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Dementia, well-being and quality of life:

**Using GPS safer walking technology to promote identity and well-being through engagement in meaningful outdoor occupations**

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**34<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Alzheimer's Disease International 2020**

# *Introduction*

More now, than ever before, we are aware that spending time in outdoor natural environments and maintaining connections to nature are important to our health and well-being.

Yet, access to the outdoors is sometimes limited for people living with dementia because of concerns about the risks of them becoming lost, particularly in natural outdoor environments such as woodland and green open spaces. This can prevent people with dementia engaging in meaningful activities outdoors and lead to a reduced quality of life.

In the UK, safer walking technology is increasingly being used by people with dementia to access the outdoor environment, (Wood, Woolham and Ward 2015).

This new research from Coventry University explores the use of this technology, through the lived experience of both people living with dementia and family carers.







**Safer walking technology is an umbrella term for a range of new and developing technologies or apps.**



# *Research design*

Within this research there was an emphasis on promoting the voice of people living with dementia, including meaningful co-design with a collaborative stakeholder group. This group included occupational therapists, people with dementia, family carers and older people with an interest in technology. The group had a central role in the design of the overall research, including the participant recruitment materials and the development of a semi structured interview schedule.

Participants were recruited with support from two national charities: The Alzheimer's Society and Dementia Adventure, and utilised the NIHR 'Join Dementia Research' database.

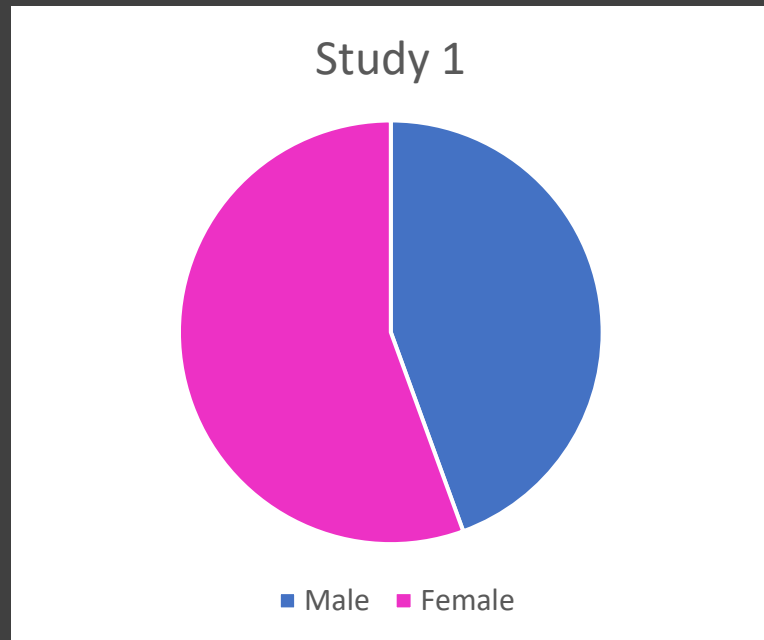
The qualitative design also included innovative recruitment strategies such as the use of social media adverts and video based recruitment methods.

Data Analysis was undertaken using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

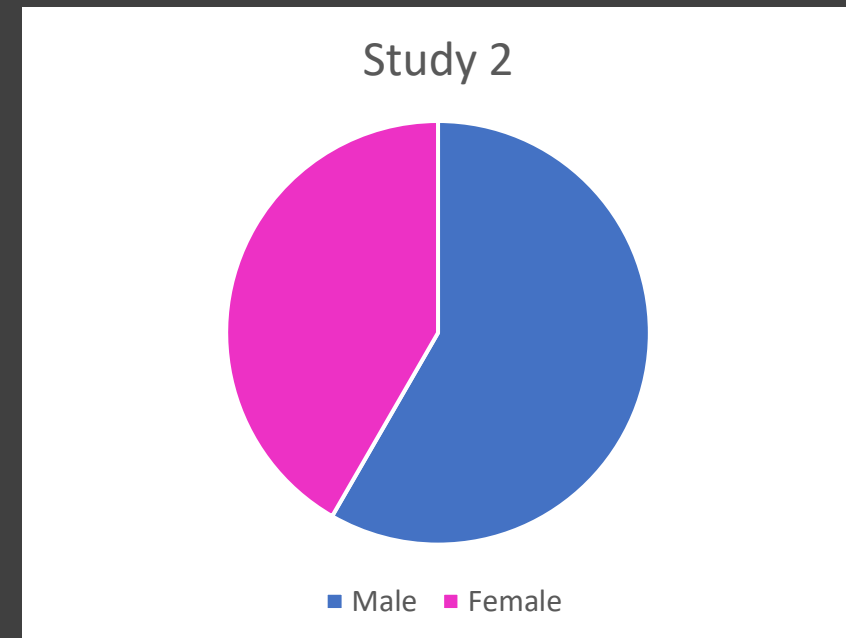
# Participants

Research data was collected from 18 in-depth individual interviews with two separate groups of participants:

Study 1: family carers of people with dementia, participant age range was between 45 - 88



Study 2 - people living with early-stage dementia, participant age range was between 57 - 88





# Key Findings

## What technology was used?

A range of data was collected about the types of technology used. In total, thirteen different types of safer walking technology were identified as being used by participants, with many adopting several types of technology at once to combine different features or undertake different activities.

## How was it being used?

Although the risk of getting lost remained the key motivator for the use of safer walking technologies, the research data revealed that the technology was also used for many different purposes; these including to track and safeguard, locate and support as well as to promote independence for individuals with dementia when accessing outdoor environments.

## Why was it used?

Participants revealed how using the technology in this way supported them to maintain their physical and psychological well-being. This was seen through the ability to remain connected to nature and engage in meaningful outdoor activities which promoted their identity and maintained a sense of self.



# *Findings: connections to nature*



The participants identified connectedness with nature as important to them and they therefore used GPS safer walking technology to spend time in outdoor environments that facilitate this connection, such as woodland and green outdoor spaces.

Many of the participants also described their love of nature and participants found these natural environments restorative, with a positive impact on their health and wellbeing, with some also identifying a spiritual dimension to their experiences outdoors.

*“I honestly think walking in the woods with the dogs, listening the birds, watching the squirrels...made me feel...it’s absolutely fantastic, calms you down, makes you feel good, let’s you connect with stuff that’s really important.” Participant*



# Findings: meaningful outdoor occupations

The research identified that people with dementia were engaging regularly in a great variety of outdoor occupations, using safer walking technology to enable to engage with 14 identified activities.

*“Because I’m aware of the problem I have, or potentially have, you tend to do things to help, right, you get more exercise, you do more brain work.” Participant*



Walking alone	Gardening	Foraging
Walking with dogs	Cycling	Wildlife rescue
Walking with groups	Bird Watching	Marathon training
Walking holidays	Fly fishing	Mowing grass meadows
Walking for fitness	Golf	

Safer walking technology was used frequently to enable people with dementia to undertake these activities alone and were often used where the outdoor environment were perceived to hold a particular risk, such as canal towpaths, open countryside and rivers.

Participants highlighted the many health benefits to getting outdoors and continuing an active lifestyle.

They also reflected upon the increased quality of life and importance of having choice and control over the occupations they engaged in.







## *Findings: maintaining a sense of self and identity*

Many of the participants had lifelong relationships with the outdoors and participated in outdoor occupations daily, which reinforced their identity.

Participants used safer walking technology to maintain engagement in meaningful occupations that were essential to their sense of self.

*“Whilst I can still do those things, I want to do them, because they’re part of what makes me me if that makes sense?” Participant*



## *Summary*

GPS safer walking technology is used by some people living with dementia to access outdoor environments in the UK. The data suggests that a number of different safer walking technologies are being used for a range of purposes. There is the potential to prolong the maintenance of a healthy lifestyle for people with early-stage dementia, whilst also promoting access to outdoor spaces and connections to nature. These benefits were identified as important to both people with dementia and family carers. As was the opportunity to support well-being and maintain self identity for people with dementia, enabling them to retain choice and control over their lives.



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