

Alleviating Migrant Loneliness with Culturally Immersive VR



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Loneliness

Loneliness is a subjective condition that arises from unmet expectations in **Participants** social relationships It is an emotional state felt differently by everyone; one . person might have few relationships and not feel lonely, while another could have a large social circle but still feel lonely [1][2][5].

Migrant Loneliness

- Main reason : Absence of familiar culture, family, and identity ^{[3][4]}.
- **Impact** : Leads them to feel a lack of belonging in their new surroundings.
- Consequences: Hinders the formation of meaningful relationships, causing voluntary social disconnection^[5].

Existing Loneliness Interventions

- Lack cultural sensitivity which reduces sense of belonging.
- Require initial community connection (e.g. social networking apps).
- Research conducted from a Western perspective (US and UK).
- Cluster diverse ethnic backgrounds into single categories.
- Predominant focus on older adults (65+) (e.g. VR reminiscence) therapy^[6]).

Problem

Need for interventions focusing on loneliness and different cultural contexts exploring adult participants from a range of cultures within a New Zealand context.

Research Methodology

- Investigate the role of culture and technology in addressing loneliness among overall migrant adults (18+ age) and subjective to specific ethnicities.
- Literature, survey and interview study.
- **Develop** a culturally sensitive gamified immersive intervention to help alleviate loneliness of migrant adults of specific ethnicity (Sri Lankan). • VR environment following User Centered Design (UCD) approach.
- Evaluate the developed intervention.
- o Conduct user studies with Sri Lankan immigrants living in New Zealand.

Current Status

Research is in the pilot study phase, with user testing planned to further assess the impact and improvement of iBelongVR on migrant wellbeing.

- Migrants who are experiencing loneliness/cultural disconnection.
- Professionals who work with/study migrant communities and/or mental health.

70 Survey Results & 20 Interview Results

Cultural Disconnection Drives Loneliness

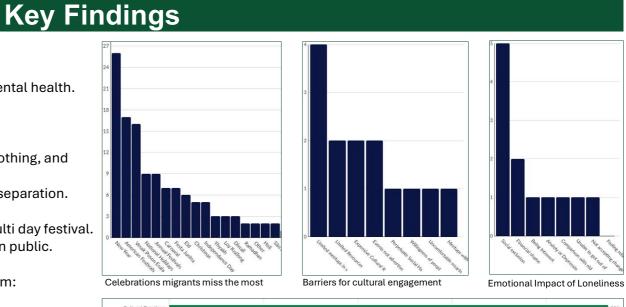
- · Migrants feel lonely due to the loss of familiar routines, festivals, clothing, and surroundings.
- Cultural loss seen as equally severe as language barriers or family separation.
- **Traditional Celebrations Are Deeply Missed**
- Regardless of ethnicity migrants miss celebrating New Year as a multi day festival.

Experts say migrants feel uncomfortable wearing cultural clothing in public. **Barriers to Cultural Engagement**

- Experts noted cultural events exist, but migrants find barriers in them: •
 - · Hard to access (e.g., limited by location, poor advertising).
 - Socially difficult (unfamiliar faces, discomfort).
- Expensive and limited in resources.

Emotional Impact & Tech Opportunities

- Experts noted internalized loneliness as a "personal failure" among migrants.
- Both groups show high interest in cultural experiences via digital platforms.
- Strong desire to blend virtual meetups with real-life gatherings.





iBelongVR

A culturally immersive Social VR experience to help migrants reconnect with their heritage. Through culturally tailored objects, activities and spaces, users can reflect on their identity and foster a sense of belonging in their host country. Experience is currently designed subjective to Sri Lankan ethnic communities to explore effectiveness.





Interactable objects, Avatar customization and familiar sounds experience

References

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Aspects whose absence most deeply affects migrants



Prompts enhancing nostalgia and self reflection about new possibilities