
Zooming into the Experiences of Young People in Lebanon

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Introduction

Thinking of the Arab Spring uprisings since 2010, those movements were primarily led by frustrated youth who had the urge to break the oppression being exerted on them on daily basis through various formats and to amplify their voices. Zooming into Lebanon, a country with various existing tensions mainly driven by sectarian intricacies as a result of the civil war dated in 1975 and the political rollercoaster it has been through, youth in that country are a highly interesting group. In fact, within a population of 5.8 million, youth (defined as aged between 15 and 24 years old) [6] constitute 29 to 32% including Palestinian and Syrian youth whose numbers cannot be determined conclusively. In such a context, narratives and experiences are quite controversial.

On the other side, HCI is an eclectic field that offers different approaches examining design and how humans might interact with it or inform it. Taking it one step further, is noticing how it translates into Digital Civics which heavily relies on linking design processes to civic matters. It is noteworthy to highlight that along both fields, a set of implications emerge related to

participation, control, ethics, democracy, publics, experience and so on...and the actual challenge is to find out how all of these elements among others can work together.

In line with the above, my current research interest revolves around exploring participatory techniques such as cultural probes and digital storytelling (and maybe others) and how they translate into experience-centred design. Additionally, I am keen on examining implications of such techniques on democratising participation and perhaps fostering empowerment of youth specifically. Moreover, I am interested in linking the concept of public design to my research interest which involves young people and the places in their neighbourhoods that continuously influence their narratives, identities and even well-being.

Related Work

Cultural Probes

The work of Gaver et al. [5] explains cultural probes as an evocative set of tasks aiming to extrapolate significant responses from people. Those responses are not necessarily very comprehensive but rather bring together random/fragmented hints about the thoughts and lives of people. This technique is used in order to inform design ideas for technologies enriching people's lives in an innovative and pleasurable manner [Ibid]. As such probes reflect multi-layered experiences of people, triggering through observable facts emotional implications and realities [Ibid]. When examining cultural probes through the lens of the paper by Boehner et al. [1], it discusses issues such as the lack

of documentation regarding the transition from cultural probes to actual design.

Digital Storytelling

As for digital storytelling, through its process, people create films which aim to amplify their voices; generating input to the public culture [2]. It balances between the ethics of democratic 'access' and aesthetics in order to maximize relevance and impact [Ibid]. The specificity of digital storytelling is that it relies on 'vernacular literacies'; competencies and skills which are not exclusively related to artistic education but are rather acquired through every day experience and a result of being a mass media consumer [Ibid].

Experience-centered Design

Wright, McCarthy and Meekison [8] state in their work that experience encompasses four threads: 1) Compositional, 2) Sensual, 3) Emotional and 4) Spatio-temporal. Acknowledging the importance of 'Knowing the User', HCI has made major methodological and conceptual progress in better understanding the user's experience and research practices that accompany that [9]. Because of their features and nature, techniques such as cultural probes and digital storytelling feed into the idea of conceptualizing and approaching people's experiences and capturing these in the design process.

Participation and Empowerment

Relying on participatory techniques (e.g. cultural probes or digital storytelling) suggests the democratization of technology in the sense of inferring more space for creativity and agency, leading to a surge in participation and productive leisure [Ibid]. Concurrently, Florida [4] claims that such ubiquitous creativity fosters cultural citizenship. Taking this one

step further, is thinking on how to push researchers to go to the 'wild' and optimize engagement with participants. Yet, as Vines et al. [7] highlight, often creative participatory tools aim to support democratization and agency of usually disempowered people but they would often be taken on by those whose voices are most likely to be heard to begin with. Acknowledging this idea, it is necessary for researchers to explore different forms of participation and to ponder on the idea of who is actually benefiting from participation [Ibid]. When exploring the potential of participation and extent of shared control, it is crucial to be aware that tensions and challenges might emerge.

Publics and Public Design

Matters of concern as DiSalvo et al. [3] explain are situations and resulting consequences which form subjective experiences that translate into political conditions. Many tensions found themselves engrained within communities in Lebanon without being always visible. For young people, these matters of concern need to be put forward because as DiSalvo et al. [Ibid] frame it, it is a necessity to engage with matters of concern from an experiential perspective and to devise tactics need that put forward these matters and act upon that. Taking that into account, it is quite challenging to tackle the narratives that would emerge since they may contain sensitive topics and to link them to places. Yet, it is crucial as noted by DiSalvo et al. [Ibid] to articulate these problematic issues within design which in its turn should convey lived experience, apparent consequences and anticipated futures. These issues would be considered by a collective 'public' (a social entity which is formed to interact with the problematic issue) [Ibid] in this case, young people.

Why attend HCI across borders Symposium

I am currently a doctoral trainee in Open Lab-Newcastle University, pursuing a MRes in Digital Civics and I have a previous background in public health with a focus on community health and health promotion especially among youth. I find myself drawn to the orientation of Public Design, Participatory techniques (such as cultural probes and digital storytelling) and Experience-Centred Design as these also are quite interesting even from a public health lens. The aim of my current project is not necessarily to find solutions for complex issues but perhaps to engage with participants in creating new meanings and re-imagining constraints and parameters that surround problematic issues as alluded by DiSalvo et al. [Ibid]. Thinking of some of the themes the Symposium would be exploring such as: Leveraging participatory design and co-design approaches, Factoring cultural sensitivities in the design of new technologies, Designing to accommodate power differentials and Devising innovative techniques for engaging users; I find these relevant to my research interest especially that my project will be implemented in a very challenging context such as Beirut in Lebanon with young people coming from various cultural backgrounds and struggles. This Symposium would be a good opportunity to hear about and discuss experiences around the aforementioned themes and how to feed that into my current and future projects.

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