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Photo-parshiya: Discursive Assemblages in an International Women's Centre

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Abstract: Research in community-based design highlights the importance of photo-sharing to support membership. As digital photographic collections both age and proliferate, the use of physical mementos and materials have been explored to support rich social interactions around photo-sharing within the home, museums, education and social care settings. However little attention has been paid to digital-material design

for diverse cultural community heritage. We present the photo-parshiya; a digital photo-album, an artefact designed and used as part of a long-term research partnership with the Angelou Centre¹, an international women's centre in the UK. The purpose of the artefact was to initiate discussion on how technology might support creative exploration of heritage across cultures and generations. We describe how particular digital-material assemblages encouraged appreciation of archives to highlight the importance of material 'herstories', confidence and play with technology while drawing attention to the challenges of sustaining community, familial continuity and relevance with young people when moving to the UK.

Keywords: Photo-sharing; Migration; Meritage; Materials; Participation; Diversity.



Figure 1. Photo-parshiya photo-album and necklace used in BAM! Sistahood heritage project. Photo credit: Lalya Gaye.

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Figure 2. Photo-parshiya (digital photo-album) and example necklace made by volunteer. Photo credit: Rachel Clarke.



Introduction

Photographs remain important evocative reminders of social experiences and history. Research in community-based design has highlighted the relevance of photo-sharing, particularly around local heritage to support informal learning opportunities to perform rights of passage for the uninitiated and support membership (Carroll & Rossen 2013, Taylor et al 2009). As digital photographic collections both proliferate and age, this creates opportunities for groups to collectively sustain participation in contributing, organising and meaning making associated with images (Gulotta et al 2013, Odom et al 2012). While an abundance of online tools and social network sites offer particular ways of organising content, researchers have also looked towards the use of physical objects, mementos and materials to create alternative opportunities for meaningful rich social interactions around sharing digital media (Ciolfi et al 2012, Durrant et al 2013, Nunes et al 2009, Petrelli & Whittaker 2012, Wallace et al 2012, 2013, White et al 2013). The context for such work has, however, largely focused on the family home, museums, education and social care settings with little attention paid to design around diverse cultural community heritage.

As part of a research through design inquiry into ‘ways of making’, we present for exhibition an interactive artefact, the photo-parshiya, (digital photo-album), illustrating aspects of the design process and use through

a series of annotated photographs. As part of a long-term research engagement with the Angelou Centre, an international women’s centre in the UK, its purpose was to initiate discussion on how technology might support creative exploration of heritage across cultures and generations. Developed in collaboration with volunteers, engineers and furniture designers, the artefact was installed in the centre over four months and integrated into a series of workshops and public events. We highlight how particular digital-material assemblages encouraged a broader appreciation of archives to support material ‘herstories’, confidence and play with technology, while drawing attention to the challenges of sustaining community, familial continuity and relevance with young people when moving to the UK.

Project timeline

The project took place between January 2013 and February 2014 and developed as an exploration of digital community archives where files are traditionally stored on computers and servers. The photo-parshiya was envisaged to support discussion on flexible sharing of digital photographs within the community. Weekly drop-in co-design workshops took place at the centre between January and April 2013. This was followed by ideation, technical development, interaction and physical design with volunteers, programmers, engineers and furniture makers between May and August 2013. A deployment of four months took place between September and



Figure 3. Staff moved premises at the end of 2012 into a new building above and began planning for a longer-term heritage project; BAM! Sistahood www.bamsistahoodproject.org.uk



Top L-R: computer room, entrance to kitchen, art room. Middle L-R: offices, counselling room, and waiting area on first floor. Bottom: Auntie's room, a social space and informal training room, where meetings and workshops during the project took place.

Photo credit: Rachel Clarke.



Figure 3. Staff moved premises at the end of 2012 into a new building above and began planning for a longer-term heritage project; BAM! Sistahood www.bamsistahoodproject.org.uk

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December 2013, where the artefact was used both within the centre and within public presentations within the city. Final discussions and follow-up interviews took place in January and February 2014.

Centre ‘Herstory’

The Angelou Centre is a charity based in the north of England, U.K. Informed by strong commitments to social justice, the centre was established in 1993 when a collective of women activists and social workers came together to campaign for greater support and equality for women from black, asian, minority ethnic and refugee communities (BAMER) within the city. A team of full and part-time staff, including support workers, counselors, trainers, facilitators and volunteers, who are now involved with the day-to-day running of the centre, support over 150 women with access to welfare and training each year. As part of a well-established network of first, second and third generation families that migrated to the area primarily from Pakistan and India to find work in the early 60s, the centre also supports families as part of more recent migrations from Nigeria, Congo, Iran, Iraq and Syria. Those involved are politically and socially active organising protests to raise awareness of discrimination and global politics alongside events such as celebrations of achievements, religious festivals, youth enrichment programmes and elders’ social groups. Befriending schemes for those who can experience extreme isolation when adapting to different cultural values

and building new social support networks when first coming to the UK, also run alongside informal peer mentoring, access to training, personal development, counselling, legal advice for immigration and intimate partner violence.

Design workshops

When we met with staff and volunteers in 2011, they were keen to create a legacy about their work and encourage the next generation to celebrate contributions from BAMER women within the local area. Informed by ethnographic action research (EAR) (Hearn et al 2008) and a participatory design approach (Bjorgvinsson et al 2010), we ran a series of video-making workshops and began to explore and speculate on what a community digital archive might look and feel like.

We followed on from this by organising a series of drop-in weekly sessions between January and April 2013 to promote dialogue around heritage, archives and display. This included a series of cultural probes to introduce ourselves to volunteers and the wider community and we invited women to bring objects from home. We asked individuals to share how the objects had become part of their home, and how they were stored and displayed. In addition a visit to a design collection in a museum was arranged where objects could be handled and different processes of making with materials were discussed with professional designers and curators. Each volunteer documented the process in sketchbooks and produced design sheets,

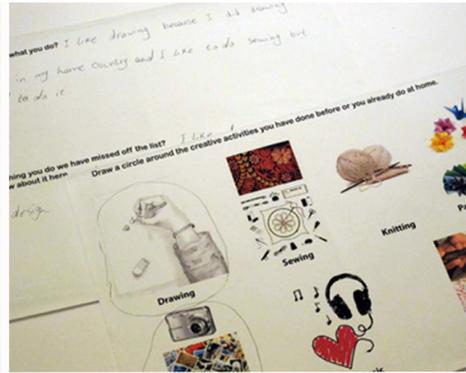
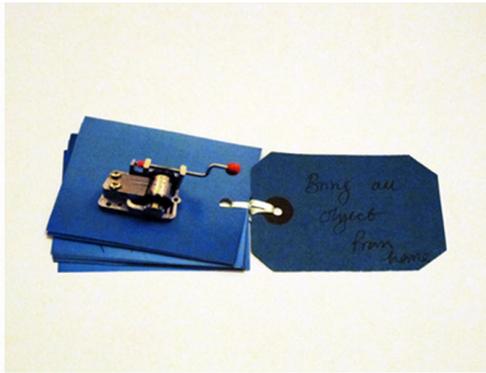
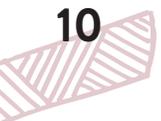


Figure 4. Design workshops exploring heritage collections and display.

Top L-R: Project information sheets, cultural probe activity asking group to bring object from home and reflections on making activities volunteers liked to get involved in.

Middle L-R: Sharing and discussing objects in the group, mats and spoon from Nigeria and volunteer sketchbook.

Bottom L-R: Visit to museum photographing objects that were familiar, handling objects and framed display of ideas presented in the Auntie's room.



which were framed and displayed in the centre to share with the wider community.

Insights from the workshops were discussed with staff and volunteers, highlighting the importance of the sketchbooks for adding and developing ideas between home and the centre. There was further interest in creating small portable objects of decoration and adornment for the centre, home, for the self and family in the UK. The group discussed how they felt small portable objects could act as reminders to share particular experiences, for instance of particular rituals around drinking tea with the family in Iran or for particular ways of decorating cutlery in some communities in northern Nigeria. There were also discussions between visitors and staff who showed a keen interest in the design sheets framed and displayed in the centre and discussed with volunteers their ideas. Volunteers described how these conversations gave them a sense of pride in finding the wider community of staff and visitors were interested in the work that they had produced (Figure 4).

Developing the artefact

From May 2013 we began to work with programmers and engineers on a series of designs. After developing a number of concepts that focused on pieces of furniture and discussing these with volunteers and staff, we focused on the idea of a photo-album and the emphasis on curation

and sharing as a form of storage that could be made meaningful through selection. We were mindful of wanting to create something that had a familiar reference for different members of the community, and the importance of the sketchbooks in documenting and curating process. We also wanted to ensure that the artefact could be experienced as something novel, potentially drawing interest, offering alternative starting points for conversations as described by Gaver et al (2011). In responding to the rich material interactions observed with objects brought from home and the sense of pride that volunteers had previously discussed, we wanted to ensure the object had a sense of occasion, but would also not dominate any space where it was installed and could also be moved around at the centre.

In drawing inspiration from Wallace et al (2013) and White et al (2013) we explored specific materials that we hoped would resonate within the community. In working with furniture designers Raskl2, they shared a number of techniques for working with wood discussing particular provenance, the qualities of wood and how embedding the technology might effect interaction through weight and feel. As a design team we shared these examples with staff and volunteers and from this chose to work with Sapale wood, from forests in west and central Africa. Through these discussions we decided on using Dutch Hollandaise fabrics, Indian silks, cottons and beads to also provide points of connection to specific materials associated with global trade, design and post-colonial histories.



Figure 5. Processes of making

Top L-R: Early cardboard and paper prototypes that were shared within the centre.

Middle L-R: Working with furniture makers, Raskl to explore CNC wood frames, bespoke wooden base and book in progress.

Bottom L-R: Prototype frames using wood and Perspex for necklace, keyring and brooch design ideas and testing different fabrics.



Small wooden laser cut wooden frames were also created to house the wireless electronics to connect to the photo-parshiya to support more intimate and tangible ways for volunteers to connect to the album to contribute to both a group and personal collection of photographs, as informed by our earlier co-design workshops. The aesthetics of the physical form and interactions were worked on iteratively within the design team drawing from the practical and sensory insights developed from previous workshops (Figure 5.).

The photo-parshiya

The finished artefact (Figure 2. & 6.) is a digital photo-album designed for the community to add, store, curate and share their photographs. It can be held like a book, is portable and acts as a static double touch screen display that sits on a bespoke crafted base. The physical form and interface design supports the ecology of interactions associated with uploading, storing and displaying collections of digital images in groups. Using a series of handmade wireless necklaces created by volunteers, these were developed to support a more intimate way of creating and connecting to a personal collection on the album. When close to the photo-parshiya, the necklaces connect with the album showing an enlarged dancing image of the necklace on the screen. When the necklace on the screen is touched a locket opens where photographs can be uploaded via USB or SD cards, then stored or transferred for public viewing to the left

screen. Photographs are stored and viewed chronologically and personal collections are then made available only when using the necklaces.

As a design team, we wanted to give the device a name, so we could give the object a sense of being a thing in the world. We eventually chose a word that would not be immediately familiar in any language so as not to create a sense of recognition for some and not for others. Drawing from the etymology of the word participation we found the word parshiya, originating from a language that no longer existed from travelling communities in the Middle East. In discussing name choices with staff and volunteers, they felt this name was suitable because of its international connections and its associations with participation within a collective.

Making necklaces

The photo-parshiya was installed in the centre between September and December 2013 in the Auntie's room (Figure 8.) initially with pre-loaded photographs from previous design workshops. This was to test designs for the necklaces for both volunteers and staff and to start informal use in existing heritage sessions. A group of six volunteers, who were interested in curating and using the photo-parshiya with their own collections of photographs were recruited in November. As a way of getting to know each other and to create their own unique necklaces to start developing their collections, volunteers worked together using small wooden frames



Figure 6. Volunteers were introduced to the photo-parshiya in BAM! Sistahood heritage workshops in November where they discussed their own archiving practices at home and the challenges they experienced in bringing all their photos together to share with their families, especially their children, because of their constant moving around since arriving in the U.K. and a multitude of incompatible mobile digital devices. Staff members discussed with the group how for them the photo-parshiya highlighted the potential of combining materials with digital technology to suggest ways young people might find interesting ways of interacting with heritage and stories. Some of the group tried out interaction with the necklaces as they brought the necklaces close to the photo-album and others discussed how it works, and how they can make their own necklaces.

Photo credit: Lalya Gaye and volunteers as part of the BAM! Sistahood heritage project.



and wireless technology that connected to the book. Each had varying degrees of skill and confidence in making a piece of jewelry with some facilitation. However, those who were more experienced at making also helped others. Through intimate peer-to-peer support, this often led to laughter, posing and lots of excited photo-taking of each other once the necklaces were complete. Young children were also involved in some of these sessions creating necklaces for themselves and other family members as gifts, while their mothers discussed where the fabrics and patterns were from alongside their cultural associations (Figure 7.).

In one of the group discussions, volunteer Jules described how she used a lot of social media to share her photographs with family in the Democratic Republic of Congo. At the same time she also used her own physical family photo-album every month to show her daughters their ancestors; grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles; so her children did not forget the people that had been important for her in her own life. In this way she discussed how the photo-parshiya would be ‘a nice way to store like all your old pictures and talk about it. Sometimes you want to share your childhood memories with your children.’ At the same time she also enjoyed its more playful use ‘to show off - oh yeah (giggles). I’m so technical you know, I’m so modern (giggles). I’d just show off yeah, so I would do that, but you can wear it as well and it goes well with any dress (laughs).’

Uploading and sharing photographs

Once volunteers had made their own necklaces they also took part in photography workshops to add their own photographs and make their own collections (Figure 8.). A total of 128 photographs were uploaded between November and December, with each volunteer uploading between 8-42 photographs during that time. Photographs taken by volunteers, included walks in the local area, family events, home life, cultural objects in the home, trips and events at the centre, craft objects they had made and activities within the workshop. The collections also included photographs downloaded from the internet including scenic places associated with countries of birth, political events, family businesses, rituals (such as marriage ceremonies and dance) and objects that volunteers were unable to bring with them when they came to the UK.

While some volunteers were initially reticent at using the photo-album, they began taking more and more photographs to share as their confidence grew. Nilah for instance one of the volunteers described how she was ‘crazy about taking photographs’ and wanted to upload as many as she could. A support worker, Lilly sat with her to show her how, and when she flicked her photographs into the album on the screen she shrieked ‘Oooh, Look! No tension. I can pass this to my neighbour’ and started to laugh as she leaned in to transfer the rest of her photographs. At the same time she described how she was also sometimes confused with how



Figure 7. Volunteers making and wearing the necklaces in workshops and helping each other. Children also made necklaces with their mothers, friends and other women who wanted to make gifts for each other. This often sparked discussion about the patterns and different types of fabrics and where they had come from.

Photo credit: Rachel Clarke and volunteers.



Figure 8. Volunteers taking photographs in workshops at the centre and uploading these images on the photo-parshiya. The photo-album, when not in use in workshops, sat in the Auntie's room. When volunteers started uploading photographs, they also wanted photographs of themselves with the artefact to include on the album too. Children often played in this room when it wasn't being used as a formal work space and were often see flicking through photographs on the photo-parshiya and talking to one another about the images. An older Auntie's group, who met once a week, as part of the heritage sessions who also used this room shared their own physical photo-albums of their time at the centre and images of a fabric store, which one of them used to own. They shared these images with volunteers as part of an ongoing discussion about what the local area used to be like when the elder Auntie's first arrived.



to interact with the album, 'I am very confused because when we put it (necklace) in my hand, all the pictures come on this side (points to the right screen) so I am very confused. So why is it not open automatically?' When discussing its future use with Nilah, she described how she would want to use it to display her photographs so that 'everybody [will] come to see my work, and appreciate me (laughs)' feeling she had 'improved my confidence [using] the digital things all together'. In uploading many photographs taken at events at the centre, Nilah also showed other volunteers and guests at public events how the photo-parshiya worked.

Reflections on a long-term design process

As with many social care and learning communities, long-term international migration has informed creative digital programmes that support sharing of particular cultural practices (Bjorgvinsson et al 2010, DiSalvo et al 2013, Flinn 2010). Our approach was to design an artefact to support exploration rather than categorise and fix interpretations of culture and heritage within the community and therefore sought to develop an artefact and creative strategies to achieve this. We asked how technology might support diverse forms of engagement with heritage across cultures and generations. Our current understanding is that the process of design of the artefacts alongside their use, served to inspire imagination and connection to generate ideas for the future development of community heritage practices for ongoing digital projects at the

centre. This was achieved by encouraging broader forms of appreciation associated with archives, that is an appreciation for archives as having a physical, digital and meaningful presence within a place and to encourage both collective and intimate appreciation of ongoing contributions that supported forms of engaged participation linked to past, present and future possibilities (Wright & McCarthy 2010, Suchman 2007).

At the same time the design and use of the artefact also surfaced matters of concern for us as the design team and within the community (DiSalvo et al 2013). These concerns arose from the desire to share understandings both digitally and meaningfully, not just between members of the community, but also within family working towards both collective and personal legacies. Such insights were relevant not only for developing sensitive approaches for digital artefacts within the community, but also for highlighting how artefacts can be meaningful for communities beyond the artefacts use. In this sense paying attention to material 'herstories', confidence and play with technology, and the challenges of maintaining community, family continuity and relevance with young people when moving to the UK, highlighted alternative considerations for archives and media-sharing not articulated in previous research in design for community-based heritage or photo-sharing in the home.

Our aim was to purposively remain exploratory, provisional and speculative in our scope, in order to open up lines of inquiry within the community to



create opportunities for further reflections to inform future engagements with technology for heritage. Many researchers have questioned the relevance of insights that can be developed from engaging in community-based design around artefacts, especially when the very terms in which we engage in such projects are often messy, long-term, specific and situated (Carroll & Rossen 2013). We acknowledge that the approach would be difficult to directly scale up to other community-based design projects, and would therefore need sensitive and responsive consideration of the transferrable nature of our work. One such challenge is the documentation, analysis and communication of such long-term processes. However, our design approach does suggest alternative ways in which community-based design research could embrace diverse perspectives using speculative digital-material artefacts. In particular, our research highlights how design approaches can recognise political, affective and engaged connections with everyday heritage and the possibilities of material-discursive relationships with digital artefacts (Suchman 2014).

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