

# Reflection in Transnational Design for Aspiration

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## ABSTRACT

This position paper outlines considerations for the role of the designer in facilitating self-reflection and imagination in transnational technology design contexts, by shifting the emphasis from space to time. The paper describes early exploratory plans for further research into South Asian migrant use of technology in the UK and how this might link to the concept of *aspiration*. The paper proposes experience-centred design theory and methods in planning studies with South Asian students and long term residents in Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK, describing an example of a family communicating through cine-film and how this highlights a personal and collective process of reflection and aspiration negotiated over space and time. We respond to this example by outlining methods on how technology might enable re-imaginings of future selves through supporting self-reflection, negotiation and imagination.

## Author Keywords

Transnational, communication, cultural probes, experience-centred design

## ACM Classification Keywords

H5.2. User interfaces: User-centred design

## INTRODUCTION

Research into transnational migrant communication highlights the active role individuals may take in constructing their own identities. Not just drawing from their ethnicity and geographical heritage, but actively and creatively developing a sense of self and who they are, which looks forward and towards the future [14]. This moves away from the idea that a particular diaspora always connects to the past, through their families, friends and their homeland. This looking forward has been described by some as aspiration ‘about imagining and pursuing possible futures’ [4: 221] and supported by the growth of technologies, which expand networks and possibilities for future growth through communication.

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Whilst such studies reveal aspiration of migrants as being supported through particular technologies, the research does not go further to highlight the specific qualities of individual aspiration and the significance of time. Such studies often focus on a snapshot of time, the here and now or the historical, without recognizing that aspiration exists within the future, a future which is constantly in the process of coming into being. Understanding aspiration then requires studying a phenomena that is constantly changing over time through negotiations with people, place and things, which provide an accumulation of experiences.

Research into and design for transnational use of technology raises interesting questions for HCI in understanding how aspiration might be supported through the technology, but also how we might sensitively design within such spaces and across time. In this position paper, I propose that experience-centred design approaches as articulated by Wright, McCarthy & Wallace, could offer ways to unpack the complexity of transnational aspiration, through bringing into play an understanding of how past, present and future identities might be constructed by people who experience migration and transnational connections. The focus of this preliminary study will be South Asian students and residents in west Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK in providing perspectives on both long and short term residence. The position paper will provide a brief background to South Asian migration in the UK and in particular to North East England and outline theoretical considerations of aspiration and examples of sensitive approaches used by cultural practitioners, which focus on temporality rather than just on space. The paper will then sketch out an early exploratory response to these positions, which suggests how technology might play a role through fostering rich and playful experiences, which support reflection on aspiration as something always in process.

## SOUTH ASIAN MIGRATION TO THE UK

Over recent years there has been an increase in immigrants from South Asia coming to the UK to study, work and join family members. In 2009, over 60,000 people from India entered the UK, the majority of which were identified as being between 25-44 years old and highlighted a desire to move on somewhere else when their studies have been completed or in the next couple of years [8]. The UK has a long tradition of South Asian migration dating back to the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, with most of the current population settlement

happening from the 1950s. With current population estimates of over 2.5 million people identifying with their South Asian heritage, the UK has the largest population of this particular group in Europe [9]. Within the North East of England, the South Asian population is less well represented than in other regions, with the majority of the population based within the cities of Newcastle Upon Tyne and Middlesbrough. These well-established communities often incorporate visitors, family and friends from South Asia, here for work, study or marriage. Some of these communities represent, dynamic connections between people and place, which has been happening over long periods of time, thereby providing an interesting space for HCI design research within transnational contexts.

Despite this continuing tradition of South Asian migration within the UK, little HCI research has considered these particular experiences, how technology has been used over time across generations and how this might relate to aspiration. At the same time, over recent years there has been a significant amount of research in the social sciences on transnationalism and technology. This research has highlighted the limits of focusing on place in transnational research [18] and the role of technology in supporting migrant communication fostering connection and maintaining relationships between families and friends with social networking and the internet [4,17]. Further HCI research into practices of mobility through mobile phone use, domestic technologies and technology design in emerging global markets have also revealed specific social and cultural practices associated with family ties and community connections spread across space and time, which highlight different practices of use in comparison to Europe and America [1, 2, 3, 5]. Some areas of these studies also highlight how the research opens up spaces for thinking beyond technology as having a specified purpose, suggesting more spiritual or enchanted spaces that the digital might inhabit for different social and cultural practices [21].

These studies not only highlight the potential of such research to expand understanding of cross-cultural use of technologies but also expand opportunities for design through a process of defamiliarisation as a device for prompting reflexivity within a research process [3] whilst also pointing to the importance of understanding human values [21]. This research does, however, have its limits in focusing on a snapshot of time, on the here and now or articulating past experiences and use of technology without considering the significance of how people might re-imagine possible futures and the role aspiration has to play in people's technology use and how this might influence the design space. Participatory design approaches have highlighted the potential of enabling people to articulate 'narratives, future visions, and community goals' [12], but experience-centred design research, with an emphasis on understanding the whole person as having a past, present and future, may offer a vocabulary and framework to think

more specifically through people's use of technology over time, not just across space, and what this might contribute to an understanding of the potential of digital technology for transnational use.

### **ASPIRATION IN EXPERIENCE-CENTRED DESIGN**

Within experience-centred design practice, aspiration plays an important role in understanding and designing with people. Wright and McCarthy position people's aspirations as part of understanding them holistically through their past, present and future lives [20]. Whilst aspiration is not interrogated in their discussion, they argue that this interplay of our sense of self over time, informs how we represent ourselves to others and informs any actions we may do in the present. Aspiration, which might be constructed both of a general sense or a specific plan of where we would like to be in the future, is therefore a result of how we perceive ourselves in the past, where we are in the present and a possible imagined future we could and would like to create. How we might understand or articulate our own or how other people might describe their aspiration is contingent on the specificities of the moment, the context of the space and who we might be communicating with.

In this sense people are important in how we articulate our future plans. Other people are also important in how we imagine and act towards making our future happen. In drawing from the pragmatist philosophy of Dewey and Bakhtin, McCarthy and Wright argue that our actions have an emotional-volitional tone connected to people and things we value. They highlight that whilst our decisions to act may be derived from reasoning and thinking, they are also coloured or 'shot through with values, needs, desires and goals.' [9: 85] Whilst they do not explicitly refer to aspiration, they highlight that each act contains an emotional-volitional tone, which is informed by how we imagine our futures could be. They refer to the constraints of commitments and the importance of other people and things to provide emotional unity articulated by our needs and desires and the negotiation of these, with our personal sense of freedom and creativity. In this sense, understanding aspiration through the future self, also requires an understanding of the values ascribed to certain people and things in people's lives which are considered personally significant.

Whilst these theoretical propositions highlight ways of thinking through the complexity of aspiration, Wright and McCarthy also propose practical processes in understanding people's needs desires and future selves. This, they suggest requires thinking through a complex interweaving of people's sense of identity across time, requiring artful techniques which go beyond simply asking people to talk about their stories [20].

It is therefore through communicating with others and through engaging with the things we value that individual aspiration might be brought to the fore. We propose this

requires a focus on the sensory nature of communication and objects, through visual, tactile and aural media, which engage the senses and open people up in individual ways prompting reflection and revealing rich insights into past, present and future aspiration. We propose that this might be done in two ways; through attending to the specific material qualities of communication and to the objects people might value. The following is an example of a sustained commentary conducted through cine-film which highlights the potential of particular technology to support multi-sensory reflection of experience through transnational communication.

### **A Forty Year multi-sited Ethnography**

In Sandhya Suri's feature length film 'I for India', Suri tells the story of her father's emigration from India and the sustained communication with his family through cine film. Whilst the documentary footage was not developed as a reflective study of migrant communication, it gives a unique insight into changing migrant aspiration over time. Suri tells the story through a rich combination of what she describes as 'cine-letters' from her father and his family in India. Most importantly she tells the story of her father's changing sense of aspiration in response to his experience in the UK, his wife and children, his job and his extended family in India.



**Fig 1. Production shot of Yash Pal Suri checking cine film in I for India © Sandhya Suri 2006**

*'In 1965 Yash Pal Suri left India for the UK, the first thing he does on his arrival in England is to buy 2 Super 8 cameras, 2 projectors and 2 reel to reel recorders. One set of equipment he sends to his family in India, the other he keeps for himself. For forty years he uses it to share his new life abroad with those back home - images of snow, mini-skirted ladies dancing bare-legged, the first trip to an English supermarket - his taped thoughts and observations providing a unique chronicle of the eccentricities of his new English hosts. Back in India, his relatives in turn, respond with their own 'cine-letters' telling tales of weddings, festivals and village life. As time passes and the planned return to India becomes an increasingly remote possibility,*

*the joy and curiosity of the early exchanges give way to the darker reality of alienation, racism and a family falling apart.'* [10]

Sandhya Suri's portrait of her family history through her father's cine letters, offer a rich documentation of his experience, which acts as a type of personal ethnographic commentary on British life. Through the eyes of someone unfamiliar with British culture, her father documents all that is strange as he tries to make sense of this new culture, whilst staying connected to his family in India. In the process of making the films, it prompts him to reflect on his family and personal life in the UK and the family he has left behind. The film represents a nostalgic reflection on dispersed family and home, but Yash Pal Suri's story also represents his own changing aspirations over time. Initially when he arrives in the UK his long-term ambition is to return to his family in India. As time goes on, he decides to stay in the UK, because there are more opportunities for his career and his immediate family. The film highlights opportunities for the role of different media to support rich personal communication to engage people in individual ways and how, through sustained interest it can be built into the practice of everyday life. The film also highlights the importance of visual, tactile and auditory exchange to support connection, but also as a process of self-reflection and re-imagination in presenting self and family to a localized British community and to a geographically distant Indian community.

### **CULTURAL PROBE ADAPTATION**

As a co-creative visual, tactile and sometimes auditory method, cultural probes offer opportunities for reflection using material and cultural references. They have been adapted in many ways as a playful research practice to help researchers elicit provocative responses from participants. They offer a sensitivity to personal and reflective research focusing on the here and now of people's lives often through deploying cameras, diaries and maps [6]. Some practitioners have also used them to place their own experiences in dialogue with participants by using them themselves as a self-reflective move [15] or by adapting the probes through their own arts practice. In expanding the latter method, Jayne Wallace's cultural probes offer more sensitive insights to understand people's dreams and aspirations. Her interpretation of the cultural probe draws from strong cultural and material symbolism, gently inviting people to respond. Wallace's probes draw from her experience as a jeweller, artist and designer and highlight the importance of her own personal experience she brings to a process [16, 19, 20]. In this sense her cultural probes are considered to be conversations, where she reflects on her own values and sensibilities in the process of making her invitations. She offers these invitations as personal and hand made interpretations of the cultural probe, which people can then respond to. These responses reveal

individual values, which eventually inform a personally meaningful design for technology for those involved.

### Material and imagined futures

In thinking through the materiality of communication and objects and of bringing aspiration to the fore, we propose to make a series of object and technology probes. This will initially draw from the cultural act of looking to the future. As part of any society, over history a set of cultural practices around looking into the future has evolved. This has included the capability of others to see the future such as shamans, soothsayers, witches, clairvoyants, and the tools they use, tarot, crystal balls, stars, animals, nature, tea-leaves, palm reading. The fact that there are so many suggest people across the world have evolved strategies in which to make the future appear more attainable and understandable. Whilst these strategies are presented as something pointing to the future, they always involve a reflective move on what we already know in order to make sense of what the future might hold. For example the daily horoscope has to be generic, but suggestive enough for people to evaluate how this relates to them, how to make sense of it in relation to their own lives at that moment in time, what they expect and hope will happen in the future. In this sense, these practices offer familiar ways in which we already engage with the future in a playful way.

In attempting to break aspiration down into something understandable but also multifaceted, based on an interpretation of Kasser's 'Aspiration Index' [8], eight areas have initially been identified which could assist in a greater understanding; health (body & mind), wealth (money & things), work (doing & learning), friends (near & far), family (near & far), community (near & far), nation (here & there), technology (new & old). The first part of the research will initially ask people to respond to these themes, in a material, tangible and open way in relation to their future aspirations. Part of this is to look at ways digital devices, which could combine ways of communicating and documenting through objects, can help to facilitate such reflection. This will provide a starting point for discussion, which may change as people's individual values come to the fore. It is also anticipated that these probes will be developed and deployed over time so that participants can make changes to how they want to document and reflect on their own lives.

### DISCUSSION

This position paper has discussed exploratory ideas of how research into migrant and transnational communication through technology could support future plans and aspirations of the individual. Current research, however focuses on the here and now of spatial negotiation and not on the changing nature of aspiration over time, which limits how we might understand people's sense of their ambition for the future. This paper has suggested that in order to understand such phenomena, a focus on experience-centred

design methods could reveal much richer interpretations of migrant aspiration over time.

In framing the early stages of an exploratory study, the paper has drawn from the theory and practice of experience-centred design to focus on methods of communication and objects of value as offering insights into people's future aspirations through technology. This has highlighted a focus on the interplay of past, present and imagined future self. In order to access this imagined future self, the method outlined here has highlighted a playful move that draws from different cultural practices and objects, which might help reflection and imagination on what has already been in order to consider what is to come. Whilst the suggested methods of engagement proposed here, open up discussion on transnational design over time in HCI, further work needs to consider the sensitive and reflexive role the designer has to engage in when working in such spaces and how postcolonial discourse might impact on thinking through such approaches [7].

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