneliness among migrants is often rooted in a disconnection from their cultural identity and lifestyle. Adjusting to a new cultural background, particularly when it involves significant cultural distance, can be emotionally taxing. Acculturation and culture shock contribute to heightened loneliness when familiar social structures and traditions are replaced with unfamiliar ones [22]. Migrants transitioning from collectivist cultures to an individualistic society face increased acculturative stress [4, 12]. Many struggle to maintain or perform cultural traditions due to lack of access to familiar ingredients, materials, or community members who share the same customs. Language barriers and limited opportunities to connect with people from similar ethnic backgrounds can further reduce social interaction and a sense of belonging which sometimes lead to having negative social experiences [26]. These barriers contribute to feelings of exclusion or perceived discrimination which intensifies loneliness feelings of a migrant [11, 12, 29].

As loneliness prolong, it leads to more severe emotional and behavioural patterns, such as avoiding social connections, being more introverted, avoiding communication with family out of shame, or feeling emotionally distanced from friends back home due to time zone differences. Many also report resentment towards local colleagues who may be unaware of the migrant experience and its emotional toll [29].

Although most existing research on migrant mental health comes from a Western perspective, Oceania has the highest migrant population proportionally [25]. As of 2023, New Zealand is home to over 1.4 million migrants, which is almost one-third of the national population with citizens from India, Philippines, China and Sri Lanka being the highest contributors to the migration gain respectively [33]. There is a growing need for culturally sensitive interventions focused not only on older adults, but also on diverse groups such as working-age migrants and ethnic minorities [13, 26]. However, research addressing the mental health and emotional needs of these populations in New Zealand remains limited [25]. Therefore, interventions tailored to address migrant loneliness in a subjective manner needs to be researched.

## 2.2 Role of Culture in Mental Wellbeing

Culture plays a fundamental role in shaping how individuals perceive, express, and cope with psychological distress, particularly in migrant populations. The 2013 edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) along with the American Psychiatric Association aimed for greater cultural sensitivity in diagnosis but has faced criticism for not fully addressing how symptoms are experienced in specific cultural contexts [7]. Mental health professionals working with migrants are therefore encouraged to adopt culturally sensitive counselling approaches that not only promote adaptation to the host culture but also support the retention of migrants' cultural values and identity. This includes integrating individual, group, and family therapy alongside traditional and indigenous healing practices, creating a holistic and inclusive therapeutic environment [12]. Studies also encourage pluralistic counselling which use different approaches depending on what suits the person best [9]. Researchers like Hofstede, Triandis, and Hall have provided well-established frameworks to understand cultural dimensions which are widely acknowledged in the Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) field [17].

On the other hand, research also highlight that intercultural encounter initiatives aimed at reducing loneliness among migrants are often inadequately designed or implemented, lacking deep cultural grounding [26]. Programs frequently take a very abstract approach, overlooking how differences in communication styles, values, and expressions of distress influence the effectiveness of support systems. Reviews of loneliness interventions have primarily focused on older adults in both community and institutional settings, often overlooking the unique needs of migrants. Although newer studies are beginning to include young people, there remains a gap in addressing culturally grounded mental health strategies for adult migrants.

Maintaining social and cultural identity through language, values, traditions and shared experiences is being researched and have proven to increase mental wellbeing of migrants [18]. Furthermore research highlights how community beliefs, shared rituals, and social networks—including cultural celebrations and practices serve as protective factors against mental health challenges such as loneliness and identity loss [19, 26]. Research also show how digital platforms can facilitate meaningful connections among migrants through “cybernetic safe spaces” supporting emotional ties to homeland and foster new identities in host countries [21]. This research further investigates how cultural experiences which aligns with their values, traditions, and lived realities enable migrants to reinforce their sense of self, express emotions authentically, and form meaningful social bonds with others who share similar interests.

## 2.3 VR for Cultural Engagement and Wellbeing

By 2022, AR and VR technologies had become increasingly prominent in cultural contexts, being widely used for 3D reconstruction of cultural artifacts, digital heritage initiatives for historical learning and therapeutic purposes, and virtual museums that allowed users to interact with GLAMs (galleries, libraries, archives, and museums) [3]. Next came the approach of using VR in indigenous storytelling, interactive museum guides, cultural awareness games,

historical reconstructions, intangible cultural heritage (ICH) preservation, serious games and gamified learning experiences which have proved enhancement of emotional connection to cultural identity and fostering cultural literacy [3, 8]. Recent initiatives have explored VR's potential in supporting migrants wellbeing through immersive storytelling for empathy-building, cultural orientation and CBT to reduce social anxiety in trauma-affected migrants [16].

Social Virtual Reality (Social VR) offers immersive, multi-user environments with avatar-based interactions simulating social presence through gestures, voice, body tracking, and real-time communication [14]. Avatars can be customized with cultural symbols, clothing, and features, enhancing identity expression and cultural pride [1, 14]. Recreating familiar environments like homes, temples, or festivals in VR enables migrants to reconnect with lost cultural spaces. While many VR worlds on platforms like VRChat and AltspaceVR depict broad regional aesthetics (e.g., “Asia”), they often lack nuanced cultural representation of specific communities [1]. Research also show that avatars can enhance user enjoyment, presence, however overly fictional or non-human avatars which are common in many VR applications, tend to disconnect users from their real selves [5]. Still, user-generated content and multilingual support offer pathways for targeted engagement. Non-verbal expression—such as gestures, sign language, and virtual arts—further enhance emotional communication [1, 5].

The immersive and inclusive nature of VR, its ability to create shared virtual environments in diverse cultural contexts, the ability to create inclusive environments related to different ethnicity backgrounds addressing individuals who initially does not desire physical presence, makes it well-suited for fostering social connections and alleviating loneliness among migrant communities. Therefore, more research is needed to design culturally sensitive VR spaces for specific groups such as migrants. This study addresses this gap by exploring how cultural spaces, objects, activities and embodied communication can reduce loneliness by enhancing belonging in migrant adults.

## 3 Requirement Gathering and Analysis

Since loneliness is a subjective condition and the proposed research is for the use of migrant adult personnel who are feeling lonely, the system design mainly focuses on user requirements in order to respond to their unique cultural needs. Therefore, the research follows a User Centered Design approach [10]. This approach will define how system should be developed interactively, focusing on user requirements and interests, following usability methods to improve productivity, acceptance, reduce errors and thereby providing applicable user experience.

### 3.1 Participants

Surveys and interviews were conducted with (1) migrants who are feeling lonely or experiencing cultural disconnection; and with (2) professionals who work with or study migrant communities and/or mental health. Requirements were initially gathered without a specific focus on an ethnic group of migrants. This was with the intention to understand the broader perspective of migrant loneliness and cultural disconnection. However, due to the nature of subjectiveness of loneliness and culture towards specific ethnic

groups, eventually the requirement gathering focus was narrowed down to understand the cultural needs of one specific ethnicity. Due to the researcher’s familiarity with the Sri Lankan culture, the study then focused on gathering requirements from Sri Lankan migrant adults focusing at a cultural perspective.

The multi-phase user requirement gathering methods and involved participants are as follows:

- (1) Online surveys (n=70)
  - Migrants (n=50)
  - Professionals (n=20)
- (2) One-on-one interviews (n=15)
  - Migrants (n=10)
  - Professionals (n=5)
- (3) Focus group sessions (5)
  - Involving participants from different ethnicities (n=2)
  - Involving participants from same (Sri Lankan) ethnicity (n=3)

### 3.2 Methodology

The primary aim of the survey and interview study was to understand the lived experiences of loneliness among migrants and how cultural elements influence their coping mechanisms. The study specifically aimed to investigate how culture could help alleviate loneliness and disconnection feelings. Furthermore, the study explored both digital and non-digital interventions currently in use by migrant adults, identifying their perceived benefits and limitations. Additionally, the study aimed to gather suggestions and feedback from migrants on the concept of a VR-based cultural intervention, in order to inform the design and development of a culturally sensitive Social VR experience.

Initially, the study adopted a broad approach, to investigate over-all experiences of loneliness and cultural disconnection among migrants and the possibility of the usage of culture along with technology to help them alleviate their loneliness. In this case, surveys were initially conducted to explore which aspects of culture migrants felt they were missing in their host country, and how these cultural gaps influenced their sense of belonging and loneliness. Surveys were chosen primarily because their anonymity encouraged participants to respond honestly, especially when addressing sensitive emotional topics such as loneliness. Additionally, surveys enabled data collection from a large and diverse group within a short period time. Following the survey phase, one-on-one follow up interviews were conducted to gain deeper insights into individual experiences. The ability of direct interviews was also available. These interviews allowed for a more detailed exploration of personal stories, emotions, and coping mechanisms based on participants’ initial responses. However, given the diverse cultural backgrounds of migrants, it became necessary to narrow the focus to gain deeper insights. Therefore, the study incorporated more focus group discussions with specific ethnic groups. Therefore, the latter part of the focus group sessions involved groups of Sri Lankan migrants of Sinhalese ethnicity to explore collective experiences and cultural disconnection in depth in the Sri Lankan cultural context. This allowed for a more nuanced understanding of how culture shapes emotional wellbeing and provided grounded insights into

how digital interventions like VR could include cultural elements influencing emotional wellbeing and community connection.

The multi-phase requirement gathering process through survey and interview study is shown in Figure 2.

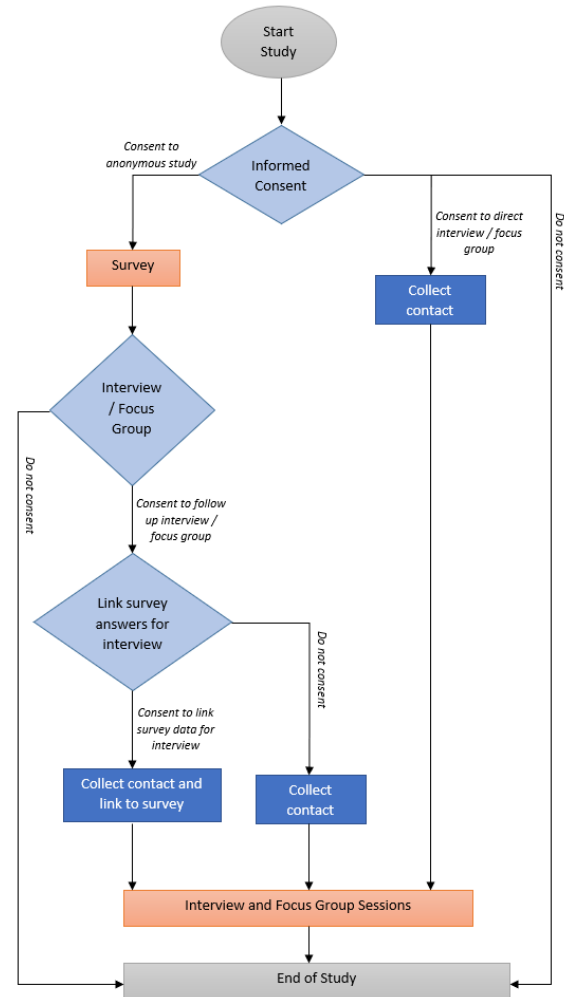


Figure 2: The multi-phase requirement gathering process

Before starting the study, Human Ethics clearance was obtained through the university’s Ethics Committee. The survey was conducted online using the Qualtrics platform, allowing participants to respond conveniently and anonymously. At the end of the survey, participants were given the option to volunteer for a follow-up interview. In addition to this, direct invitations to interviews were distributed throughout the study period to broaden participation. These invitations were shared among international students, cultural clubs, mental health and migrant professionals, and community advocates connected to migrant networks.

All interviews were recorded via Zoom, and the platform’s built-in transcription feature was used to generate transcripts for analysis. Once data collection was complete, a thematic analysis was

conducted following a six-phase framework [6]. The process began with data familiarisation, where transcripts were read to gain an in-depth understanding of participants’ narratives. This was followed by initial coding, during which segments of text were systematically labelled to capture meaningful features relevant to migrant loneliness and cultural disconnection. A codebook was then developed to ensure consistency, refine definitions, and group related codes together. From these codes, candidate themes were generated, representing broader patterns. NVivo software was used to organise codes, visualise connections, and facilitate iterative refinement of themes. Additionally, justifications for theme relevance were strengthened using OpenAI’s FAISS for identifying semantic patterns across large text segments. This helped identify recurring patterns and meaningful themes across the dataset. The insights gained from these themes, in conjunction with theoretical knowledge from existing literature, informed the development of both the functional and non-functional requirements for the proposed VR-based cultural intervention - iBelongVR.

### 3.3 Key Findings

Four main themes emerged after performing analysis:

- (1) Migrant Challenges leading to Loneliness
- (2) Cultural Context of Migrant Loneliness
- (3) Loneliness Interventions
- (4) Feedback of the VR intervention

When discussing overall migrant challenges, missing their culture emerged as a significant sub theme on top of acculturation and culture shock. When discussing how challenges have lead migrants to feel lonely, missing their cultural elements emerged as a significant reason with a predominant focus on missing routines and performing cultural activities. This was understood as a major gap in their new lives. An interesting finding was that despite their different ethnicities, majority of the participants expressed missing celebrating their traditional New Year festivals. The lack of experiencing familiar colors, sounds, and atmospheres prominently contributed to this sense of detachment. Migrants also expressed that they miss their day to day clothing which they used to wear in their country of origin. Justifying this, 50% of the experts mentioned that migrants do not feel comfortable dressing in a way that express their cultural identity in public. 70% of experts mention that through cultural community organizations, migrants are able to participate, perform and attend activities which align with their culture. However, contrasting to this, migrants highlighted that even though cultural engagement was available, many found it inadequate or difficult to sustain due to several challenges. Migrants mentioned that cultural meetups are not always effective due to unavailability of meetups area wise, meetups not being advertised adequately and feeling uncomfortable meeting unfamiliar people even from same cultural group. Cultural resources being expensive and limited was also exacerbated as a reason for being unable to simulate cultural practices. According to experts, for a migrant, missing their own culture is an equally severe challenge as language barriers and missing their own family. According to professional insights, some migrants internalize loneliness as a personal failure. Not accepting the change of life and culture and not knowing how to get out of the cycle has pushes them to feel more lonely. 50% of

experts are unaware of any technological interventions to specifically address loneliness, whereas social media based applications are prominently used by migrants to connect with others. 64% of migrants know that community support interventions exist, however migrant interview responses highlight the fact that they miss the period of traditional festive seasons which includes preparation, pre and post celebrations. Migrant Interview Participant 1 stated “I use to celebrate my traditional event for a whole week in my country, but in New Zealand our community celebrate it only for one day”. Another interesting finding was that both migrants and professionals were interested in real human interaction with like minded people through digital spaces. Participants expressed a strong desire to experience own cultural events and familiar environments through digital systems, specially focusing on extending virtual meetups made through virtual environment into physical meetups. Figure 3 shows the Hierarchy Chart depicting the four main themes and sub coding references created in NVivo.

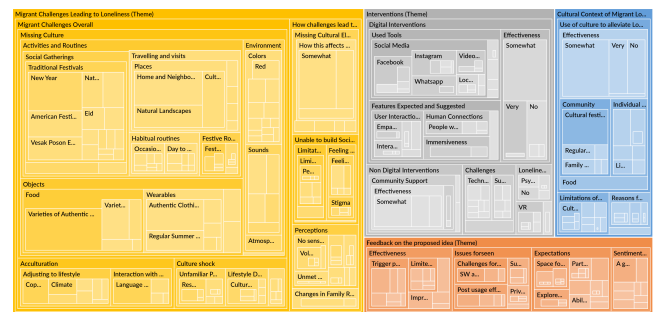


Figure 3: Hierarchy Chart depicting the four main themes and sub coding

A prototype was designed including features on culturally sensitive avatar customization, culturally related objects and spaces, and cultural events and celebrations. These findings, combined with theoretical and empirical literature, guided the conceptualization and development of iBelongVR.

### 4 iBelongVR

iBelongVR is a culturally immersive virtual reality experience designed to help migrants reconnect with their heritage. Through culturally tailored objects, activities and spaces, users are encouraged to reflect on their identity and foster a sense of belonging in their new surroundings in their host country. The experience is currently designed subjective to Sri Lankan ethnic communities to explore it’s effectiveness. Prototype modules focusing on culturally tailored objects, spaces and activities using Unreal Development Platform is shown in Figure 1.

The current experience takes place in a culturally authentic virtual environment inspired by a traditional Sri Lankan village home and its surrounding yard. The timeline falls on the Avurudu (Sri Lankan New Year) season which takes place on mid April. Users are able to explore the exterior and interior of the home. They are also free to try and interact (e.g. grab, pick up, throw) with 3D objects set within the environment. Inside the home, users will interact with familiar 3D objects such as the traditional oil



Figure 4: Sri Lankan village home



Figure 5: Authentic food, art and Prompts enhancing nostalgia and self reflection about new possibilities

lamp, Avurudu table with authentic food and temple flowers, each triggering nostalgic memories and reflective prompts about home and cultural practices. Users can also view and customize their own avatar using Sri Lankan traditional clothing which might depict cultural identity. Outside the home, users can interact with flora and fauna which can be seen in a typical Sri Lankan village garden. Users can also experience environmental sounds which resembles Sri Lankan surroundings. Additionally, users can engage in traditional Avurudu games and customs.

The design of iBelongVR was informed by key findings from the study, which identified specific cultural disconnections experienced by Sri Lankan migrants. Table 1 depicts how the empirical and theoretical studies have informed the design and development of iBelongVR.

## 5 Discussion

Findings from the survey and interview study revealed that migrants often experience cultural disconnection during traditional festivities, especially during the New Year. For Sri Lankans this is deeply associated with visiting their village homes, family gatherings, and sensory elements like traditional foods, clothing, and environmental sounds. To address these gaps, the iBelongVR prototype recreates a culturally rich Sri Lankan village environment mainly focusing on the New Year time period, allowing users to



Figure 6: User engagement in avatar customization



Figure 7: User engagement with traditional games

explore, interact, and reflect. Features such as avatar customization, ambient sounds (e.g., Koha bird), and culturally familiar objects aim to foster identity expression and emotional resonance. Social features, including multi-user rituals and native language use, are designed to enhance belonging and reduce communication barriers. A potential risk of iBelongVR is that lonely migrants may overuse the system as a substitute for real world interactions, which could inadvertently increase social withdrawal. To mitigate this, the application is designed not as an end point but as a bridge supporting self reflection leading to outward action. Through nostalgic prompts reflective thinking about how cultural identity can be preserved and reimagined in their host country is encouraged. By integrating these culturally grounded elements, the research tries to investigate the possibility of reducing loneliness through meaningful immersive cultural engagement. Additionally, software-based measures are implemented to reduce any potential discomfort/motion sickness related to visual effects (e.g., using teleportation rather than continuous movement in the VR environment). During the user

**Table 1: Use of empirical and theoretical studies to develop iBelongVR**

Finding : Migrants miss New Year celebration
iBelongVR Component : Experience takes place in a Sri Lankan village home with the timeline being the New Year season. See Figure 4
Justification : Sri Lankan New Year is celebrated with all generations in family homes, usually in villages far from urban areas
Finding : Migrants miss familiar colors, sounds and atmosphere
iBelongVR Component : Intractable objects, walking through culturally sensitive space and environmental sounds
Justification : During New Year, significant food and art are created. See Figure 5. The "Koha" bird sound can be heard during New Year only
Finding : Migrants missing day to day clothing, Uncomfortable to express cultural identity
iBelongVR Component : Avatar customization. See Figure 6
Justification : Giving migrants a chance to expose their identity with Sri Lankan clothing
Finding : Migrants missing performing traditional activities due to cultural resources being expensive and limited
iBelongVR Component : Availability to perform New Year rituals and activities using interactable virtual objects and spaces
Justification : Giving migrants a chance to performing traditional activities (Multi user interaction to be implemented in stage2)
Finding : Migrants not knowing how to get out of the cycle of loneliness
iBelongVR Component : Prompts enhancing nostalgia and self reflection about new possibilities. See Figure 5
Justification : Self reflection about how to convert their cultural aspects into new possibilities in their host country
Finding : Cultural meetups not being effective due to not feeling belonged to community
iBelongVR Component : Availability to perform New Year rituals and activities in a multi user environment
Justification : Giving migrants a chance to initially anonymize themselves and build meaningful relationships (Multi user interaction to be implemented in stage2)
Finding : Language barrier
iBelongVR Component : Perform New Year rituals, engage in traditional games and activities with other Sri Lankan users
Justification : Ability to use their mother tongue if necessary (Multi user interaction to be implemented in stage2)
Finding : Migrants miss the period of traditional festive seasons
iBelongVR Component : Activities and games related to New Year available over a period of time. See Figure 7
Justification : Mirror the seasonal nature of traditional festivals and provide ongoing connection (Multi user interaction to be implemented in stage2)

studies, data on motion sickness, fatigue, and discomfort will also be collected to conduct a psychological comfort analysis of the application. The research has undergone a pilot testing phase and has begun user studies with first-generation Sri Lankan migrants in New Zealand aged 18+.

## 6 Conclusion and Future Work

This study aims to highlight the importance of a culturally sensitive immersive intervention to alleviate loneliness among migrants. By identifying key cultural elements, such as New Year traditions, familiar clothing, language and rituals, iBelongVR was designed to recreate an immersive cultural environment, currently focusing on the Sri Lankan cultural context. The current development phase (Stage 1) features a single-user VR experience focused on nostalgic engagement, identity expression and self reflection. User studies will assess emotional impact, usability, and relevance. Insights from this evaluation will inform the development of Stage 2, which will integrate SocialVR components, enabling multi-user interaction, performing cultural rituals, and real-time social bonding within the virtual space. A second round of user studies will then evaluate whether such culturally contextualized virtual worlds effectively support emotional wellbeing and alleviate loneliness of migrants. This two-stage approach aims to create a robust, user-informed intervention that bridges cultural gaps through meaningful digital experiences.

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