

# Co-Design and Evaluation of a Digital Platform derived from the Lived Experience of Loneliness among UK Older Adults during COVID-19

SERVICE Project - <https://serviceproject.org.uk/>

Our project aimed to:

- 1) Investigate the lived experience of loneliness among older adults during COVID-19
- 2) Co-Design and Evaluate a smartphone App that addresses the increased risks of loneliness facing older adults during and beyond the pandemic

Read the outputs of our work so far at:

<https://psyarxiv.com/pufd5/>  
<https://psyarxiv.com/rhf32/>



**UK Research and Innovation**

# COVID-19 exaggerates identity-related vulnerabilities to loneliness in older adults

Older adults faced social restrictions during COVID-19, which was likely to exacerbate existing propensity for loneliness and decline of social connections.

We explored older adult loneliness during the pandemic:

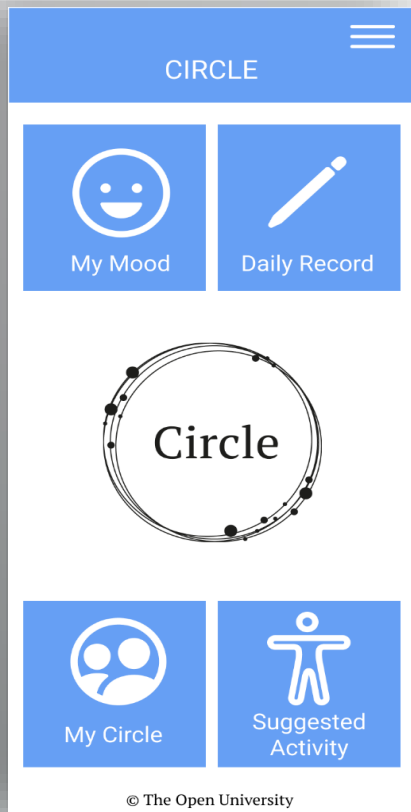
- Focus groups ( $N=33$ , 11 groups, selected for diversity of living situations and gender), and Interviews with medically vulnerable older adults at 3 time points ( $N=9$ , Late 2019, Mid 2020; Early 2021)

**We found that:**

- COVID-19 restrictions impacted undermined **fragile group memberships and relationships**
- Undermined **participation** and **usefulness**, intensifying identity threats of marginalisation and redundancy in later life. Inability to **reciprocate** in social support fuels the identity threat of burdensomeness.
- Increased reliance on **technology** must empower older adults to avoid performance anxiety, feelings of age difference and alienation

# Our digital platform ('Circle')

We designed the first platform that builds on social identity theory to help older adults increase understanding of their social world, enhance social reflection, and reduce loneliness.

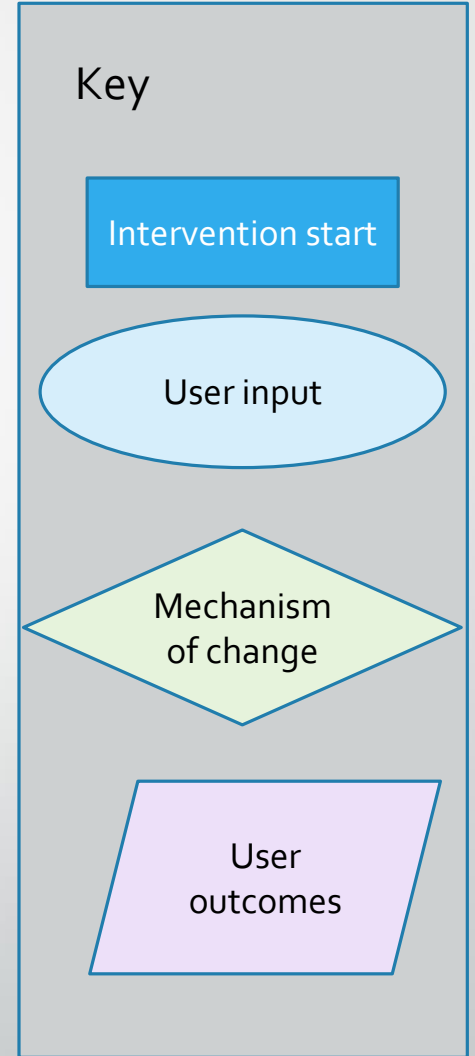
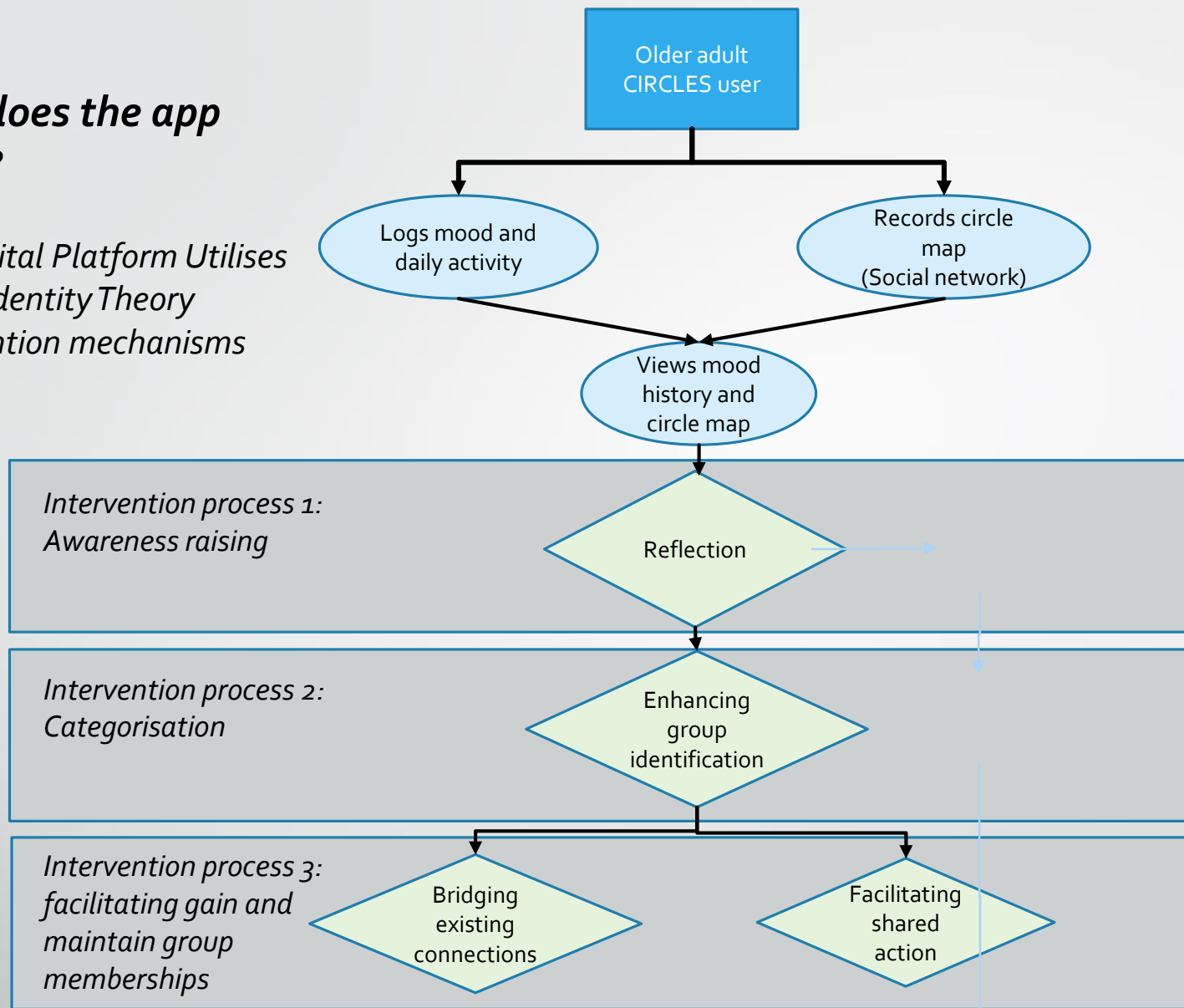


## The design process:

- Late 2020: Initial older adults co-design interviews ( $N=10$ ) discussing app concept
- Early 2021: Usability trial with older adults ( $N=12$ , 1 week using app)
- Mid 2021: Field trial partnered with Wellmoor, recruiting a rural older adult population ( $N=17$ , 2-week app use)
- Upcoming early 2022: Randomised trial evaluating app efficacy in delivering loneliness reduction compared to waitlist group.

# How does the app work?

The Digital Platform Utilises Social Identity Theory intervention mechanisms



- Increased feelings of belonging and social support within existing social groups;
- reducing loneliness ;
- increased wellbeing

# What next? Implications for...

## Research

- Our app promotes self-reflection, older adult's identification with their groups, and can accentuate their roles within their families and local communities, which is one method of addressing the feelings of uselessness that occurred during the pandemic.

## Practice

- Loneliness relates to feeling useless and dependent on others – thus opportunities should maximize on contributions older adults make to supporting their communities.
- Digital inclusivity for older adults needs to address feelings of dependency and disconnection that can be created by technology;

## Policy

- Positive ageing identity promotion needs to be a key focus of post-pandemic loneliness reduction efforts.