

# I'm Not Fighting Alone: Designing a Community for Social Activists' Mental Well-being

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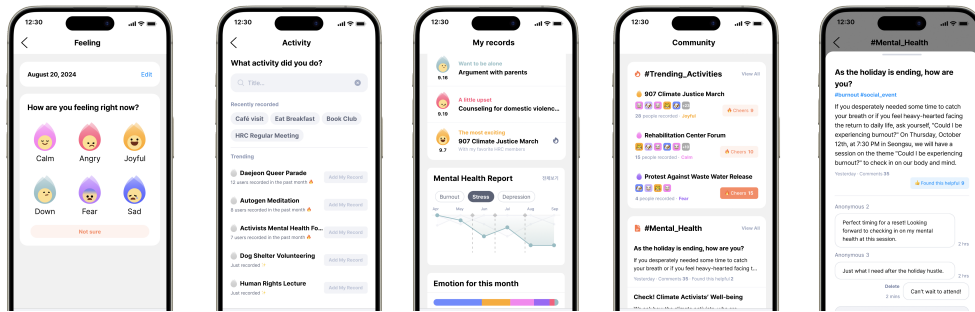


Fig. 1. A community-based service designed for the activists' mental well-being

This paper explores the need for mental health support for social justice and human rights activists, who face heightened risks of mental disorders. Due to the popularity of social media for social movements, there were recent CSCW works researching social computing for activism. However, there remains a scarcity of discussions on system design that specifically supports activists' mental health within the domain of social support in an online community, which is a crucial element in the perspective of Positech. In this study, we introduce our attempt to create a new social community aimed at enhancing the mental well-being of activists enabling social support among them, and suggest two design goals and supporting design components from the user interviews of activists.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → **Collaborative and social computing**.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Social justice and human rights activists are especially susceptible to mental disorders since they put pressure on themselves to have a significant impact on the world against discrimination or violence [6]. The mental health problems faced by activists are often characterized by severe burnout [9, 29] and depression [8], due to the factors inherent in activism, such as limited social support and difficulties in self-care caused by a culture of suppressing concerns about

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activists' well-being [19]. These mental health problems are distinct from the minority stress [18] that has been studied in HCI to some extent [21].

Despite their mental health problem being identified as one of the major obstacles to activism [9], the characteristics of activists' mental health and supportive computing systems have not been deeply studied in HCI. Instead, there has been research on understanding how recent activism has spread within online communities [1, 4, 10, 30] and how online collective action and the use of social media can foster the social movements [15, 20]. Recent CSCW work has paid significant attention to understanding emerging social movements including #BlackLivesMatter [23], #ILookLikeAnEngineer [16], and #MeToo [11]. In addition to understanding activism, there have been attempts to understand activists in a specific context by focus group research [31] and to explore design spaces that support actual activists through participatory design [25, 27]. Even with the growing interest in activists within CSCW and HCI, there remains a notable gap in HCI research specifically focused on the mental health of social justice and human rights activists as a distinct population.

Since limited social support within the group of activists has been noted as the main cause of burnout [29], one of the domains of CSCW, social support in the online community, holds significant potential as a method to improve activists' mental health. It has been reported in multiple studies that receiving social support, particularly from those who have endured similar experiences, aids in stress management which can impact mental health [2, 7, 12, 13]. There has been research suggesting that empathy created through networked acknowledgment from those who have had similar experiences can launch the empowerment of social movements [26]. In addition to receiving, it is expected that individuals can be affected positively when they are able to help others in the concept of indirect reciprocity [17]. Indeed, there was a study indicating that helping other survivors through their activist work also contributed to participants' healing process [24]. Therefore, we posit that a new online community of peer activists will be one solution to mitigate the mental health problem of activists. To formulate it, it is essential to thoroughly understand the activists through participatory research and delicately design the social interaction between them.

In this paper, we will introduce our attempt to design a community to improve the mental health of activists through social support from their peers through conducting user interviews. Through the research, we also emphasize the potential of social technology for the mental well-being of individuals leading social movements, which is barely researched in the CSCW research community.

## 2 DESIGNING MENTAL HEALTH CARE FOR SOCIAL ACTIVISTS

In this study, we aimed to answer the research question: *What are the key needs of social activists that should be addressed in the design of a community-based service for mental well-being?* The target group in our study was social justice and human rights activists, defined as "individuals who are affiliated with social justice or human rights organizations such as environmental organizations, feminism organizations, educational institutions' human rights organizations, LGBTQ rights organizations, and labor unions, or those who engage in social justice activities as a profession, including social justice lawyers and social welfare workers." To design the system, we first needed to gain a deeper understanding of the target users' experiences. Therefore, we recruited individuals who fit the defined criteria and conducted user interviews for needsfinding. Our project is a collaboration between HCI researchers and a therapist who works within a counseling center for social justice and human rights activists called Amazing Counseling Center [5] in South Korea.

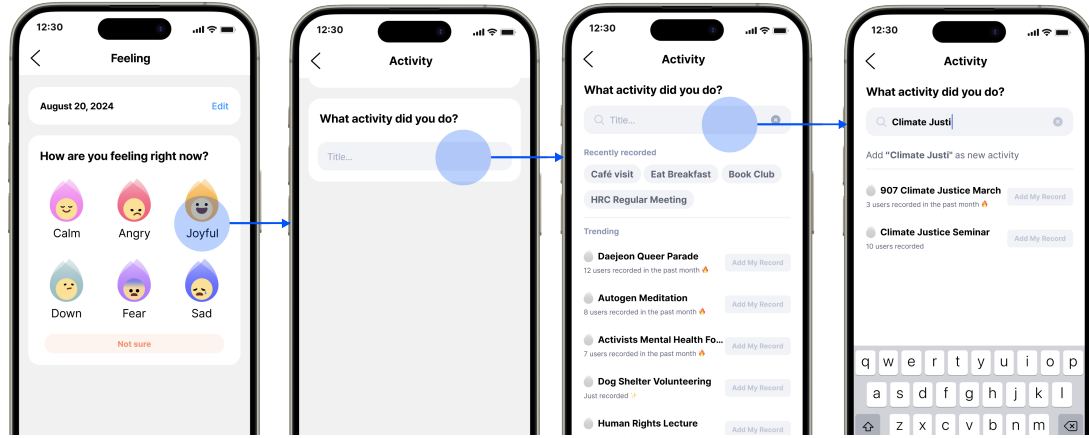
## 2.1 User Interviews and Design Goals

We conducted semi-structured interviews with six participants over six months of social justice and human rights activism experience who have suffered mental health problems such as burnout, anxiety, or depression. The participants were activists from the university human rights committee and social welfare workers, with an average of two years of experience in their respective fields. Interview questions included these: (1) *Have you used any digital services for managing your mental health while engaging in social justice activities? What aspects did you find beneficial, and what were the drawbacks?* (2) *Are you currently using any online communities for social justice/human rights activists? If yes, what type of community is it? What are the advantages, and what challenges or inconveniences have you encountered while using the service?* (3) *If there were a community specifically for activists, do you think using it could improve your mood or mental health?* Our project is a collaboration between HCI researchers and a therapist who works within a counseling center for social justice and human rights activists called Amazing Counseling Center in South Korea. From the thematic analysis by researchers on the interview results, we elaborate on two design goals, which are as follows.

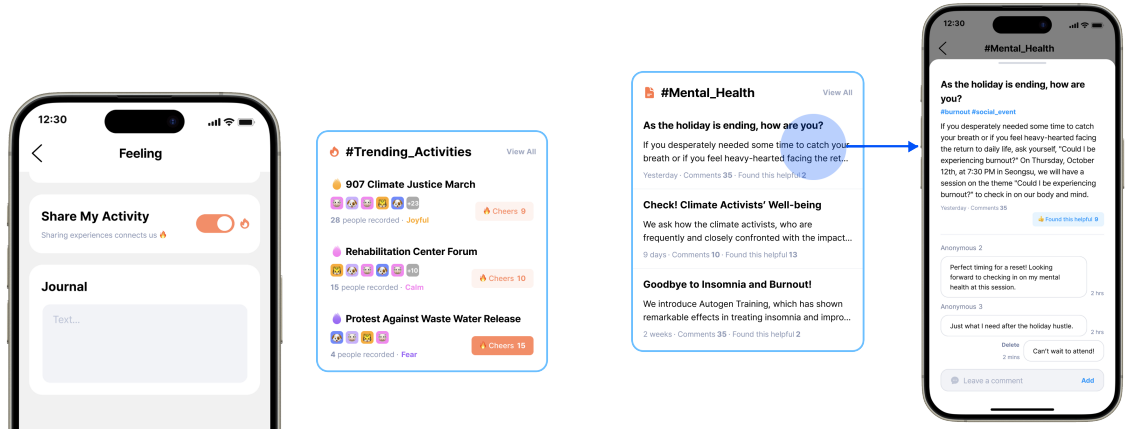
**2.1.1 DG 1: To record emotions linked to their activism activities.** Some of the participants introduced their experience using digital services for managing mental health, which were mainly categorized into daily emotion and mood journaling services. However, the existing self-care services rarely consider the contextual and fluidic aspects of emotions and only allow the recording of emotions as a result. They mentioned that it would be beneficial to connect positive emotions such as fulfillment and joy with their activism records in the service although the consequence of activism activity was negative. For example, P1, who experienced significant burnout after organizing an event, stated that *"Since social activism is emotionally demanding, it would be helpful to have a way to focus on and log these emotions more than those related to everyday tasks. I have experienced burnout after organizing a human rights event, but I remember that I felt proud and joyful during the event. It would be nice to record these feelings and revisit them later."*

Additionally, participants mentioned hopeless feelings during activism by facing societal problems that they cannot easily change. It is clearly distinct from other stressors, but it is not treated differently in the current mental health management approach. For instance, P3, who regularly received counseling noted, *"I have discussed various desperate social issues with my counselor. However, the counselor analyzed my negative emotions and stress as my individual characteristics, such as 'You have a strong sense of awareness about societal issues' rather than merely empathizing with me. This made me feel frustrated."*

**2.1.2 DG 2: To support each other and share thoughts on mental health.** Most of the participants reported that they had not used the online community where activists gathered. One of them mentioned the X (Twitter), but they also acknowledged that there were too many outgroup users, which can be offensive and harmful to activists. These possible harms to mental health and privacy risks that existing public social media can inflict on activists have also been reported in various research [3, 28]. Some participants mentioned that since there isn't an online community exclusively for activists, occasional in-person events such as a Pride Parade or a Climate Justice March are important to form a community and solidarity. It was observed that the participants needed a space where activists could support each other and share their thoughts on mental health. For instance, P6 noted, *"It is difficult to receive social recognition just for engaging in activism, and instead, we frequently encounter opposition. It's tough when I start to wonder, 'Am I the only one putting in this effort?' That's why continuous support from the same activists' community is essential."*



(a) A user flow of emotion-activism linked recording



(b) A trending board and cheering button for shared activities

(c) A community board that can discuss mental health

Fig. 2. Detailed design components

## 2.2 Suggested Design Components

From the extracted design goals, we designed a service aimed at supporting the mental well-being of activists, which enables emotional recording and community-based support. To facilitate daily access, the service is provided in the form of a mobile application, with the designed user interface depicted in Figure 2.

**2.2.1 Emotion-activism linked recording.** The user flow depicted in Figure 2a demonstrates how our service allows users to record their emotions linked with their activism activity, which addresses the first design goal (Section 2.1.1). While recording an activity, they can see the activity titles that other users have recently recorded. This design aims to help users feel a sense of connection, knowing that other activists are engaging in their own activities.

2.2.2 *Community for trending activism and mental health.* In Figure 2b, it is described how joint activities by multiple users appear on the trending board. Each item shows the number of users who recorded it along with their profile pictures, enhancing the sense of presence of peers. Users can also show their support by pressing the cheering button. To ensure that everyday activities differ from the activism (e.g., visiting a local café) can also be included in the scope of service, a toggle button that allows users can select whether they will publish or not is provided when they record the activity.

A suggested user interface for discussing users' thoughts for mental health is depicted in Figure 2c, which forms a post-based community. To encourage active participation, the community is structured as an anonymous forum. However, the concern has been reported that online communities have the potential harm of reinforcing vulnerable groups' unhealthy behaviors [14]. Therefore, we also suggest that administered moderators need to have the ability to identify users, block users, and delete posts or comments to prevent abuse and maintain content moderation. This design is developed aiming at the second design goal (Section 2.1.2).

### 3 SUMMARY AND FUTURE WORK

Through user interviews with activists, the study identifies two key design goals: 1) enabling the recording of emotions linked to activism activities, and 2) providing a space for activists to support each other and discuss mental health. The paper presents a mobile application design that includes features such as emotion-activism recording, a trending board for shared activities, and an anonymous forum for mental health discussions. The design aims to address the unique mental distress faced by activists and offers a specialized community considering the context of activism. It goes beyond the limitation of existing mental-health self-care services which tend to portray mental distress as something to be endured only by the individual, instead of looking towards collective action and systems [22]. We propose that this attempt to understand the target group, and the design focus on social support rather than on preventing or fixing the risks of an online community could be introduced from the perspective of the Positech framework. This could be expanded into longitudinal study for evaluating how user engagement in the community affects users' mental well-being over time, particularly for reducing burnout and other mental distress.

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