

METHOD CONCEPT: Online probes with online rapid prototyping

INSPIRATION

- Speculative design
- Design sociology (Lupton, 2017)
- Cultural Probes (Gaver et al., 1999; Gaver et al., 2004)

Key RQs:

- How do participants frame touch and digital touch in narratives of loneliness?
- What insights can open-ended and speculative design methods provide on the role of touch and digital touch in narratives of loneliness?

PREPARATION

- **Online probes:** Create a website or PDF with a selection of approx. 6 online probe tasks per week (participants will be encouraged to select 1 or 2 of these). Ensure these tasks are short and offer a range of response mediums as options (e.g. short story, photo, 30 second film, sketch). Your website / PDF should also include a short introduction to the online probes, how to use them (including instructions for sending completed tasks), and what you hope participants will get out of doing them.
- **Online Rapid Prototyping** (to take place during an online workshop): Email participants in advance of the workshop to explain the idea of rapid prototyping in clear language, and suggest some possible materials for participants to have ready to hand (e.g., 'any of the following you have available: scissors, tape, paper, a small selection of recycling packaging, small objects, crafty bits and bobs...'). Also prepare a short presentation of example touch technologies designed around loneliness to discuss first with participants (and which they can draw on as inspiration for their prototyping).



REFERENCES

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METHOD



Online probes – an adaptation of cultural probes – are a digital method where participants respond to open-ended ‘evocative tasks’ communicated by any combination of website, social media, apps and email. Sometimes also called ‘digital probes’, they may involve a number of digitally connected devices, including, but not limited to personal computers, tablets and smart phones. A key shift with online probes is that researchers provide the tasks, but not the physical objects and materials. This shift also applies to **online rapid prototyping**.

These methods were used in the context of **a three-part creative (online) workshop series** designed to support participants to explore the complex areas of loneliness, touch and digital touch in stages. Participants were invited to engage with the online probes in-between the online workshops.

- 1. Week 1 – Online Workshop 1: Touch & Loneliness (1.5 hrs):** (Email participants in advance asking them to prepare paper, pen/pencils & an ‘object of connection’ to introduce themselves with). Participants introduce themselves through their ‘object of connection’, define loneliness, map experiences of loneliness and then frame touch within those experiences. At the end of the workshop, they are introduced the online probes (the website) and are invited to select 1-2 (of 6) probe tasks, to help them develop their reflections on touch and loneliness. These can be emailed or sent via WhatsApp to the researcher the following week. After the workshop, email participants with a re-cap of the online probes instructions and a list of what materials to prepare for the online rapid prototyping next week (see P1. ‘Preparation’).
- 2. Week 2 – Online Workshop 2: Digital Touch & Loneliness Part I (1.5 hrs):** Participants share the process of their online probe returns from Week 1 (if they are happy to). Researcher gives short presentation with example digital touch technologies, which participants then discuss/critique. Participants are then invited to rapid prototype a digital touch technology around loneliness and connection (they can frame this how they wish, e.g., solution-oriented and aimed to comfort and support, or more questioning, as critique). They then present their prototypes to the group. Finally, the researcher introduces the online probes for Week 2 and emails participants with a re-cap of these instructions and a list of what to prepare for Week 3 (pen, paper and their prototype).
- 3. Week 3 – Online Workshop 3: Digital Touch & Loneliness Part II (1.5 hrs):** Participants share the process of their online probe returns from Week 2 (if they are happy to). Researcher facilitates further discussion of prototypes from Online Workshop 2, and then broader questions about touch and loneliness and final reflections of taking part.

METHOD CONCEPT: Online Rapid Prototyping with Online Probes

SCENARIO

For the online rapid prototyping:

- 1. Discuss the example digital touch technologies shown in the short presentation – what stood out?*
- 2. Imagine (and prototype) a digital touch technology around loneliness & connection (this can be to ameliorate loneliness, and/or a way to critique touch technologies designed for loneliness)*
- 3. Select 1-2 probe tasks to complete this week (and discuss in the following online workshop)*

PARTICIPANTS

- 1) people over 70 who were self-isolating*
- 2) professionals between the ages of 25-55 working from home*
- 3) young people aged 18-24*

There were 6 workshop groups in total: Two groups for each of the above demographics, with an average of 4 participants in each group (24 participants in total: 7 males and 17 females).

INSIGHTS/FINDINGS

Touch comforts - for many, touch is comforting for moments of loneliness – and this idea of touch is expanded in lots of different ways. Social touch is important, but participants also spoke about touch from animals, the natural world, objects, and the feel and sensations of particular materials.

Materiality matters: Digital touch is often perceived as too hard – participants desired softer, more comforting materialities, as well as less synthetic ones!

The online adaptations of the methods used in this study created a changed relationship to materials in the project, and supported remote engagement with embodied ideas, like touch, differently.

The shift from researcher-led resources /materials (traditionally curated/provided by the researcher/facilitator in rapid prototyping and cultural probe methods) to participants' home resources often led to personalised and novel outcomes, which allowed participants to express nuanced aspects of touch (and digital touch) and loneliness in their lived experiences (see examples on the next page).

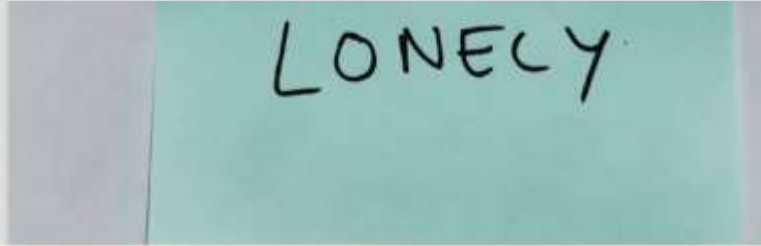
Whilst there is not an equivalent in-person version of the study to directly compare this to, it's possible that participants being situated in their homes and using materials they had to hand gave them more agency and control.

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Online Probes Website: Example tasks



CONNECTION



LONELY

(A) Create a 'textural vocabulary' of loneliness & connection.

In your home, find textures you associate with words from the 'vocabulary' of loneliness. Write the associated word on a piece of paper or post-it, next to each texture, and photograph your outcome.

You may find that you associate more than one texture with a word, in which case you may like to cluster groups of textures together.

Some examples of words you might explore include (but are not limited to):

- *Lonely*
- *Longing*
- *Estranged*
- *Homesick*
- *Disconnected*
- *Alienated*
- *Marginalised*
- *Spititude*
- *Connected*

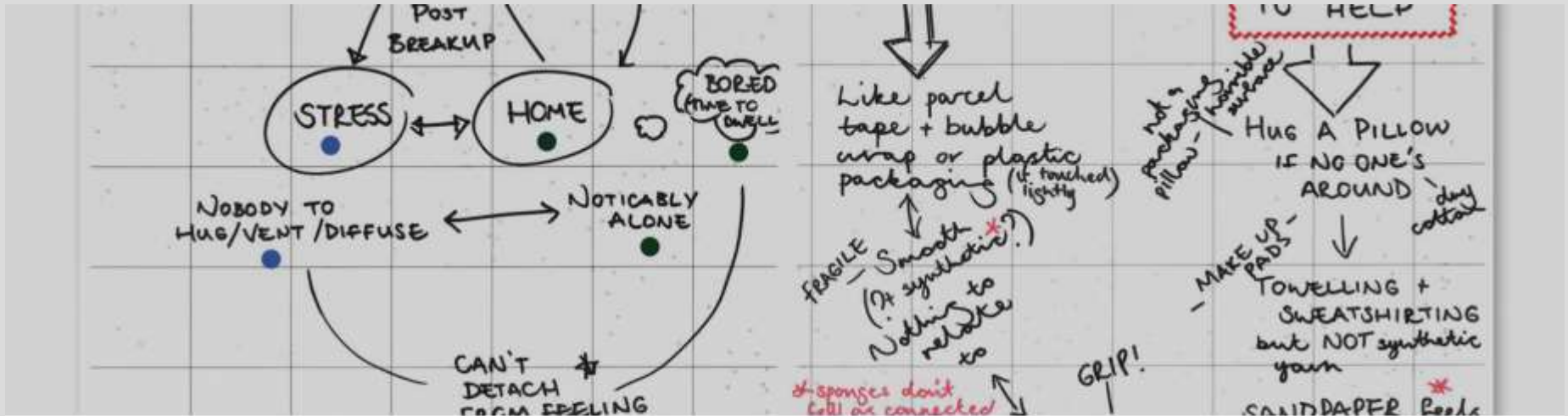
*Please send your outcome(s) via email to [redacted]@ucl.ac.uk, or via the 'Digital Probes Returns' WhatsApp number: +44 (0) [redacted]

Please include the task identification letter 'A' in your communication.

If you need clarification on any of the tasks, please contact me at the above email address.

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Online Probes Website: Example tasks



(E) Make your workshop map tactile.

In Workshop 1, you mapped moments of loneliness and connection over time, thought about whether touch played a role in these experiences:

Make this map tactile - you might like to do this by adding cuttings taken from resources in your home (e.g. foil, cotton wool etc.). Or you might like to re-make your map in tactile form.

*Photograph your map. Please send your outcome via email to [redacted]@ucl.ac.uk, or via the 'Digital Probes Returns' WhatsApp number: +44 (0) [redacted]

Please include the task name or identification letter 'E' in your communication.

If you need clarification on any of the tasks, please contact me at the above email address.

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Online Probes & Rapid Prototyping: examples from one participant



Online probe return for Week 1 Task D, 'Make a touch postcard'



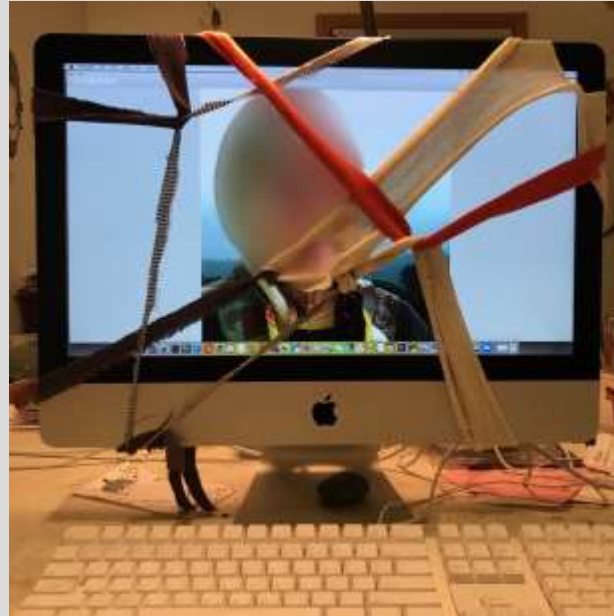
Workshop 2 rapid prototype of a digital touch technology: A programmable textile ribbon

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Online Probes & Rapid Prototyping: examples from one participant



Online probe return for Week 2 Task M, 'Write a diary entry from the perspective of your workshop prototype'



Online probe return for Week 2 Task I, 'Integrate digital touch with an existing object in your home'



Online probe return for Week 2 Task L, 'Engage your workshop prototype with different parts of the body'