

Improving Mental Health Peer Online Forums (IPOF)

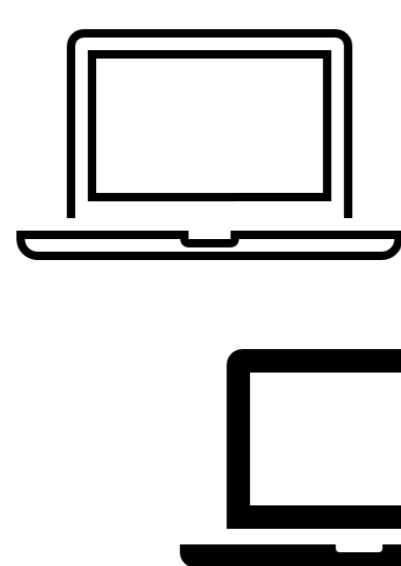
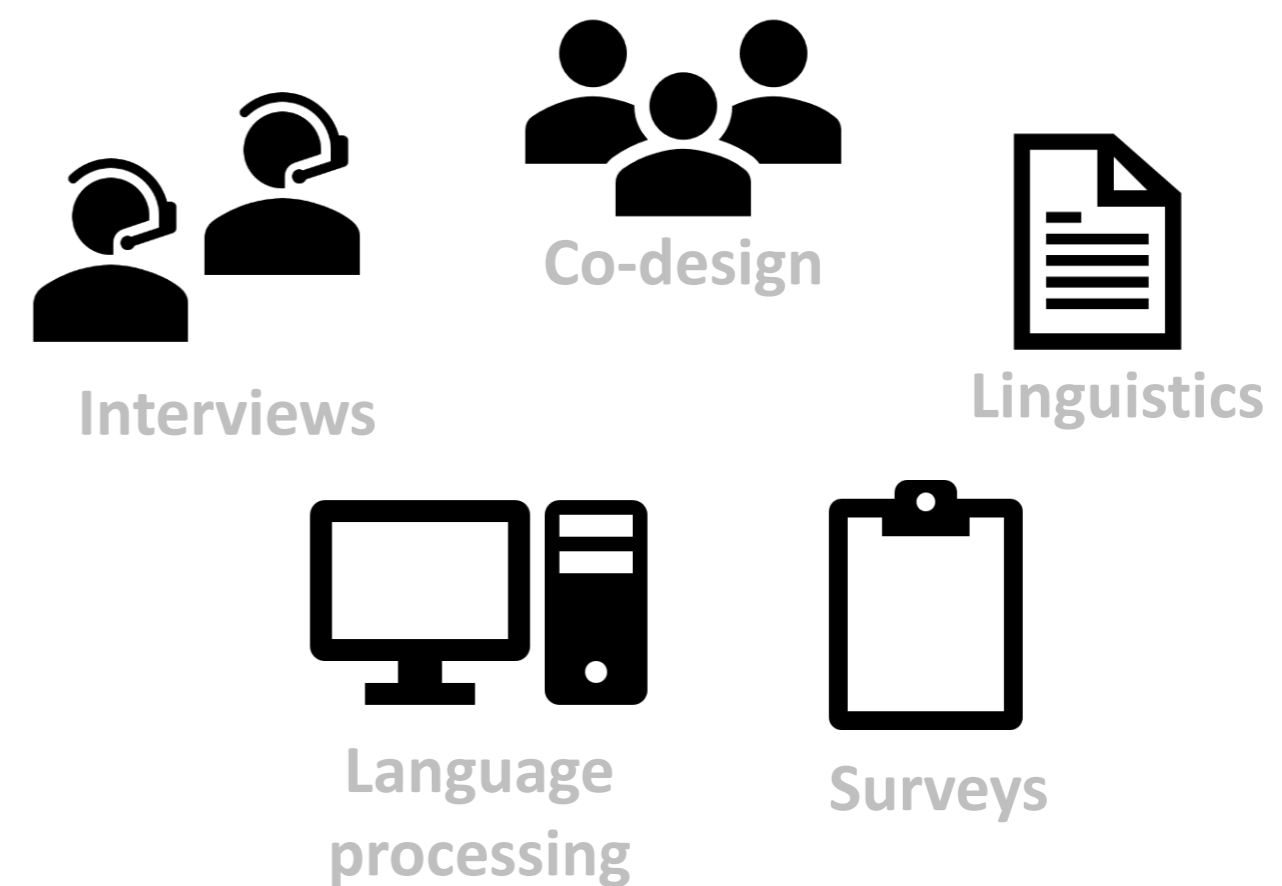
A mixed-methods realist evaluation 2022-2024

Paul Marshall & Zoe Glossop

This study is funded by the NIHR Health and Social Care Delivery Research (HS&DR) (NIHR134035). The views expressed are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.

Background

Online forums are text-based discussion platforms that allow users to share information and advice. Evidence of their safety and effectiveness for mental health support is mixed. The iPOF study is a mixed-methods realist evaluation working with a range of UK mental health communities. It aims to develop a programme theory to explain how forums work and co-designed resources to improve forum delivery.



Forums contexts:

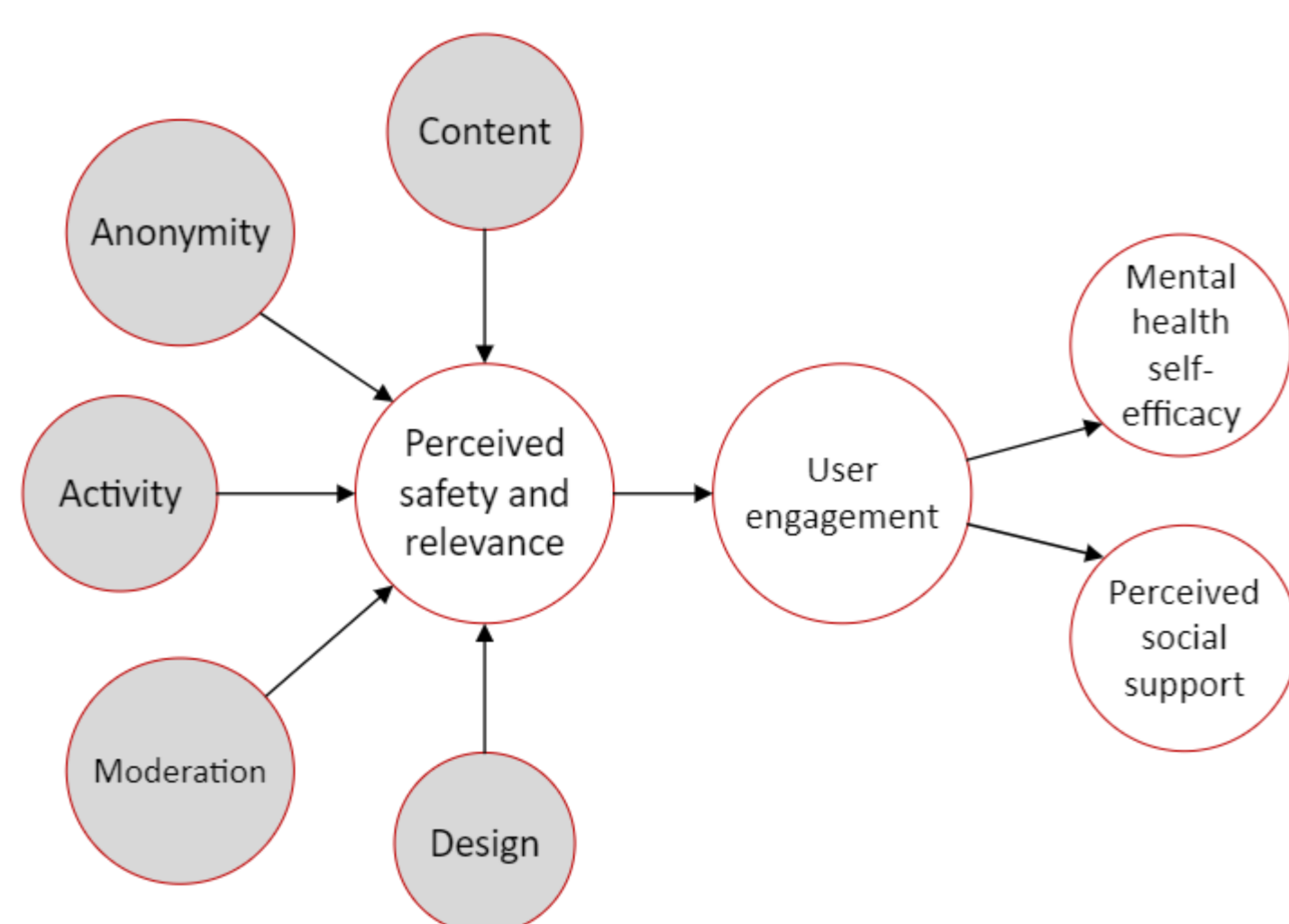
- Mental health charities
- NHS
- Peer-led forums
- Young people's services
- Carer's support
- Intervention research

Clinical Research Network funding

Demand for participation from forum providers was high. We secured CRN funding for 5 additional online forums to be involved in the study. Forums represent individual cases in this evaluation. By recruiting forums from a broad range of contexts, we are better placed to develop research outputs that are applicable to a wide audience.

Outcomes to date

- Produced a detailed protocol¹ and initial programme theory²
- Recruited further forum providers for a total of 10 cases
- Received over 1000 survey responses from forum users
- Conducted 50+ qualitative interviews with users and staff
- Downloaded over 100,000 forum posts
- Co-designed a knowledge translation video



Implications for forum delivery

Key issues for forum function and design include:

- Balancing openness and rule enforcement
- Balancing anonymity against safeguarding responsibilities
- Size and activity influence forum sustainability
- Sharing experiences promotes learning and connection
- Yet harms can emerge from exposure to distressing content
- Moderators are key to a forum's culture and safety

Further iPOF research

- Co-design of a staff training package
- Develop theory-informed design and evaluation guidance
- Test and refine theories to answer:
 - Why do people use online forums?
 - How is lived experience shared?
 - Do forums influence use of other services?
 - What makes forums safe?
 - What explains the impact of forum use on mental health?



1. Lobban et al. (2023). Improving Peer Online Forums (iPOF): protocol for a realist evaluation of peer online mental health forums to inform practice and policy. *BMJ open*, 13(7), e075142.

2. Marshall et al. (2024) Understanding the impacts of online mental health peer support forums: A realist synthesis. *JMIR Mental Health* (in press).