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## PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

(Young men focus groups)

### Project title:

**Designing an Empathic Virtual Agent for Mental Health: A User-Centred Approach to AI-Driven Mental Wellness**

### Research team:

This study is conducted by the Empathic Computing Laboratory (ECL), an academic research laboratory at the University of Auckland in Auckland, New Zealand, and University of South Australia in Adelaide, Australia, and at the. Directed by Prof. Mark Billingham, the ECL is exploring new ways for technology to enable people to better understand one another.



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Dear participant,

Thank you for your interest in participating in this focus group. We sincerely appreciate your willingness to contribute. This information sheet outlines the purpose of the focus group, the procedures involved, and your role as a participant.

Participation in this research is voluntary, and the invitation to participate can be declined without giving any reason. If you do choose to participate, you can withdraw at any time without experiencing any disadvantage.

With your consent, we will be audio recording this session. This recording is used solely for research purposes and is non-identifiable, as your name/face will not be associated with the audio recordings.

## Motivation and Aims:

Adolescents in New Zealand have the highest suicide rates among OECD countries. Depression is notably prevalent among young males, with incidence rates as high as 20% and significantly higher rates observed among Māori youth. Despite the severity of these challenges, one-quarter of young individuals seeking mental health support face waiting times exceeding four weeks.

This research aims to provide support for young men through AI-driven virtual humans that provide empathic responses in response to monitoring their emotional state. The anticipated outcome of this research is a deeper understanding of the potential for digital personas to address mental health challenges, and finally, the establishment of a platform (an Android Mobile Application) for delivering personalised mental health care.



The presented study will be conducted for 12 months, starting in November 2025 and ending in November 2026. Individuals are invited to help improve young men's mental health by participating in this study.

## Objectives:

We are exploring how young men feel about using digital mental health tools, like the Tōku Hoa app. This app features a digital buddy, an AI agent that talks with you and gives support based on how you're feeling. We want to hear your thoughts on how such a digital buddy should act, what kind of tone or personality it should have, and what features feel helpful or not.



## Eligibility criteria:

We will need 2-6 participants in each focus group.

To uphold the objectives of this study, clearly defined inclusion criteria have been established. These criteria are designed to ensure that participants possess the relevant characteristics or lived experiences necessary to provide meaningful contributions to the research aims. Should there be any questions or ambiguities concerning eligibility, individuals are invited to contact the research team for further clarification. Individuals who have a general interest in mental health and well-being, applications, trackers, and digital health in general can participate in this focus group.

- **Demographic Requirements:** Participants must be male and between 16 and 25 years of age.
- **Language Proficiency:** A proficient understanding of English is required, as the focus group will be conducted entirely in English.

## Equipment:

Here we provide an overview of the equipment you will use throughout the focus group. Please carefully review the equipment list to ensure a smooth and secure research experience for all involved.

- The focus group/interview can be conducted **in person** or over the **Zoom Call**.

## Methodology:

You will take part in a small group focus session (2–6 participants) where we will explore how young people perceive digital mental health support and how a virtual companion app like Tōku Hoa could better meet your needs.

In the session, we will ask open-ended questions and facilitate a semi-structured discussion. Topics may include:

- Your preferences for how a digital companion should behave or respond
- What features make such tools feel useful, trustworthy, or supportive
- Tone, language, and personality traits that feel appropriate or relatable
- Any concerns you might have about privacy, stigma, or using such an app in daily life

You will not be required to share anything personal or disclose your mental health status unless you choose to.

The session will be audio recorded (with your permission) to help us understand group feedback. The recordings will be transcribed, and once the transcripts are verified, the original audio will be securely deleted.



**Please note:** Because this is a group setting, it may not be possible to remove specific comments if others have responded to them. However, if you wish to withdraw specific statements, you may contact the research team within **one week** of the session, and we will review your request.

We may show brief video demos or mock-ups of the Tōku Hoa app to spark discussion or gather feedback on early design ideas.

- Outcome: Insights from the session will help us refine the app's interaction design, agent personality, and content tone to make it more engaging and effective for young users.
- Duration: 60 to 90 minutes
- Location: Auckland Bioengineering Institute (ABI), 70 Symonds Street, Auckland, or Zoom.

## Risks:

There are no anticipated physical or psychological risks associated with participating in this focus group. You will not be asked to share any personal mental health experiences unless you choose to. However, as the discussion involves topics related to mental health, some participants may find certain topics sensitive. You are free to skip any questions, take a break, or withdraw from the session at any time without giving a reason. If you feel uncomfortable or distressed at any point, the facilitator can pause or stop the session.

The session will be audio-recorded. Please avoid mentioning personally identifiable information (such as your full name, address, or banking details) during the discussion. If you accidentally share any such information, you can let the researcher know at any point, and we will review the recording and redact that portion from the transcript before analysis.

## Incentive:

Participants will not incur any costs, and upon completion of the focus group session, you will receive a **\$20 Westfield Gift Card** as a token of appreciation for your time and contribution. Should you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact the research team.

## Data retention:

If you choose to participate in this focus group, the audio record will be retained only until transcription is completed and verified, after which the audio will be deleted. Transcripts and research data will be retained for six years, following the [Research Code of Conduct Policy](#).

- The signed consent form will be stored as a paper record.
- All research data will be stored at the University of Auckland. No data will be transferred to any other institution.



- The audio recordings will be stored in audio formats, respectively and will be deleted once transcribed.

All collected information is securely stored on a dedicated computer housed within the Auckland Bioengineering Institute. This computer includes password protection. Access to the computer is strictly controlled, with limited and authorised personnel having the necessary permissions.

Post data collection, the research data will be transferred to a folder within the University Research Drive. This folder, connected to tape storage, provides a secure and stable environment for data that is no longer actively used but is essential for compliance with ethical standards.

Any data collected using paper forms will be stored in a secure locker/desk at the Auckland Bioengineering Institute and destroyed in accordance with university document destruction guidelines. In case of digital data, the data will be removed from the Research Drive platform.

After six years of data retention, all your data will be automatically deleted from the Research Drive platform, and paper records will be destroyed.

## Data de-identification:

Audio recordings will contain no information about participants' names and identities and will only be used for thematic analysis. **Transcripts will be de-identified.**

## Participants rights:

Participation in this focus group is voluntary, and participation will not result in any disadvantage. You may withdraw from the focus group at any time before or during the session, without giving a reason.

However, due to the group setting, it is not possible to fully remove your contributions once the session has ended. If you wish to withdraw specific comments, you may request redaction **within one week** of the session by contacting the research team. These redactions will be reviewed and, where feasible, removed from the transcript. However, complete removal of your data from the group transcript may not be possible.

If you are a student of the investigator/co-investigator/researcher, we give our assurance that your participation or non-participation in this study will have no effect on your grades or relationship with the University and that you may contact your academic head should you feel that this assurance has not been met.

## Dissemination of results:

The audio recording will be utilised solely for research purposes, maintaining strict privacy safeguards. No identifying information will appear in any reports or publications.



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Thank you for your interest in participating in our study.

Please send an email to [msia787@aucklanduni.ac.nz](mailto:msia787@aucklanduni.ac.nz) to book your slot before it is filled!