

Remaining Digital Public Space: *Kindred* Circles and the civic signal Cultive  
Belonging

Soledad Alexis Ulloa

T00714757

Thompson Rivers University

CMNS 3201\_SW1 – Citizen and Consumer Identities in Networked Culture

Dr. David Loewen

Nowadays, with the massive use of social media like Facebook, Instagram and, TikTok, surveillance, polarization, and commodification of attention have become more and more common in public online spaces. Hintz et al. (2017) argue that digital infrastructures work with the use of surveillance, which prioritizes data collection over the users. Channel 4 News (2019) highlights how the algorithm is designed to amplify division and misinformation, preventing citizens from properly engaging with it. Meanwhile, projects like *Civic Signals* call for a reimagining of digital public spaces, promoting community, understanding, and civic participation.

This paper proposes the idea of *Kindred Circles*, a digital public space that exemplifies the Civic Signal #5: Cultivate Belonging (Civic Signals, 2020). Upon research from Stroud et al. (2021) and Curry (2020), the concept is visualized as a social platform for young adults aged 18 to 30 seeking mental health support and authentic connections. The platform aims to counteract the alienation created by commercial systems and demonstrate how digital platforms can be used to promote democracy, engagement, empathy, and agency.

Commercial digital platforms are built on a business model that transforms users into products. Hintz et al (2017) observe that the logic behind surveillance relies on the continuous monitoring of the behaviour of the user, limiting privacy and autonomy. These types of platforms favor viral content over substance, encouraging emotional reactions and social comparisons. As a result, they increase the user stress, anxiety, and polarization.

Channel 4 News (2019) highlights those major social platforms design algorithms to privilege outrage and engagement over truth on purpose, creating an “attention economy” that undermines public trust. For young adults experiencing mental health challenges, environments like these create or intensify feelings of loneliness and disconnection. According to recent research, the

constant exposure to commercialized social media is associated with anxiety, social isolation, and low self-esteem (Mackson & Brochu, 2024).

Although platforms provide tools “community,” their structures often promote hierarchy and interactions instead of authentic connection. Likes, followers, comments, and a manipulated algorithm distort users’ sense of social value, leading to a shallow feeling of inclusion. As a result, belonging depends on visibility and engagement metrics rather than empathy or shared values.

Digital public spaces nowadays are not as effective as civic commons. They emphasize individual consumption over collective well-being, limiting the opportunity for dialogue across differences and commercializing human connections. These weaknesses contradict the principle of civic life, which depends on empathy, dialogue, and shared understanding.

The Civic Signal *Cultivate Belonging* (Stroud et al., 2021) emphasized that the feeling to belong is a fundamental human need and a psychological basis for self-esteem, empathy, and social cooperation (Civic signals, 2020). Curry (2020) explains that belonging occurs when individuals both feel valued by a group and perceive that they contribute value in return. This reciprocity turns participation into a meaningful connection.

Psychologists Baumeister and Leary (1995) proved that belongingness is linked to psychological well-being, self-control, and pro-social behaviour. On the other hand, lack of belonging increases risk of depression, aggression, and self-isolation (Civic Signals, 2020). The white paper’s research found that neutral, non-verbal interactions, such as sharing a silent activity, can foster belonging when based on mutual respect.

The *Cultivate Belonging* framework acknowledges that digital belonging is subjective and situational. Users can feel accepted even in virtual spaces when design mechanisms promote reciprocity, trust, and shared identity (Civic Signals, 2020). Di Lu et al. (2017) found that using inclusive language such as “we” and “us” in online communities encouraged offline participation and create long-term connections.

Yet, as Roy Baumeister notes in the Civic Signals expert interview, belongingness cannot be artificially generated by algorithms alone, it requires platforms to enable positive, empathetic interactions and reduce the social costs of exclusion (Civic Signals, 2020). Therefore, cultivating belonging demands intentional design that fosters small, meaningful relationships rather than mass engagement metrics.

*Kindred Circles* is a proposed digital public space that integrates the principles of *Cultivate Belonging* into design for young adults seeking emotional support, peer connection, and civic awareness. The platform is envisioned as a non-commercial, privacy-respecting where the users can share experiences, facilitate dialogues, and collaboratively develop community related to mental health and wellbeing.

The platform serves as a social support network and a civic commons. It is not a simple mental health application or social feed. Instead, it serves as a belonging-centered public space designed to help users feel seen, heard, and connected, free from surveillance or judgment. Its users are students, recent graduates, and early professionals, who are the groups most affected by digital isolation.

The core features of the platforms are:

1. Circle Rooms: Users will be assigned or matched in “circles” of 8 to 10 people based on shared life experiences. These circles replace algorithm feeds with small-scale interactions.
2. Reciprocal Moderation: Instead of a hierarchy of power, each circle adopts a “rotating facilitator” model. All the members share the responsibility of maintaining the respectful dialogue, fostering accountability.
3. Privacy-by-design framework: Unlike other big platforms, *Kindred Circles* operates without data profiling or targeted advertising. All the user data is encrypted, and the analytics are community-owned.
4. Empathy Prompts and Reflection tools: Periodic prompts invite members to share personal stories or reflections. These interactions enhance the feeling of belonging.
5. Offline Integrations: Circles are encouraged to organize meetings outside the online. Create a bridge from online to offline. This will avoid people isolating themselves from the outside world.
6. Wellbeing and Safety Architecture: Use of AI moderation that prioritizes mental health rather than viral content.
7. Collective Learning Hub: A shared resource section provides mental health education, peer-led workshops, and civic engagement guides.

By centering belonging rather than profit, *Kindred Circles* redefines what a “public-friendly” digital space can be. It aligns with Pariser’s call (New\_ Public) to design digital environments around civic rather than commercial values.

*Kindred Circles* prioritizes trust and transparency. Things like followers, likes, ads, or manipulated feeds do not exist. The platform’s open-source architecture invites civic oversight

and community co-governance, promoting digital agency, a key aspect of democratic participation (Hintz et al., 2017).

In Cultivate Belonging white paper, the exposure to shared experiences reduces the prejudice and cultivate empathy (Civic Signals, 2020). Each circle functions as a small society, where participants practice listening, dialogue, and care.

The feeling of belonging is strongly tied to self-esteem, motivation, and resilience (Civic Signals, 2020). For young adults, cultivating belonging counteract t digital loneliness. According to a recent study by Rogers and Reinecke (2023) community-oriented platforms help to reduce the feeling of loneliness and improve the self-perception.

When people feel connected, they are more likely to engage civically. As Baumeister in Civic Signals emphasizes, people who feel that belong to a group of people are happier, healthier, and more cooperative. In *Kindred Circles* all these insights are put into the design, encouraging members to host local actions, co-create discussions, host local actions, and share personal narratives.

Visually, *Kindred Circles* platform resembles a calm, minimalist interface organized around circles.

- The home circle acts as a dashboard, showing open invitations, community projects, and upcoming events.
- Personal circles appear as a color-coded rings representing the groups. Hovering reveals members shared interests and wellness tag like for example “study stress”
- Each circle features a “Story Space”, where members can post reflections visible only with their group.

- A “Kindred Map” shows how many users worldwide joined the reflections that week, offering a collective perspective without surveillance.
- A space where users can put some of their data so they can connect easily with other user with the same interests.



In conclusion, in today’s digital world the design for belonging is a civic act. Cultivate Belonging research emphasizes that belongingness plays a big role in mental health, cooperation, and democratic participation (Civic Signals, 2020). *Kindred Circles* represents a reimagined digital public space that focus in cultivating meaningful connections.

By integrating the values of Cultivate Belonging with a human centered architecture, the platform offers an alternative to mainstream social media. It transforms the digital sphere into a site of empathy and participation, where individuals not only feel that they belong, but also recognize their self-perception.

## References

- Brown, R. M. (2021). Loneliness is negatively related to Facebook network size: Implications for digital-community design. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*. <https://doi.org/10.5817/CP2021-2-3cyberpsychology.eu>
- Channel 4 News. (2019, September 23). *Shoshana Zuboff on 'surveillance capitalism' and how tech companies are always watching us* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QL4bz3QXWEo>
- Chen, S. (2025). New perspective on digital well-being by distinguishing affective and behavioural digital experience. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 27(1). <https://doi.org/10.2196/e70483> [JMIR](#)
- Civic Signals. (2020). *Connect: Cultivate belonging*. New Public. <https://newpublic.org/uploads/2020/09/S5-Cultivate-belonging.pdf>
- Curry, A. (2020). Cultivate belonging. In T. Stroud, J. Jennings, & R. Baumeister (Eds.), *Civic Signals: The qualities of flourishing digital spaces* (pp. 2–12). National Conference on Citizenship.
- Hintz, A., Dencik, L., & Wahl-Jørgensen, K. (2017). *Digital citizenship in a datafied society*. Polity Press.
- Malloy, J., et al. (2023). Co-design of digital health interventions with young people. *JMIR (Young Adults & Digital Health)*, ... <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-023-10722957> [PMC](#)
- Mair, E., Buglass, S., McNamara, N., & Betts, L. (2024). Exploring the impact of online group membership on mental health, well-being and loneliness for young adults. [*University thesis – UK*]. <https://irep.ntu.ac.uk/id/eprint/54284/1/Elizabeth%20Mair%202024.pdf> [irep.ntu.ac.uk](https://irep.ntu.ac.uk)
- “Young People’s Sense of Belonging Online.” (2024, October 2). *Digital Wellness Lab Research Briefs*. <https://digitalwellnesslab.org/research-briefs/young-peoples-sense-of-belonging-online/> [The Digital Wellness Lab](#)
- Stroud, N. J., Wilner, T., & Pariser, E. (2021). *Civic Signals: The qualities of flourishing digital spaces*. New Public.