

Connected Words, Shared Journeys: Exploring Motivations, Practices, and Impacts of Individual and Collaborative Gratitude Journaling Users

Annika Kaltenhauser
annika.kaltenhauser@unisg.ch
University of St. Gallen
St. Gallen, Switzerland

Adrian Preussner
first.last@unisg.ch
University of St. Gallen
St. Gallen, Switzerland

Meike Kocholl
meike@resilyou.ch
Resilyou GmbH
Zurich, Switzerland

Johannes Schöning
johannes.schoening@unisg.ch
University of St. Gallen
St. Gallen, Switzerland

ABSTRACT

Gratitude journaling (GJ) has become a popular tool for improving mental health and wellbeing. Mobile applications now facilitate such practices by offering prompts, reminders, and ways to document positive experiences. Some go further by introducing collaborative journaling, allowing users to share and reflect together. However, little is known about why users engage in or avoid such shared reflective practices, how they integrate them into daily life, and what impacts emerge. Through interviews with 14 *Resilyou* users, seven individual and seven collaborative, we explored their motivations, practices, and the dynamics of collaboration. Our findings show that collaborative users were motivated by social connection and mutual encouragement, which sustained their GJ through shared commitment and accountability. However, this reciprocity was double-edged, introducing emotional tension and the need to negotiate boundaries. We propose designing for reflective conversation by supporting users' relational rhythms and fostering mutual empowerment rather than providing system-driven prompts.

CCS CONCEPTS

• Human-centered computing → Empirical studies in HCI;

KEYWORDS

user interviews, gratitude journaling, journaling, collaboration, reflection, self-reflection

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1 INTRODUCTION

Gratitude journaling (GJ) has become a popular tool for enhancing mental health and wellbeing, with studies showing that cultivating gratitude increases happiness, life satisfaction, and emotional

resilience while reducing negative affect [11–13]. Regular GJ, in particular, supports regulating the nervous system and promotes positive psychological conditioning through the repeated recognition of positive experiences [9, 13, 14, 32]. Within GJ, reflection plays a key role – helping users recognise, articulate, and sustain awareness of positive experiences. Alongside traditional pen-and-paper journals, digital tools have emerged to scaffold this practice through prompts, reminders, and review features, thereby helping users integrate it into their everyday routines. Most of these tools frame reflection as an individual, introspective and private act. However, reflection is not only personal but also social, shaped through interaction, mutual acknowledgement, and shared meaning-making [5, 23, 29]. Collaborative forms of reflection in GJ may thus offer distinct motivational dynamics compared to individual practice.

Digital technologies have also reshaped how people engage in reflection more broadly. People increasingly seek interactive and dialogic forms of reflection—through social sharing, collaborative documentation, or conversational interfaces [3, 5, 15, 23]. The recent popularity of large language models (LLMs) as reflective partners illustrates this shift toward conversation-based reflection [1, 3, 15, 17, 20, 25, 26]. This trend underscores a growing interest in reflective practices, peer-support and journaling as a dialogic process, scaffolded by conversation [5]. Against this backdrop, it becomes increasingly important to understand how human-to-human digital reflection unfolds – what motivates people to share their reflections with others, and what forms of connection and authenticity arise when the reflective partner is a person rather than an algorithm.

Existing HCI work has explored digital gratitude tools focused on individual reflection [2, 6], which highlight personalisation and reinforcement but remain limited to individual use. Our study addresses this gap through the *Resilyou* app (see subsection 2.3 for details), which uniquely supports both individual and collaborative GJ¹ within one platform using the “counting blessings” method. This gratitude intervention involves regularly recording gratitude events, such as “today, I am grateful for x, y, and z”. Importantly, the app has sustained a community of users who have integrated GJ – individually or collaboratively – into their daily lives over extended periods. Examining why some users opt into collaboration while others prefer individual GJ, how gratitude is expressed and shared in practice, and what benefits or tensions users perceive offers insights into how social dynamics shape digital GJ, and how reflective and emotional processes intertwine in such contexts.

¹From now on, the abbreviation GJ refers to digital gratitude journaling, unless otherwise specified, to denote the practice in a broader, non-digital sense.



To investigate these dynamics, we conducted an interview study with 14 users of *Resilyou*: seven who practised collaborative GJ and seven who used GJ individually. Our research addresses:

- RQ1)** What motivates individuals to participate – or refrain from participating – in collaborative GJ in the *Resilyou* app?
- RQ2)** What are the practices and experiences of users in the (collaborative) GJ process with *Resilyou*, and how do they perceive the collaborative experience compared to individual users?
- RQ3)** What are the impacts of (collaborative) GJ within *Resilyou*?

Our findings show that collaborative *Resilyou* users were motivated by social connection, emotional support, and personal growth, but also navigated tensions between autonomy and obligation. Collaborative GJ fostered empathy, perspective-taking, and a sense of belonging, while simultaneously revealing an ambivalence between the desire for shared reflection and the need to preserve emotional safety. Beyond immediate app engagement, GJ influenced users' mindfulness, communication, and everyday behaviour, embedding gratitude into daily routines. On a larger scale, our work contributes empirical insights [31] to HCI discussions on conversational reflection and peer-support in wellbeing technologies – designing for mutual empowerment, emotional resonance, and socially sustained reflection practices mediated through interaction with others.

2 RELATED WORK & BACKGROUND

2.1 Reflection in Digital Practice

GJ can be understood as a form of self-reflective practice, encouraging individuals to notice, interpret, and internalise positive experiences as a way to foster emotional awareness and wellbeing. In this work, we draw on established definitions of self-reflection as the intentional examination and interpretation of one's experiences to derive insight and inform future behaviour [4]. Mols et al. [23] found that reflection in everyday life often occurs spontaneously and contextually rather than through deliberate, structured activities, and—crucially—is not purely individual. Their study revealed that most people reflect both alone and with others, often involving friends or partners as reflective companions. This underscores the inherently social nature of reflection and the importance of designing technologies that support such shared, situated practices.

Recent HCI research increasingly highlights these social dimensions of (self)-reflection. Work in personal informatics has shown that reflection is often enacted collaboratively, through shared sense-making and reciprocal interpretation of personal experiences or data [24, 27]. While these works study data-driven reflection, our study focuses on narrative reflection through collaborative GJ.

Bentvelzen et al. [5] developed a taxonomy of design resources for reflection technologies based on a literature review of artefacts and app reviews. One of these resources, *conversation*, encompasses both *conversation with others* – collaborative reflection human-to-human – and *conversation with technology*, such as chatbot-mediated reflection. Recent work has explored both directions. One example illustrating *conversation with technology* is Nepal et al.'s work [25] that introduces MindScape, an AI-powered journaling app that combines behavioural sensing and LLMs to generate context-aware prompts for self-reflection and emotional regulation. In contrast, Sakel et al. [29] conceptualised “Us-Reflection”

as reflection through *conversation with others*, fostering mutual understanding and emotional connection within close relationships. Addressing prior work's focus on the disruptive effects of technology in collocated interactions, they proposed using technology as a reflection and conversation enabler in synchronous, in-person settings. Our study examines how similar reflective exchanges unfold asynchronously through collaborative GJ, where users engage in *conversation with others*.

2.2 Peer-Support in Wellbeing Technologies

Collaborative GJ can also be understood through the lens of *peer-support*, where GJ partners provide mutual encouragement, empathy, and accountability in sustaining wellbeing practices. Related work, such as that by Ding et al. [10], examined the infrastructural work required to support positivity and social cues in mental health practices. Their findings emphasise the importance of structured support systems in fostering meaningful and constructive interactions within peer-supported environments. In the context of early adolescence, Mittmann et al. [22] developed a social augmented reality game to enhance real-world social interactions. Their study showed how gamified approaches could effectively contribute to mental health, fostering a sense of belonging and improving interpersonal skills. Collaborative sensing systems have also shown promise in promoting behavioural changes. You et al. [33] explored a social sensing prototype designed for flexible, long-hour workers. By collecting and sharing personal health and wellbeing data with partners, the system increased shared awareness and encouraged collaborative behaviour changes that supported mental health.

These studies collectively highlight the potential of collaborative and community-driven digital tools to enhance mental health and wellbeing. While our work aligns with these efforts, it extends the understanding of collaborative practices through the specific lens of GJ, uncovering the unique opportunities and challenges it presents.

2.3 Gratitude Journaling in *Resilyou*

To investigate our RQs, we draw on the *Resilyou* app as a real-world setting in which both individual and collaborative GJ naturally occur, and which supports both modes within one platform using the “counting blessings” method. The app structures one or more digital gratitude journals around a thematic focus called a “ritual”, such as gratitude or appreciation (see Figure 1a in the appendix). While these rituals invite attention toward positive experiences, entries are not restricted to exclusively positive events. Collaborative GJ is enabled through fixed journaling partners, with users choosing for each entry whether to keep it private or share it (see Figure 1c). (Shared) entries appear within a chat-like interface that supports conversational reflection, where each partner can post one entry per day and respond to the other's reflections using emoji reactions (see Figure 1d). The appendix provides illustrative screenshots of this workflow (Figure 1).

3 METHODOLOGY

We conducted an exploratory interview study to examine users' motivations, practices, experiences, and impacts of (collaborative) GJ using *Resilyou*. Between September and November 2023, the first author, who is not affiliated with the *Resilyou* app, conducted remote semi-structured interviews with 14 active users. Each session

lasted between 46 and 86 minutes (Median= 61 min). Our semi-structured interview protocol focused on participants' GJ practices, motivations, and experiences. During the interviews, we asked participants to describe their most recent *Resilyou* experience, including the context, the timing, and their thoughts, in as much detail as possible. We explored their experiences related to their most recent, first, and favourite journal entries and asked follow-up questions throughout to clarify meanings and elicit richer descriptions where needed. After each interview, we summarised our notes and later added quotes and additional insights from the transcripts.

Participants. We recruited participants directly through the *Resilyou* app via in-app notifications and email invitations. To ensure relevance and data richness, we selected users who had made at least one journal entry within the last 30 days, guaranteeing recent and active engagement. The third author is affiliated with the company that develops and maintains the *Resilyou* app and supported recruitment by distributing the study invitation to active users. To mitigate potential bias, this author was not involved in conducting interviews or analysing the data. At no point did we access, request, or read participants' journal entries, nor did the app provide such access to us. Two participants identified as male and 12 as female (ages 28–63, Mean = 46.5, SD = 12.7). Participants had been using the app for an average of 8.8 months (range: 2–18 months). We recruited both users who exclusively used GJ individually (7 participants) and those who had experience with collaborative GJ (7 participants: 6 current partners, 1 past partner). The interviewees did not receive any compensation. Table 1 in the appendix details participants' demographics and app usage. Our study was approved by the ethics committee at our research institution. All participants provided written informed consent.

Data Analysis. We transcribed all 903 minutes of audio data and analysed the transcripts using inductive, reflexive thematic analysis [7], complemented by affinity diagramming to identify themes and patterns. Two authors – both not affiliated with the *Resilyou* app – conducted open coding; codes were developed inductively through close, repeated reading of the data. After preliminary coding of eight interviews by the first author, the second author applied the draft codebook to seven interviews (two overlapping). Codes and candidate themes were iteratively refined through discussions, comparing interpretations and exploring how codes clustered into broader, analytic themes. Consistent with reflexive thematic analysis best practice [19], we did not compute inter-rater reliability but emphasised interpretive consensus.

4 FINDINGS

Although participants occasionally referred to GJ in general terms, the themes presented below concern their experiences of practising GJ as supported and shaped by the *Resilyou* app.

4.1 Motivations

 &  Across individual and collaborative use, participants described GJ as a way to shift attention toward positivity and cultivate an appreciative outlook. This reflected a desire to “notice the good” and counterbalance stress, with several participants describing GJ as soothing and even a “*protective shield*” (P3, C (collaborative user)) against daily pressures. Many viewed the practice as a deliberate

act of attentional control, helping them anchor their mindset in gratitude despite external distractions: “*I decide where to focus my attention.[...] The world is fighting for our attention. [...] And if I am the master of my own attention, then I determine my purpose in life. [...] That’s why I’m putting it in this diary*” (P9, I (individual user)). GJ fostered mindfulness and emotional resilience by helping participants recognise and document moments of gratitude, reinforcing positivity in daily life. As one noted, “*It makes me look back on the whole day [...] and then I go to bed with a good feeling*” (P9, I).

 Collaborative users were motivated to share their GJ to maintain or revive meaningful relationships despite geographical distance (8 of 10 GJ partners lived in different cities) or infrequent contact. They journalled with a friend, partner, flatmate, or sibling – someone they felt shared their mindset and would benefit from the practice. For them, collaborative GJ offered a way to stay connected and present in each other's lives. Sharing entries fostered empathy, mutual understanding, and emotional support: “*It feels good to know someone else is experiencing the journey with you*” (P4, C). Partners' reflections prompted new perspectives and offered encouragement during vulnerable moments. They appreciated the honesty of sharing difficult days, which deepened empathy and normalised vulnerability: “*Sometimes you write: Today was a shitty day, but I’m grateful for dot, dot, dot. [...] That helps to understand that not everything is always sunshine and lollipops for the other person either*” (P11, C). Further, they appreciated celebrating each other's joys, as one noted: “*It’s so nice that we can be happy for each other*” (P4, C). This reciprocal affirmation strengthened their motivation and deepened the perceived closeness between partners.

Social interaction and positive feedback from GJ partners were especially powerful in sustaining motivation. Participants frequently mentioned how engaging with a partner's entries or receiving affirmations on their own contributions strengthened their commitment to the practice. P14 (C) described this dynamic as “*almost like a reminder*”, while P4 (C) shared how the anticipation of feedback inspired consistent GJ: “*We also react positively to each other’s entries, which means that I know that when I write something, I also get positive feedback from them. These are simply pleasing emotions. And then it’s easier to do it actively [sustaining the practice].*”

At the same time, reciprocity in collaborative GJ occasionally introduced tension. P4 (C) described how unequal engagement could create emotional pressure – both to share more and to support the other during difficult times: “*When one person writes a lot, you feel pressure – to write more yourself, or to support them even when you have few resources.*” The tensions arising from reciprocity also led some participants to discover new ways of communicating and negotiating boundaries within the collaboration (see *Impact*). P6, for instance, chose to stop sharing entries when the practice began to feel emotionally taxing, noting that her posts could unintentionally pressure her partner to reciprocate – highlighting the fine balance between support and emotional responsibility in collaborative GJ.

 For others – particularly individual users – this very need for boundary-setting was perceived as a barrier to sharing journal entries, as it introduced concerns about responsibility and emotional availability in shared GJ. P13 consciously avoided the collaborative mode, emphasising both the desire for autonomy and the avoidance of social obligation: “*I decided not to do it with someone else. It felt like that Facebook-type stress – the sense that I should post something.*”

I didn't want journaling to feel like that kind of obligation. [...] I would only do it if I could take responsibility for staying active." This decision did not necessarily reflect a rejection of collaborative GJ per se, but rather a hesitation rooted in the emotional labour and sense of responsibility it might entail toward others' wellbeing. In general, a notable difference from collaborative users was the value placed on autonomy. Individual users emphasised GJ as a personal space free of pressure, expectations, or social obligations: *"I wanted it for myself, in a completely protected space. [...] I haven't yet had the courage to try it"* (P7, I).

For some, the idea of collaboration evoked an internal *"tension between trust and caution"* (P7, I). While they recognised the potential value of external feedback or connection, the deeply personal nature of GJ made sharing feel risky and uncertain: These reflections reveal a delicate balance between autonomy, vulnerability, and responsibility in shaping individual users' motivations – an ambivalence between appreciating the potential of shared reflection and preserving the emotional safety of individual practice.

4.2 Practices and Experiences

 &  GJ unfolded through five key phases: (1) *consciously noticing*, (2) *reflecting on*, (3) *documenting moments of gratitude*, (4) *interacting with a partner (collaborative use only)*, and (5) *revisiting and reflecting on past entries*. Participants reported that GJ heightened their awareness (phase 1), which naturally led to reflection (phase 2) and then documentation (phase 3). Writing was seen as a way to preserve what felt valuable: *"Everything I find valuable, I want to hold on to. Those are my treasures"* (P13, I). Through writing, fleeting experiences became tangible memories, and the app was experienced as a *"secure space"* for these reflections.

Participants described GJ as intentional *"me-time"* – a pause to slow down, notice, and process the day. Even in collaborative use, entries were written alone, preserving GJ as a private moment within shared practice. Some connected it to earlier creative or mindful routines, such as drawing or morning meditation. Participants integrated GJ flexibly into their daily rhythms, often writing before bed or during quiet moments such as commutes, using these pauses to revisit entries and reconnect with associated emotions. Revisiting entries (phase 5) helped rekindle feelings, draw perspective on tough days, or inspire new posts. Retrospection was brief and tool-scaffolded – e.g., scrolling recent entries, filtering favourites, doing date cross-cuts (e.g., the 26th across months), or quick "Bingo"-style skims; photo attachments served as fast recall anchors.

The digital format further sustained engagement. Participants contrasted their consistency in *Resilyou* with prior failed analogue attempts, emphasising the convenience of GJ anytime and resuming entries easily – even during fragmented moments like evenings with childcare. Despite its benefits, participants occasionally paused GJ due to stress or workload. Yet their commitment to the practice and its positive effects often reignited engagement – supported less by system notifications and more by cues like the app's presence.

 Collaborative users described developing rhythms of reciprocity, where partners' writing activity influenced their own. In the initial GJ phase, users benefited from their partners' engagement (phase 4), which helped them overcome uncertainties about what to express gratitude for or how to phrase their reflections

(phase 3): *"I remember that I found it very difficult to find three points at the beginning and that I didn't do it every day. But that changed with my journal partners"* (P3, C). Reading their partners' entries also inspired participants to evolve their writing style over time: *"And after a month or a bit longer, when my journal partner joined in, my entries changed a bit too. [...] And then my last entry was also completely different from the first entry"* (P14, C).

Collaboration often encouraged more elaborate expression. Some participants began adding photos or longer reflections, often investing extra time to make entries *"feel complete"* or aesthetically satisfying. Others moved from brief notes to more narrative, flowing text, indicating that social presence enriched expressiveness.

The collaborative aspect introduced further unique practices and interactions. Engaging with a GJ partner allowed participants to exchange ideas and inspirations that enriched their routines. Reviewing a partner's entry often prompted deeper reflection and helped identify new sources of gratitude (phase 1). *Resilyou* users viewed collaborative GJ as shared self-reflection, using partners' perspectives to gain insight into their own lives: *"When [my GJ partner] writes something about being ill and being grateful to have finally taken some time off, I look at myself again and ask myself: How am I actually dealing with this?"* (P3, C).

Participants, even individual users, appreciated the idea of sharing content with others in a broader community as a way of opening up new perspectives and receiving emotional support: *"If there is distance to a stranger, then it can be a very opening distance because the anonymity helps to reveal heavy feelings or heavier thoughts because the other person doesn't know you. [...] And in the best-case scenario, you simply get another word of encouragement"* (P2, I).

Finally, collaborative GJ fostered everyday emotional connectedness and intimacy, as users engaged more deeply with each other's lives. Reading a partner's mundane entries – about cleaning, bathing, or daily chores, typically unspoken moments – created a sense of *"shared emotional attunement"* (P5, C), allowing users to feel with rather than for each other. In sum, collaboration shaped GJ into a shared reflective practice, adding layers of accountability, empathy, and creative engagement that added different dimensions to the experience of GJ, enriching users' routines through deeper reflection and new sources of gratitude inspired by their partners.

4.3 Impact

 &  The impact of GJ through *Resilyou* extended beyond app use, shaping users' everyday attention and mindfulness. Many described how their thoughts naturally shifted toward gratitude during the day, noticing moments to document and cultivating ongoing awareness. As P8 (I) explained: *"And then the anticipation arises [...] your attention has been directed to the right place [...] a way of consciously experiencing situations that would otherwise sink into the unconscious [...] enriching even outside the pure use of this app."*

P4 (C) described how the practice became woven into daily routines, noting that *Resilyou* *"blurs the lines between using the app and everyday life"*. This blending highlights how gratitude practices transcended their initial purpose, becoming an enduring presence in participants' lives. Participants also reported shifts in perspective: P3 (C) described how noting down something as mundane as the purchase of a vacuum-cleaning robot – originally motivated by

a dislike of vacuuming – became a catalyst for a broader shift in awareness: *“I think this one particular entry has opened my eyes to be grateful for a whole range of other things.”*

The ripple effects of GJ often extended into users’ daily interactions, prompting them to rethink habits and respond to others more thoughtfully. For instance, P2 (I) described how GJ inspired more mindful digital communication: *“Inspired by the theme of appreciation [in Resilyou], I tried for a weekend to answer every WhatsApp message differently than I normally would – avoiding empty phrases and turning each into something special for the sender. [...] Putting such thought into my replies and seeing its effect on others brought me a completely different kind of joy.”* This illustrates how reflective awareness cultivated through GJ translated into everyday empathy and intentional communication.

 Journal partners frequently described continuing their reflections beyond the *Resilyou* app, with their shared GJ practice sparking deeper conversations. These took the form of phone “deep talks,” co-reading past entries followed by follow-up questions, exchanging voice messages via WhatsApp, or using time spent together to collaboratively revisit and discuss their entries. Reading one another’s entries deepened understanding of the other’s values, contexts, and relationships, revealing facets unnoticed even in long-term friendships or family ties. As P9 (C) described, *“It sharpened my view of them – what their important values are – we were able to see parts of each other that we weren’t previously aware of.”*

Collaborative GJ also encouraged participants to develop emotional awareness and boundary-setting skills. P4 (C) described how the closeness of collaboration required recognising personal limits and taking responsibility for one’s own wellbeing: *“Even though we are on this journey together, each person is first and foremost responsible for their own mental health. That took some time and a lot of feedback to learn. [...] Through Resilyou, we were more often confronted with the need to assert this, because the contact was closer. For me, it was the perfect practice ground to learn to communicate boundaries.”* This illustrates how collaborative GJ extended beyond gratitude itself, enabling participants to cultivate relational and emotional competencies – transforming the app into a space for practising empathy, vulnerability, and self-care.

In summary, the impact of individual and collaborative GJ through the *Resilyou* app went beyond its immediate functionality. It helped users embed mindfulness into their routines, encouraged (collaborative) self-reflection, and inspired positive changes in behaviour.

5 DISCUSSION

In the following section, we discuss the motivations, practices, and impacts of individual and collaborative GJ as identified in our interviews. While this study offers initial insights into both collaborative and individual GJ, several limitations should be acknowledged: The findings stem from a small, self-selected sample of *Resilyou* users. As the study focused on a single app that uniquely supports both modes, results may not generalise to other digital reflection tools or contexts. Moreover, participants were already *active* users who had integrated GJ into their daily routines, potentially leading to more favourable attitudes toward the practice than those of less engaged users. Despite these limitations, our study offers situated

insights into how individual and collaborative reflection unfold in everyday life and suggests design directions for future work.

5.1 Key Takeaways from the Findings

Motivation (RQ1). Our findings show that motivations for engaging in collaborative GJ were deeply relational and affective. Users sought emotional connection, mutual encouragement, and a sense of shared presence, particularly across distance. The format offered a structured yet intimate way to “*stay in each other’s lives*,” fostering empathy and belonging, and partners’ activity often served as a motivational nudge. However, these dynamics also introduced hesitation: collaboration introduced feelings of obligation and emotional responsibility. Individual users valued autonomy as protection from such expectations, describing individual GJ as emotionally safer. These ambivalent motivations highlight how collaborative reflection is shaped by an ongoing negotiation between connection and self-preservation – a balance design should sensitively support.

Practices and Experiences (RQ2). GJ unfolded as a cyclical process of noticing, reflecting, writing, (interacting), and revisiting. Participants described GJ as a flexible routine (similar to [21, 23]) that adapted to life’s rhythms – pausing during stressful periods and resuming with time, calm, or social cues. The app supported this fluidity through easy re-entry. Writing was experienced as a mindful and meaningful act of preservation, transforming fleeting moments into tangible “*treasures*”. Revisiting entries offered continuity and perspective, particularly during difficult times. Many treated GJ as intentional “*me-time*”, fitting into everyday gaps such as evenings, commutes, or pauses. Collaboration further inspired new perspectives and richer expression, evolving into a shared reflective practice characterised by empathy, accountability, and mutual attunement. In sum, GJ emerged as a living rhythm of reflection – shaped by personal circumstances, emotional states, and, in collaboration, sustained through relational dynamics.

Impact (RQ3). The impact of GJ through the *Resilyou* app extended well beyond daily reflection, blurring the boundary between app use and thought: Users began noticing and anticipating moments of gratitude throughout their routines, fostering continuous mindfulness and a heightened awareness of small, often-overlooked experiences. Beyond mindfulness, GJ sparked perspective shifts and behavioural change. Even mundane entries, like buying a vacuum-cleaning robot, deepened appreciation for everyday comforts and inspired more thoughtful social interactions. In collaborative use, GJ partners continued conversations beyond the app, deepening empathy and uncovering new facets of each other’s values, even in long-term relationships. Overall, GJ in *Resilyou* fostered mindfulness, emotional growth and relational depth, transforming reflection into a socially grounded, everyday practice. Echoing Lai and O’Carroll [16], participants valued rather than resisted the manual effort of GJ – suggesting that gratitude, as a skill, deepens through regular, intentional practice.

5.2 Designing for Reflective Conversation

Attuning to the Sensitivities of Collaboration. We propose that design should sensitively build on the motivating, empathy-building, and perspective-expanding qualities of collaborative technologies supporting self-reflection, acknowledging the emotional nuances,

relational boundaries, and varying capacities that shape users’ engagement throughout their journey. Bentvelzen et al. [5] describe *social reference* as a design resource that enhances reflection by enabling users to compare their own state to that of others or to an “ideal” benchmark, leveraging normative or competitive social influence. In our findings, comparison played a more relational and empathetic role: rather than striving toward an external ideal, users engaged in subtle, mutual comparison with their GJ partners. This comparison was not driven by competition but by attunement – observing differences in focus, values, or writing style helped participants broaden their own perspective and discover new dimensions of gratitude. In this sense, *social reference* in collaborative GJ functioned less as a motivational hierarchy and more as a reflective dialogue that deepened understanding of both self and other.

Yet, this very reciprocity introduced an ambivalence: while participants appreciated the encouragement and shared joy, they also experienced the weight of mutual expectation. The collaborative dynamic at times blurred the boundary between support and responsibility, requiring emotional labour and negotiation of availability. In contrast, individual users valued autonomy as protection from such obligations, framing solitude as a condition for authenticity and emotional safety. Together, these tensions illustrate how collaboration in reflective technologies is sustained not merely by technological design but by ongoing negotiation of relational rhythms – oscillating between connection and self-preservation.

Designing for the Rhythms of Self-Reflection. Our findings align with Mols et al. [23], who showed that reflection unfolds in fluid, rhythmical cycles shaped by life transitions, emotional states, and social interactions. Rather than being a deliberate or isolated cognitive act, reflection in the form of collaborative GJ often emerged organically within everyday contexts and relationships. Building on this, our study extends the notion of rhythmic and social reflection to collaborative GJ, illustrating how users’ engagement follows personal and relational cycles – pausing during demanding periods and resuming when social or emotional cues reawaken the practice. Unlike system-generated reminders, social or emotional cues – such as receiving a partner’s new entry, noticing their continued engagement, or sensing their absence – served as human prompts that reawakened participants’ GJ practice. This form of social reminding operated through relational attunement and subtle social obligation – rekindling motivation not merely through emotional connection and shared presence, but also through an awareness of the other’s engagement and expectations. While prior work has proposed using behavioural data to identify opportune moments for reminders [8, 18, 25, 28], our findings indicate that human cues may provide complementary or more personally resonant triggers. Algorithmic reminders rely on inferred behavioural patterns, whereas social cues arise from emotionally meaningful relationships. A partner’s entry or continued engagement rekindles motivation not because it appears at the “right” time computationally, but because it carries affective relevance and shared intent. This form of relational prompting values attunement over optimisation: it aligns with the natural ebb and flow of human life rather than enforcing behavioural regularity. Designing for such social rhythms may therefore move reflection technologies beyond corrective nudging toward supporting the relational dynamics that sustain reflective practice over time.

Additionally, participants reported that regularly taking time to write down things they were grateful for brought with it unexpected moments of changing perspectives. While these flashes of inspiration might be challenging to capture and foster by technologies, we can leverage the critical role of technology to help users take the time and adhere to the practice of gratitude – and self-reflection in a wider sense – to come to such realisations. Our work highlights the importance of a delicate balance between technological support and potential overuse to ensure that we can harness the benefits of technology without jeopardising essential human elements of self-reflection and mental wellbeing.

Designing for Mutual Empowerment. Within the rhythms of GJ, we identified the early stage of practice as a particularly sensitive moment in which users can benefit from additional support. Participants described uncertainties about what to express gratitude for or how to articulate their reflections, especially when first engaging with the practice. Similarly, prior research has shown that individuals often turn to social media or online videos to see how others approach journalling [30], underscoring that reflection practices are socially shaped and inspired.

Our observations highlight that rather than relying solely on technological scaffolds such as prompts or templates, users often found empowerment through relational exchange – observing, mirroring, and learning from one another. Reflective technologies that are open and permeable to mutual empowerment allow users to draw on each other’s rhythms, language, and perspectives as sources of motivation and personal growth. Designing for such permeability requires sensitivity to the fluid boundaries between self and other, autonomy and interdependence. Technologies that are too directive risk constraining these dynamics; those that are too passive may fail to sustain them. We thus propose that reflective technologies should act as enablers of mutual empowerment – supporting shared reflection, emotional resonance, and the circulation of care that naturally arises when people are given space to “see” and strengthen one another.

6 CONCLUSION

This paper presents findings from an interview study with 14 participants investigating gratitude journalling experiences – both collaborative and individual. We found that GJ extended beyond a daily reflection task, becoming integrated into users’ thinking patterns, routines, and relationships. Individual GJ provided autonomy and self-protection, while collaborative GJ fostered social motivation, empathy, and perspective-taking, but also required negotiation of emotional labour and boundaries. Designing for such shared practices requires sensitivity to users’ relational rhythms – supporting reciprocity without enforcing it, and enabling emotional connection without over-structuring it.

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A APPENDIX

A.1 Overview of the *Resilyou* App Interface

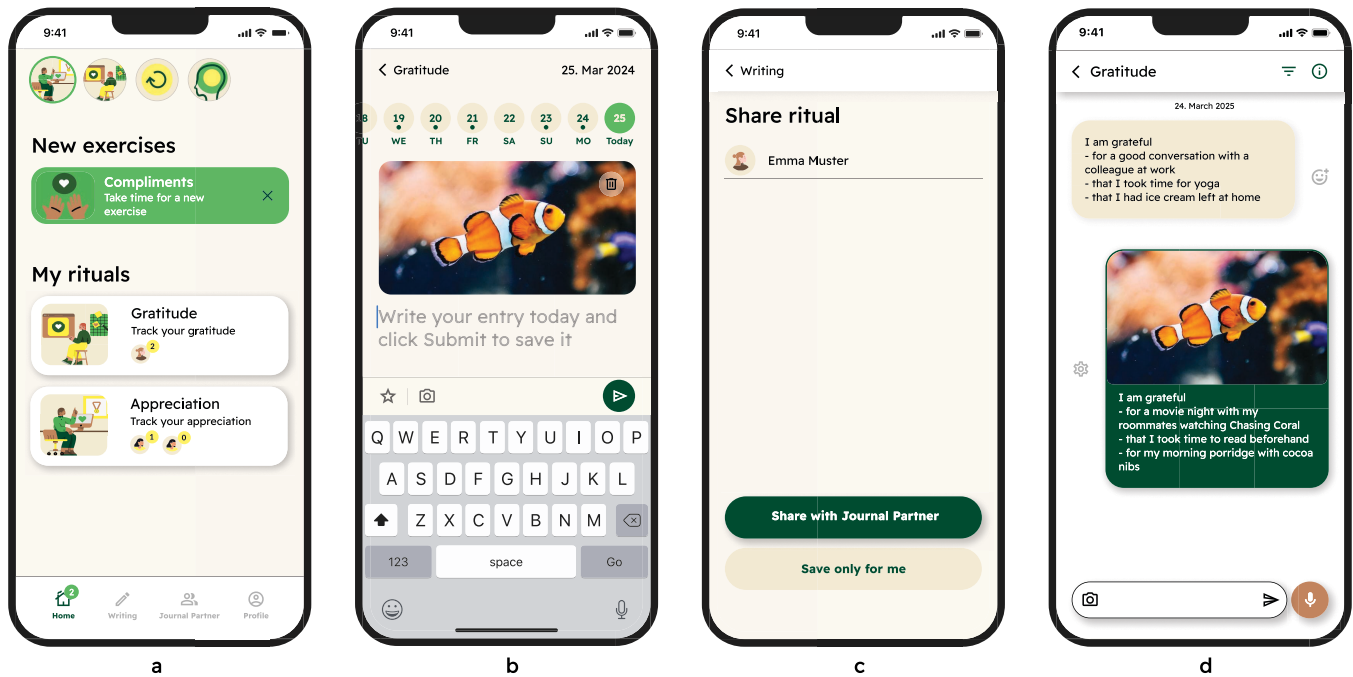


Figure 1: An example of collaborative journalling is in the *Resilyou* app. Frame a) shows the overview of a user's gratitude journal – optionally with updates from their journalling partner(s). Moreover, the app provides exercises at certain milestones (e.g., 15 entries) to further enrich the personal journalling experience. Frame b) through d) demonstrate the process of creating a gratitude journal entry, including the option to add images and text (b), the option to share the entry with a journal partner in collaborative mode (c), and the chat-based interface showcasing journal entries (d).

A.2 Demographics and Gratitude Journal Usage of Interview Participants

Table 1: Demographics and Gratitude Journal Usage of Interview Participants (N=14)

ID	Age	Gender	Profession	Resilyou Entries	Usage (Months)	Journal Partner	Collab. Usage (Months)
P1	49	Female	Vocational School Teacher	173	7	-	-
P2	48	Female	Social Pedagogue	83	6	-	-
P3	63	Female	Educational Director	236	18	2	9
P4	28	Female	Social Pedagogue & Student	196	11	1	11
P5	63	Female	Social Pedagogue	165	9	1	9
P6	30	Female	Social worker	175	5	(In the past) 1	3
P7	62	Female	Principal	225	5	-	-
P8	49	Female	Psycho- and Physiotherapist	190	6	-	-
P9	62	Female	Interpreter	173	9	1	9
P10	51	Male	Business Administrator	66	2	-	-
P11	30	Female	Founder & CEO	340	18	3	18
P12	41	Female	Career Manager	182	18	-	-
P13	46	Female	Occupational Therapist	67	7	-	-
P14	30	Male	Educator	19	3	1	2
Avg	49			115	8.8		8.7