

An Analog Tool for Social Narratives

Columbus, Ohio USA



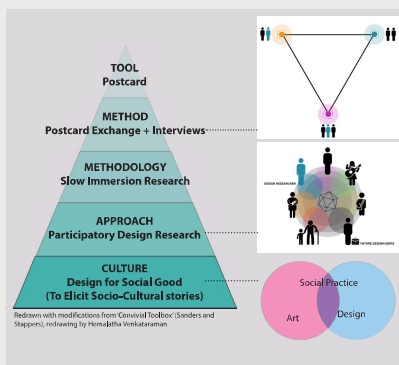
Interdisciplinary Exploration of an Analog Tool to Elicit Socio-Cultural Narratives

Eliciting multiple stakeholder narratives is a critical factor when designing systems, services or products. This research explores how the use of an analog tool (the picture postcard) in the digital age can be used to elicit socio-cultural stories to support design for 'social practice'. The process combines people and things by using a participatory design approach and material culture studies to design, explore and analyze the complex nature of interactions between social ideals and the artifact.

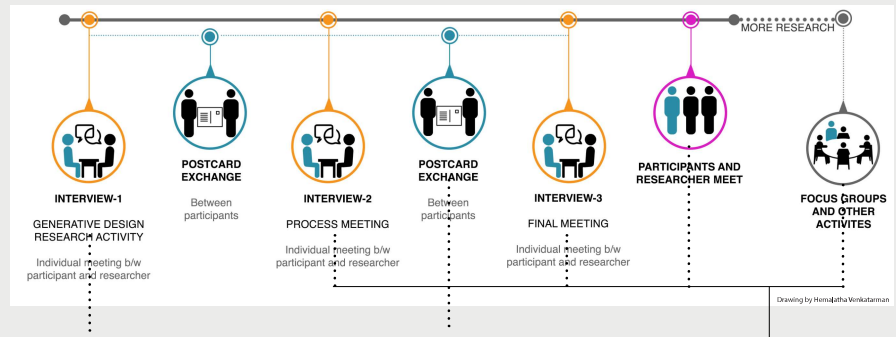
The study emphasizes 'slow immersion and design' by creating prolonged interactions that allow people to sit with someone else's perspective while also introspecting about their own. In an age of echo-chambers, the research examines the impact of reducing the risk of fragmentation (where people assign themselves into homogeneous groups leading to an amplification of pre-existing views (Sunstein, 2001)) on participants' ability to generate and sustain a healthy exchange of honest, social narratives.

The research findings reveal a deep bonding between participants and a reduction of implicit biases that initiates a broader range of discussions within a given socio-cultural topic. The space for 'elastic interaction' (articulation of ideas without fear of judgment; when and how they want it to be expressed) allows honest thoughts to manifest. The findings also reveal that this process slowly allows for an empathetic acceptance of another's perspectives.

(Sunstein, C. R. (2001). Echo chambers: Boob & Gore, Inepacacher, and Beyond. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.)



The Process



GENERATIVE DESIGN RESEARCH ACTIVITY

The first interview was to set the pace of the research and help establish an in-person contact and understanding between the participant and researcher, improving the researcher-participant interaction. A ten minute generative design research activity using pictures relating to the topic of 'home and community' (the social topic being explored), along with sharpies and sticky notes were laid out to prime the participants about the topic. They were also handed the postcard packet that contained everything they'd need for this project.



Photographs by the author showing the set-up of the activity and how one participant described their ideas of what home and community meant to them.

THE POSTCARD EXCHANGE

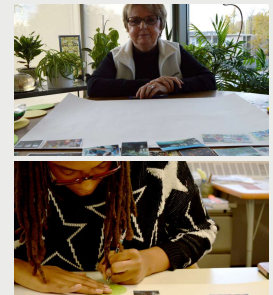
The postcard packet they were given in the first interview contained a mix of 12 artist-rendered, mass-produced and blank postcards in them that were designed using an interdisciplinary approach using processes from material culture studies. These cards varied in sizes between 6" x 4" and 7" x 5". The postcards were introduced in such a combination so as to allow participants the freedom to pick and choose from a varied set of visual responses and space constraints. If they found themselves stuck, they could use any of the 'trigger questions' from the packet and respond to the question. Some participants drew their own cards and some modified existing cards (like tears drawn on the Statue of Liberty card). The postcards allowed for a personal touch in the correspondence and allowed for participant-participant interaction.



Photographs by the author showing the contents of a postcard packet, an altered macro-cropped postcard and the conversation between a pair of participants.

PROCESS INTERVIEWS AND MEETINGS

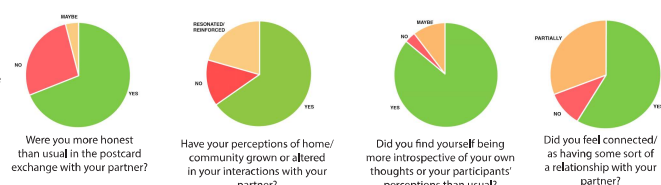
Interviews 2 and 3 were process and final one-on-one meetings with the participants and the researcher. They were posed with questions that were used for preliminary analysis of the process and incoming data. The fourth interview is in its final stages of preparation where pairs of participants are brought together for a face-to-face meeting with the researcher upon the completion of study and collection of data (enhancing participants-researcher interaction). There is also an 'expert interview' that will be conducted upon the completion of data analysis wherein it is sent to experts in several fields like design research, material culture studies, socio-cultural anthropology, arts etc., to gather their thoughts and critique of the process, methods and the tool.



Photographs by the author showing participants during different interviews. The participant pool comprised of a diverse composition of people from various ethnic, gender and socio-cultural backgrounds.

Preliminary Results and Future Work

The conclusions at this point in the research are largely positive. It seems that the research process has provided a safe space for open dialogue that invited people to interact with their counterparts with more vulnerability (without feeling threatened at the same time), by exchanging postcards with one another, so far in the study. In an industry where the bigger demand is for immediate results and findings, this research has the potential to address larger concerns and organizations like the healthcare industry or the work of NGOs who have a cultural and social focus that could benefit from prolonged studies.



Implications

This method (based on preliminary analysis) is useful for high immersion-slow research for socio-cultural design, works well as a priming process for a larger research, for working with older adults, and in situations that call for provocation of refinement of thoughts.



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