



Rebuilding Belonging: Cultural Identity and Loneliness in Migrant – Focused Social VR

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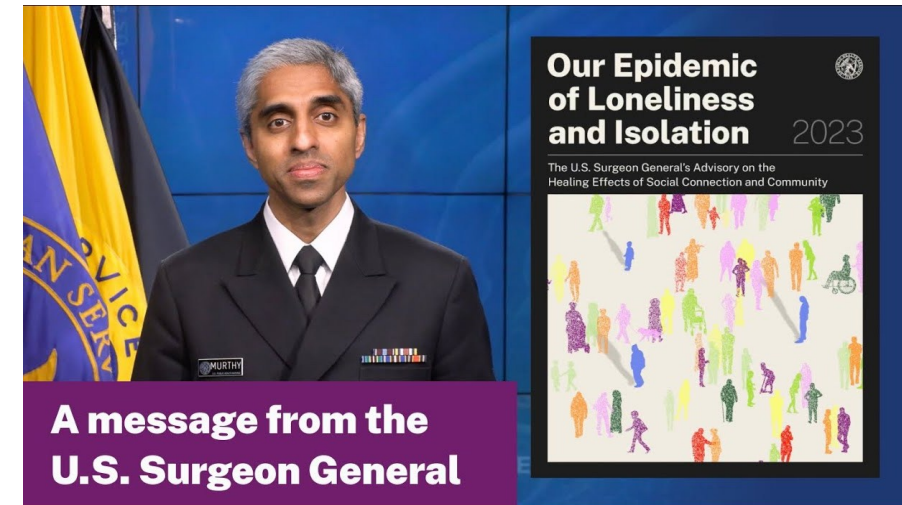


LONELINESS

A mismatch between an individual's desired and actual social relationships

A subjective emotional state

- One might have few relationships and not feel lonely
- Another could have a large social circle but still feel lonely



MIGRANT LONELINESS

Reason : Absence of familiar culture and identity

Impact : Feeling a lack of belonging in their new surroundings

Consequences : Hinders formation of meaningful relationships, causing voluntary social disconnection



PROBLEM

Existing loneliness interventions

- Lack of cultural sensitivity – reduce sense of belonging
- Require initial community connection (e.g. social networking apps)

Existing Research

- Conducted from a Western perspective (US and UK)
- Cluster diverse ethnic backgrounds into single categories
- Predominant focus on older adults (65+)



Need for loneliness interventions that consider diverse cultural contexts and adult participants

RESEARCH METHOD

Investigate the role of culture and technology in addressing migrant loneliness

- Literature
- 70 Survey and 20 Interview results
 - Migrants experiencing loneliness/cultural disconnection
 - Professionals working with migrant communities

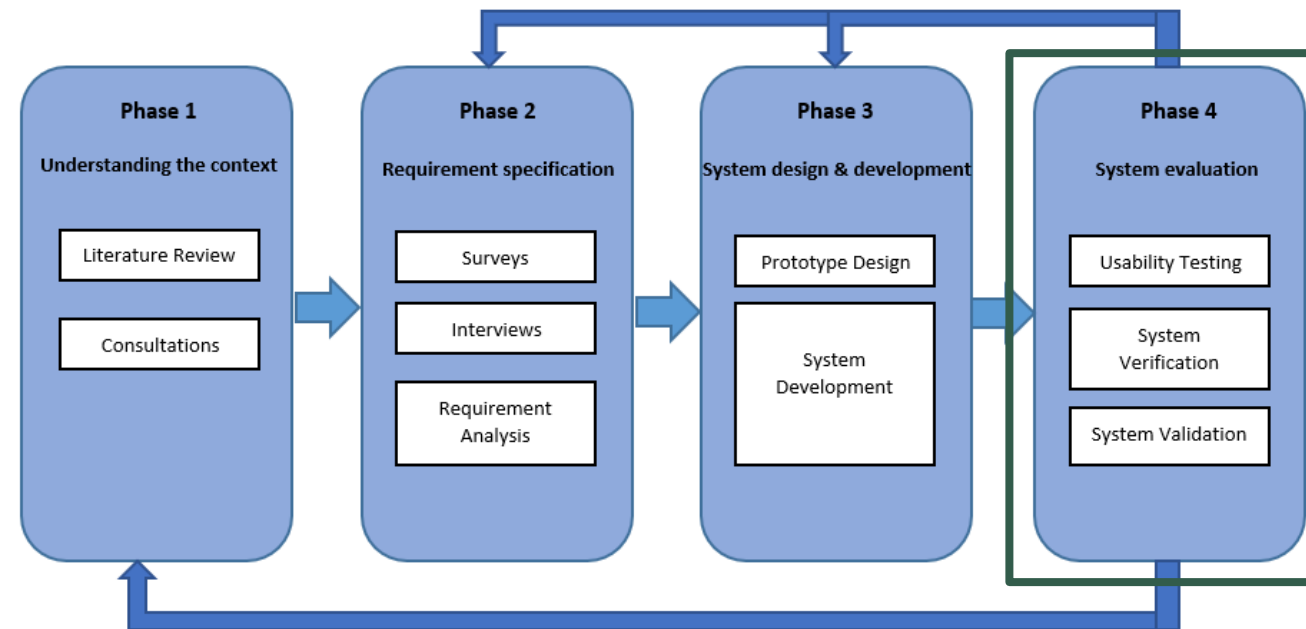
Develop a culturally sensitive immersive intervention to help alleviate loneliness by enhancing belongingness

- **iBelongVR** – currently focused on Sri Lankan ethnicity

Evaluate the intervention

- Conduct user studies with Sri Lankans living in New Zealand
- UCLA-6, GBS, TSRI scales

User Centered Design Approach



KEY FINDINGS – Survey and Interview study

Cultural Disconnection Drives Loneliness

- Loss of routines, festivals, clothing, surroundings
- Cultural loss as severe as language/family gaps

Traditional Celebrations Are Deeply Missed

- Migrants miss multi-day New Year festivals

Barriers to Cultural Engagement

- Cultural events exist, but limited accessibility, costly and poorly advertised
- Discomfort with unfamiliar faces

Emotional Impact & Tech Opportunities

- Internalized loneliness as a “personal failure” and not knowing how to get out of the cycle
- High interest in cultural experiences via digital platforms
- Strong desire to blend virtual meetups with real-life gatherings

iBelongVR – stage 1



Experience takes place in a Sri Lankan village home during the New Year season



Interactable objects, routines, activities, familiar sounds and atmosphere



Prompts and Avatar Customization enhancing nostalgia and self reflection about new possibilities

KEY FINDINGS - Pilot Study

Cultural Immersion

- Strong nostalgia from sounds, objects and interactions
- Reflection on identity increased

Social Connection

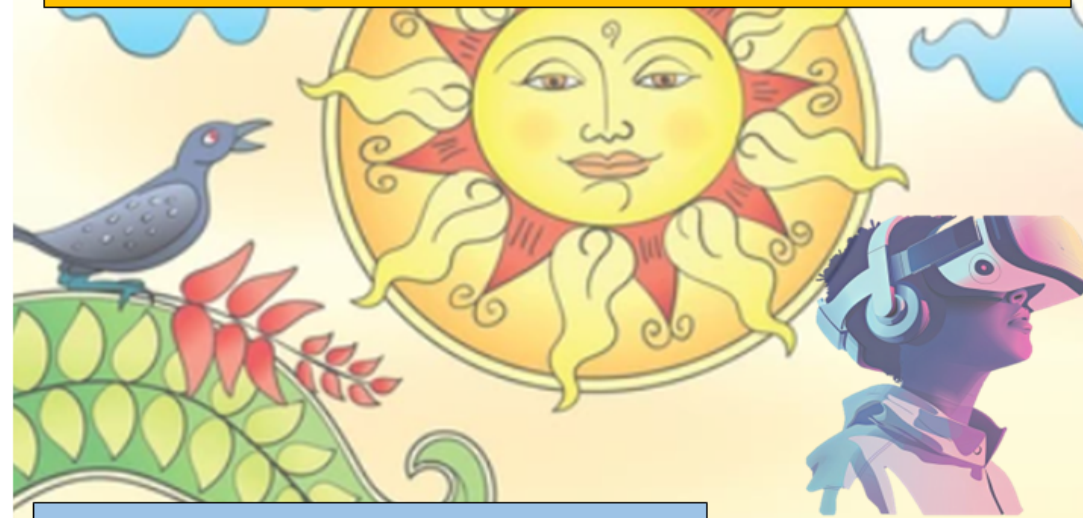
- High interest in future multi-user features
- “VR felt safer than physical meetups” – participant 3

Improvement Suggestions

- Add narration/tutorials
- Expand cultural scenes/activities

USER STUDY

Are you first generation Sri Lankan migrant aged 18+?
Have you ever felt culturally disconnected or lonely?



We invite you to take part in an exciting research study!

Experience traditional Sri Lankan "Awurudu" through VR!

(No prior VR experience needed)



- **Duration:** ~2 hours
- **Thank You Gift:** \$20 NZD Koha
- **Scan QR Code to check eligibility & register!**

Or

email your interest : nishadi.ariyasinghe@vuw.ac.nz



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iBelongVR

