

D2: Design Exploration Report - Brainstorming & Developing Alternatives

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Executive Summary

Design Problem Framing

In an increasingly globalized world, young adults are entering environments such as universities, workplaces, and digital communities, that are culturally diverse. However, meaningful cross-cultural connections remain rare. Homophily (the tendency to stay within similar circles), structural barriers like geography and language, and prejudice cause restrictions in genuine engagement. Research ^[1, 2] indicates that cross-cultural connections and learning foster empathy, reduce prejudice, and enhance teamwork and collaboration. Recognizing this, our project aims to design a solution that facilitates sustained, meaningful cross-cultural connections among young adults. We define “culture” primarily in terms of race and ethnicity, but our framing can expand to include differences in religion, region, upbringing, and values—dimensions that shape identity and social experience.

Key User Group

We chose young adults aged 18-28 as our target user group. Research ^[3, 4, 5] shows that young adults are the most open to cross-cultural interaction, with studies finding that young adults report strong interest in cultural diversity, lower ethnocentrism, and higher willingness to engage with people from different backgrounds. In contrast, older adults are typically more settled, with smaller social circles and less motivation to form new cross-cultural connections. We observed this phenomenon in our research with one of our interviewees who came from an older age group.

Our key user group’s goals are to build genuine, long-lasting, cross-cultural connections and to explore and engage deeply with diverse perspectives, traditions, and lifestyles in order to learn more about other cultures and broaden their worldview. However, they face several challenges, which we aim to address:

- Overcoming initial communication and cultural barriers that cause hesitation and discomfort.
- Finding peers from diverse backgrounds in an accessible and trustworthy way.
- Engaging in meaningful interactions rather than superficial connections.

Solution

Our design problem centers on the question: **How might we facilitate meaningful, sustainable cross-cultural connections among young adults?**

After exploring multiple concepts and gathering feedback from interviewees, we decided to pursue the ‘Cultural Buddy Finder’ app. **Cultural Buddy Finder** is a mobile app designed to connect individuals or groups from different cultural backgrounds through shared activities, hobbies, or events. The MVP focuses on creating structured yet flexible digital environments where users can meet, interact, and explore cultural diversity. The app focuses on 3 key goals: *connect, engage, and learn*.

Key Features

- **Personalized Cultural Profiles:** Each user has a profile showcasing their cultural background, interests, hobbies, etc., allowing other users to quickly learn more about them before initiating connections.
- **AI-based Matching System:** AI automatically matches users with the same or similar interests/hobbies and will intentionally match different cultural groups to form diverse pairings.
- **In-App Chat:** The chat feature allows for users to connect in the application itself, giving users a chance to sync before meeting in person or meeting online to chat, exchange stories, or plan activities together.
- **Anonymous Discussion Portal:** Users can participate in anonymous Q & A or discussions to ask questions or share thoughts that they might not feel comfortable expressing publicly, allowing safe and pressure-free engagement.
- **Events and Activities Hub:** This section allows users to stay updated as well as create invites for local cultural events and activities, enabling other users to discover things to do and find people to do those things with.
- **Teach 'n Learn Spaces:** Users can share traditions, recipes, dance, music, etc. through these interactive spaces or can use the platform to plan in-person meetups for these activities.

These Features Meet Our User Needs As The App...

- **Supports connection through shared interests and activities, encourages genuine connection.** It connects users from different cultural backgrounds through mutual hobbies or passions (e.g., cooking, dance). Shared experiences reduce initial hesitation and help users bond naturally.
- **Ensures balanced cultural representation.** It uses an AI-based matching algorithm to ensure diversity, giving users equal opportunity to connect with people from varying cultural backgrounds.
- **Encourages intentional and meaningful cross-cultural interactions.** It promotes sustained engagement by suggesting recurring activities or challenges that users can participate in together.
- **Embeds learning and teaching opportunities.** It enables users to share cultural practices, traditions, and skills during their interactions, encouraging mutual learning and cultural appreciation.
- **Has a low barrier to entry.** It has minimal profile setup and intuitive matching, allowing users to connect quickly and comfortably regardless of technical or social confidence.

Social Feasibility

- The target user group is highly active on social connection platforms like Instagram, Hinge, Discord, etc., and is thus likely to adopt similar technologies readily.
- Tackles cultural polarization and social isolation among young adults by enabling sustained cross-cultural connections.
- Encourages empathy and reduces prejudice, leading to more inclusive environments.

Economic Feasibility

- Scalable, as it can be adopted by universities, workplaces, cultural organizations, and event platforms.

Technical Feasibility

- This project has a high level of technical feasibility. All technologies used by the platform are mature with successful existing implementations.

Ten Design Concepts

Problem Framing

Our current problem centers on the question: **How might we facilitate meaningful, sustainable cross-cultural connections among young adults?** Many barriers exist to cross-cultural connection among young adults, including homophily, structural barriers, and prejudice. Our idea focused on actively breaking down cultural barriers to foster exploration and appreciation of differences.



group design session

Top 10 Design Concepts

Top 10:

From all 3 brainstorm sessions:



Mixed Language Karaoke

1. A group of people can select which cultures they come from or want to explore more of.
2. Helps strangers learn more about each other's cultures through music discovery and language sharing, providing a common activity for them to bond over.
3. Can be done together in a physical space, promoting in-real-life cross-cultural interactions.



DailyLens

1. Every day, users are prompted to share a short video of what they are doing, and they can see a feed of popular videos of what people around the world are doing.
2. Allows users to see what the daily lives of people look like around the world to build understanding and acceptance.
3. Serendipitous algorithm design will promote a feed of diverse cultures and perspectives.



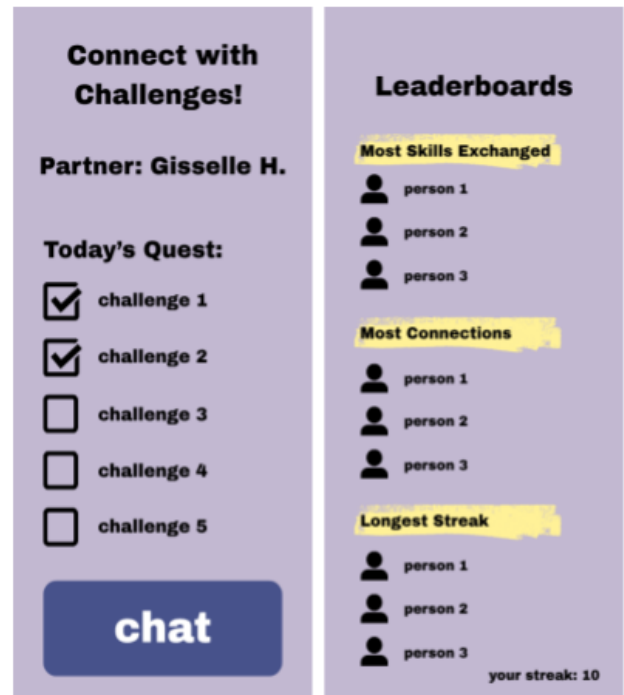
Safe Space

1. It is an anonymous platform for a group of people in the same organization to speak and respond freely focusing on cultural topics.
2. This idea is designed for users who find it difficult to express their feelings face-to-face when they experience cultural discomfort or offense.
3. The platform fosters empathy through guided reflections and response prompts that transform sensitive moments into opportunities for learning.



Culture Quest

1. A gamified platform where users connect with a partner and “swap lives” for the day, completing tasks (created by the partner) that are specific to that person’s culture.
2. With this, users are enabled to learn about daily customs of another culture and bond with others over activities; they also are encouraged with leaderboards and streaks.
3. This promotes users' goals by promoting learning in a genuine and task-driven setting rather than something like a school environment.



Rhythm Roots

1. A dance-learning game where users follow guided steps to learn cultural dances (e.g., Bhangra, Flamenco, Salsa).
2. Makes cultural traditions interactive and fun, promoting cross-cultural appreciation.
3. Since people connect through shared hobbies and interests like dancing, it helps users bond through sharing their heritage or discovering new cultures.



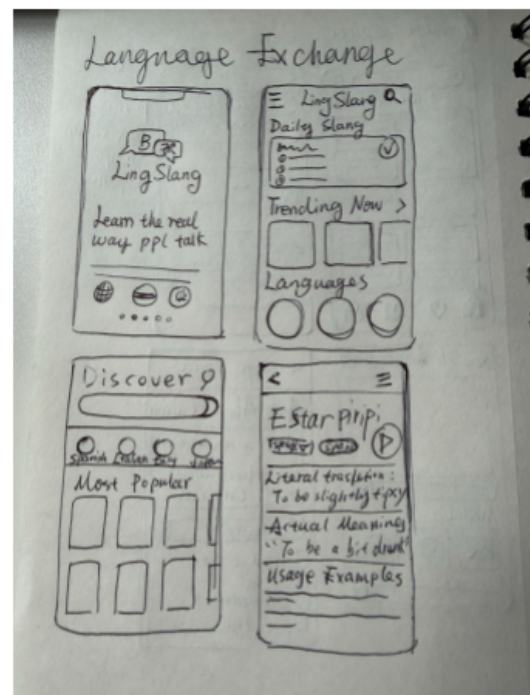
Ask Grandma

1. An app for users to send questions to "grandmas" from different cultures, and those grandmas can respond with a video explaining or demonstrating something.
2. Can connect younger and older people, bridging cultural and generational barriers.
3. Allows older people to preserve cultural heritage, and younger people to have a more well-rounded worldview.



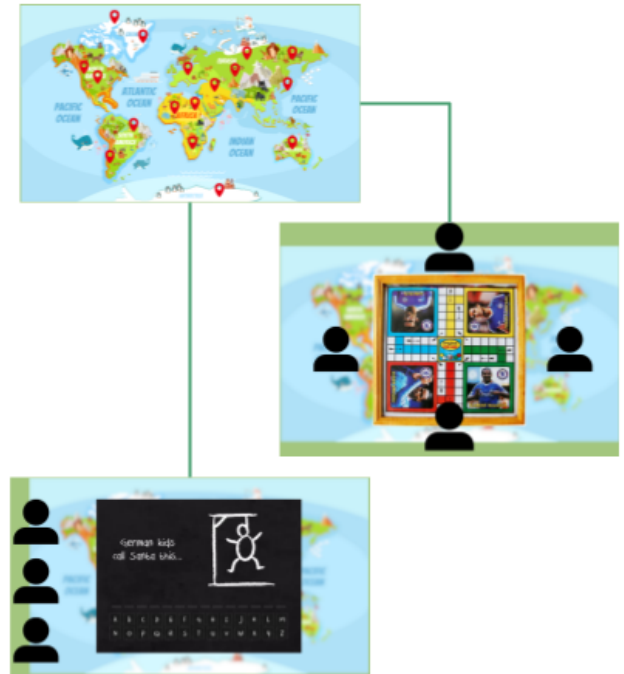
Language Exchange

1. A platform that enables users from different cultural backgrounds to exchange everyday slang and idiomatic expressions.
2. Encourages learning and authentic communication, helping users speak more naturally and connect beyond textbook language.
3. Help users develop deeper cultural understanding by exploring the emotions and social stories embedded within informal language.



World Party

1. A Jackbox-like/online multiplayer game where users can join and pick a region to play different childhood games from different cultures with other people around the world.
2. This allows people to connect in a low-stakes way, fostering low-barrier entry and relationships over background.
3. It promotes the preservation of culture in addition to smaller group connection.



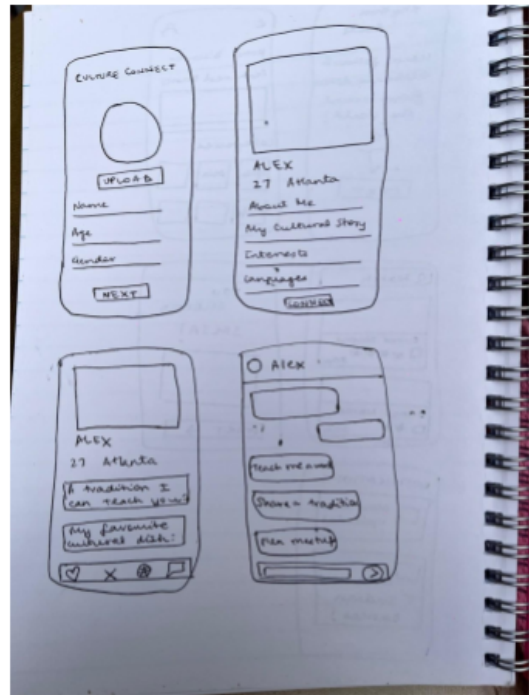
Shared Table

1. A platform where users are connected with other users from a different culture, and they exchange recipes. These connections are random, and users are expected to share recipes specific to their culture.
2. Allows users to connect with another person by learning about the food of their culture and gives them the opportunity to further this connection through chat features.
3. Designed to allow for connections over food, as many users stated that this was a big thing they used to explore culture. Promotes interaction and learning.



Culture Connect

1. A profile-based platform where users showcase cultural identity, practices, and interests (similar to Bumble/Hinge but centered on culture).
2. Enables users to build their personal profiles, making it easy to find people with shared, different or complementary backgrounds.
3. Designed to meet the user goal of making new connections; it fosters meaningful relationships grounded in culture, values, and belonging.



Two Design Alternatives

The Two Alternatives

1. **Cultural Buddy Finder** - A mobile app that encourages people from different cultural backgrounds to engage in activities/hobbies/events together in order to form genuine relationships. There will be a profile for each user which showcases cultural identity, practices, and interests (similar to Bumble/Hinge but centered on culture). The matching can happen between individuals or groups from different cultural backgrounds using AI, prioritizing shared or complementary interests. This app will make it easy to find people with shared, different or complementary backgrounds.
2. **Global Daily Video App** - Each day, this app (inspired by BeReal) will prompt users to record and upload a short video of their daily lives. These videos will be tagged with the location from where the user took it. Users will see a feed of videos from various places around the globe, promoting engagement and understanding across cultures. The app's algorithm will be designed to maximize the diversity of each users' feed through serendipitous design, to ensure that each user can see videos from a variety of places around the world.

How Each Alternative Aligns with Our User Requirements

User Requirement	Cultural Buddy Finder	Global Daily Video App
Support connection through shared interests and activities, encourage	Connects users from different cultural backgrounds through mutual hobbies or passions (e.g., cooking, dance). Shared experiences reduce initial hesitation and help users bond naturally.	Creates a space for people to find common ground by exploring similarities in their daily routines and activities, fostering familiarity across cultures.
Ensure balanced cultural representation	Uses an AI-based matching algorithm to ensure diversity, giving users equal opportunity to connect with people from varying cultural backgrounds.	Uses a serendipitous algorithm to ensure each feed showcases diverse perspectives, places, and lifestyles, promoting inclusivity and cultural balance.
Encourage intentional and meaningful cross-cultural interactions	Promotes sustained engagement by suggesting recurring activities or challenges that users can participate in together.	Encourages engagement with authentic video content from users worldwide, allowing viewers to comment, react, and discuss cultural experiences.
Embed learning and teaching opportunities	Enables users to share cultural practices, traditions, and skills during their interactions, encouraging mutual learning and cultural appreciation.	Exposes users to real, unscripted glimpses of global life, encouraging observation-based cultural learning.
Have a low barrier to entry	Minimal profile setup, and intuitive matching, allowing users to connect quickly and comfortably regardless of technical or social confidence.	Accessible to anyone with a smartphone, removing physical and geographical barriers.

How We Came to Our Decision of shortlisting the above 2 concepts:

In coming to a conclusion on our final two design alternatives, we considered several aspects of the design ideas. First, we concluded that these two ideas were the best way to support a user journey. Additionally, some of the top 10 design concepts ended up being too simple and could easily be integrated as features of another concept. For example, Culture Connect, which allows users to make a Bumble/Hinge-like profile, and Culture Quest, which allows users to partner up and complete challenges from another person's culture, were refined and combined to create 'Cultural Buddy Finder.' Finally, we wanted to focus on intentionally creating connections between people and cultures, and concepts such as Safe Space, which allows for

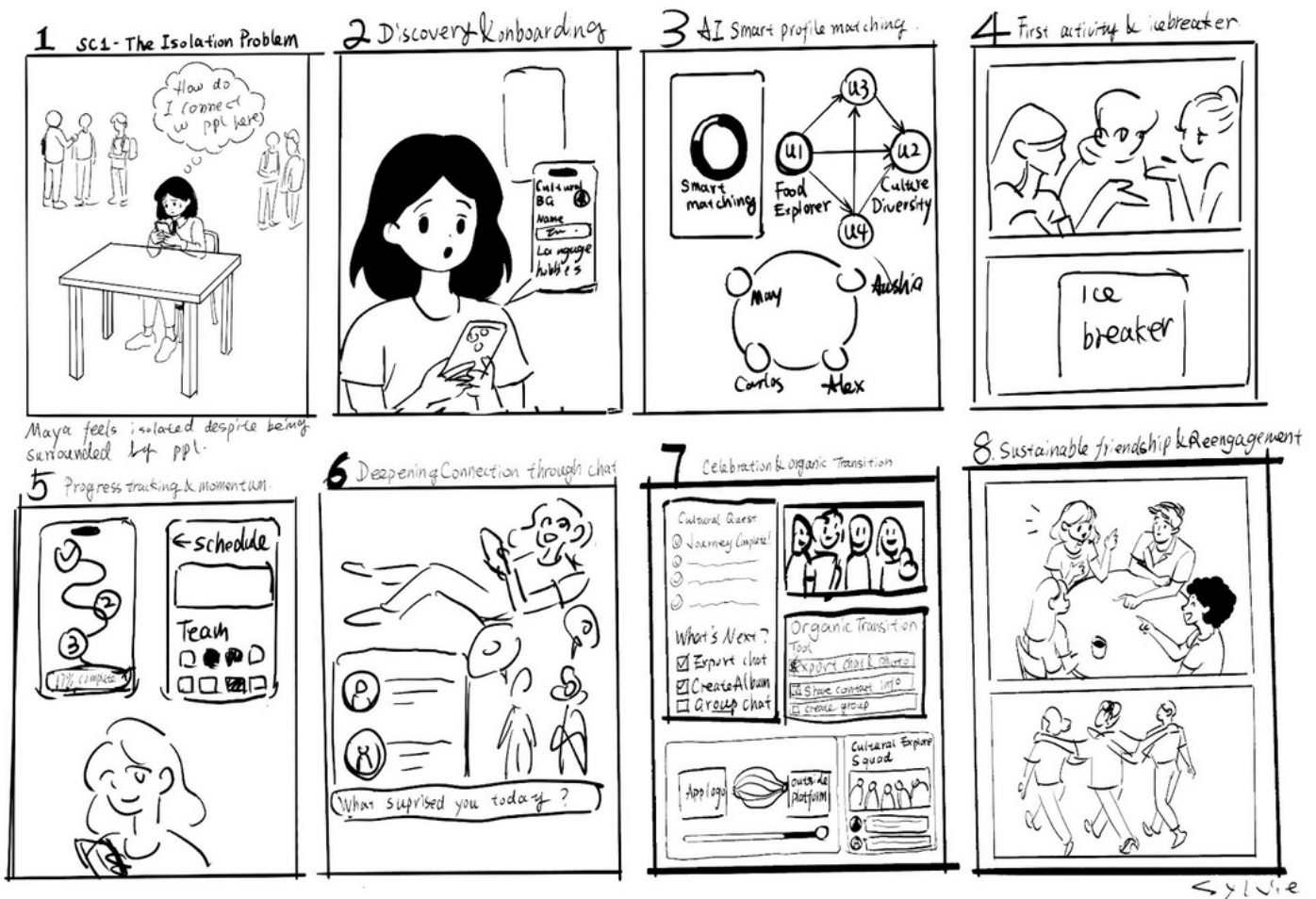
anonymous chatting, could not provide this. These two ideas aligned best with our user needs for meaningful cross-cultural engagement.

Storyboarding Summary

Storyboards

Cultural Buddy Finder

Storyboard 1



Maya is surrounded by classmates but feels a deep social isolation. None of her peers share her cultural background, and she doesn't know how to bridge that gap to make genuine connections. She feels alone, despite the crowd. (SC1)

As she starts to browse through the app store, she's found an app called "Cultural Buddy Finder", she then reads the description and decides to give it a try. The onboarding was quick and fun, she quickly filled out her profile with a picture of herself, her culture, her favorite songs and activities, her preferred social group and distance.....etc. (SC2)

As she hits the proceed button, the AI smart matching system implemented in the app automatically matches her with 3 other folks who also want to make friends with people from other cultures within her selected distance range, based on their hobbies and interest; the four of them have at least one shared hobby, and many others to offer the group. (SC3)

They arranged their first group activity as the icebreaker-- to explore the new Malaysian style Cafe in downtown and chat.(SC4)

After the first meet up, they liked hanging out with each other, so they decided to start a quest for the group, which means multiple activities in a series for them to complete together in the near future. They can schedule the event date and time via the app's implemented interactive calendar. (SC5)

Aside from the activities, the group can also chat in the group channel and exchange information to deepen their connection and arrange mini activities. (SC6)

When a team completes a designed quest, they get points for reward, these can be used to order souvenirs for the group. And also allows a quick run through to review the photos as shared memory of the group, and also link and post the photos on other social media. (SC7)

After the group completes a quest, these young adults from different cultural backgrounds become good friends and eventually start to hangout together during their free time without having to start a quest. (SC8)

Design Decision Justification

This design direction demonstrates the long-term focus version of the Cultural Buddy Finder idea. It aims to create a journey-based experience to encourage cultural mixing by forming teams on the platform and beginning with neutral hobbies. This design direction enables people with similar motivation and intention to connect both online and physically which meets our research based user needs: genuine connection through shared interest and hobbies, a low barrier chance for people to get started with no stress (people fear reaching out to others from different cultural backgrounds for connection).

Strengths:

- It intentionally fosters long term relationships by making the team choose to sign up for a multi-activity quest, making the bond even stronger with a structured path. Instead of instant, one time connection without follow ups.
- This design direction leverages cultural exchange as a feature, instead of treating cultural difference as a passive detail in a profile.
- This design direction's chat feature and reward at completion help users better engage.

Weaknesses:

- It might be hard for people to keep up with pre-arranged activities due to unforeseen situations and change of schedule.
- The matching quality is not 100% assured, it varies heavily based on geographic locations and population.

Storyboard 2



1. **Event Discovery:** The user opens the app and comes across a cultural dance event (Indian garba) that she is interested in. Events are recommended based on cultural relevance and similarity in hobbies. This is found in the Event & Activity Hub section.
2. **Buddy Matching:** She does not feel comfortable going alone and does not know who to go with. So, she uses the app to find buddies who are going for the event. The app provides a list of potential buddies. She checks their profiles which highlights their interests and cultural backgrounds.
3. **Chat and Coordination:** The user then opens the chat feature to talk to Maya, a potential buddy for the event. They decide to go together and they discuss coordinate logistics.
4. **Teach 'N Learn:** The app's 'Teach n Learn' section in the app provides contextual guidance about the event - cultural norms, appropriate attire, steps to participate through short tutorials.
5. **Meet & Attend Event:** On the day of the event, the user meets their buddy at a pre-agreed point. They attend the event together.
6. **Feedback:** After the event, the user shares her feedback and rates the event.

Design Decision Justification

- Users want to find cultural events that match their interests without feeling overwhelmed or out of place.
 - By presenting curated, interest-based event recommendations with clear details (time, location, type of activity), users can quickly identify events they feel confident attending, reducing anxiety associated with exploring unfamiliar cultural spaces.
- Users feel hesitant to connect with people from other cultural backgrounds.
 - The app suggests buddies based on shared interests, promoting comfort and encouraging meaningful interaction. The app also allows users to chat with each other online before meeting in-person.
- Users want to feel prepared and confident in participating in culturally unfamiliar activities.
 - Providing tutorials before the event and tips on attire helps users feel prepared, increasing confidence in social interactions.

Strengths

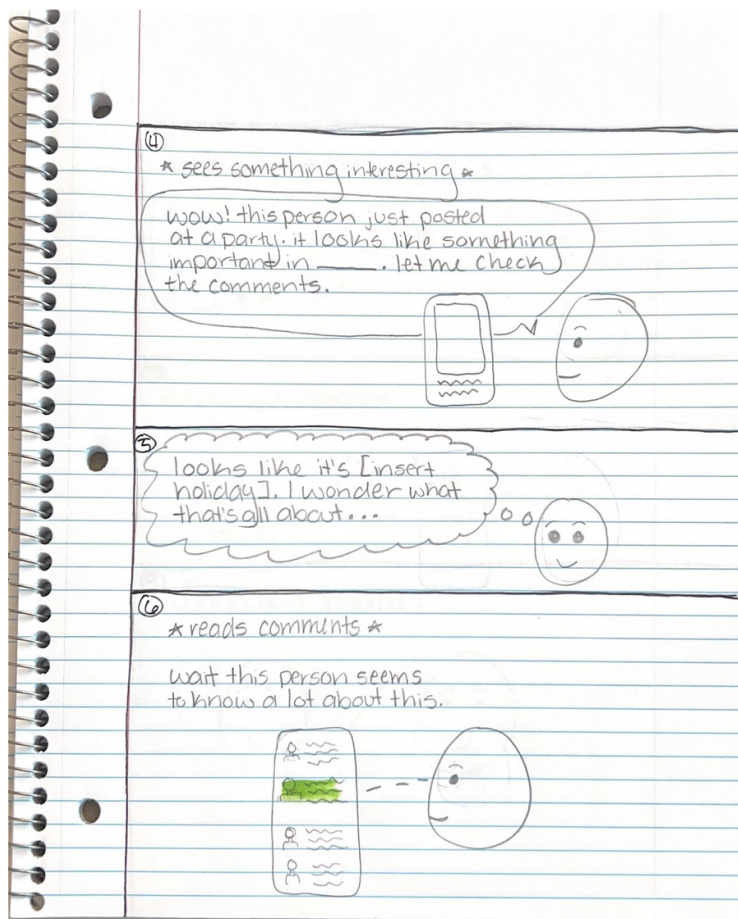
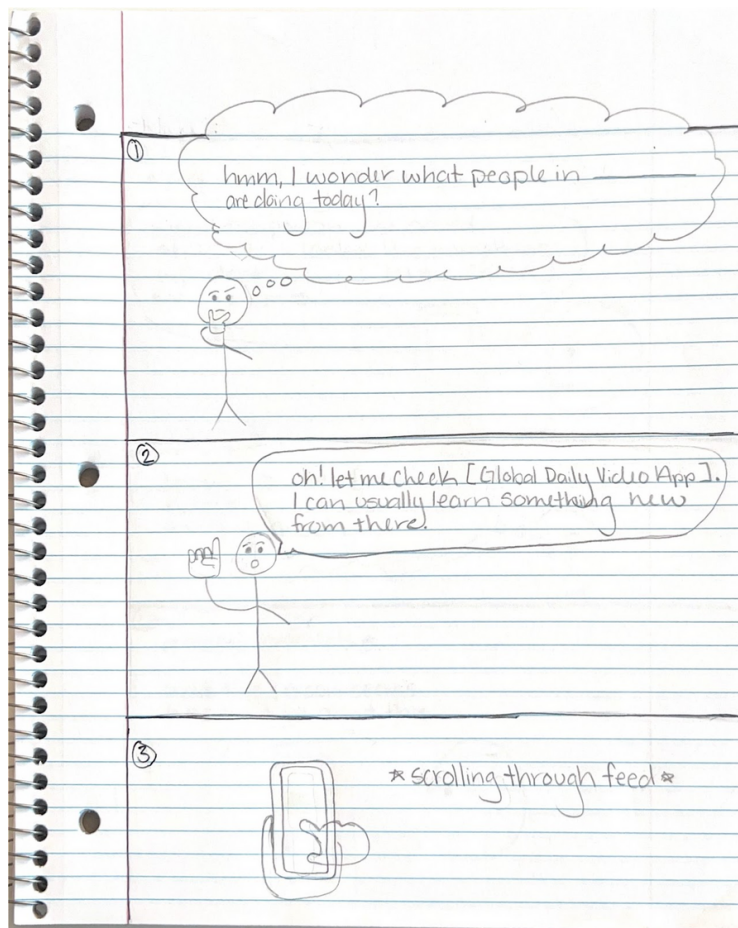
- Event recommendations and buddy matches are tailored to interests and past behaviors
- Combines social interaction with cultural education; learning through experience
- Pre-event guidance reduces stress and uncertainty for first-time participants.

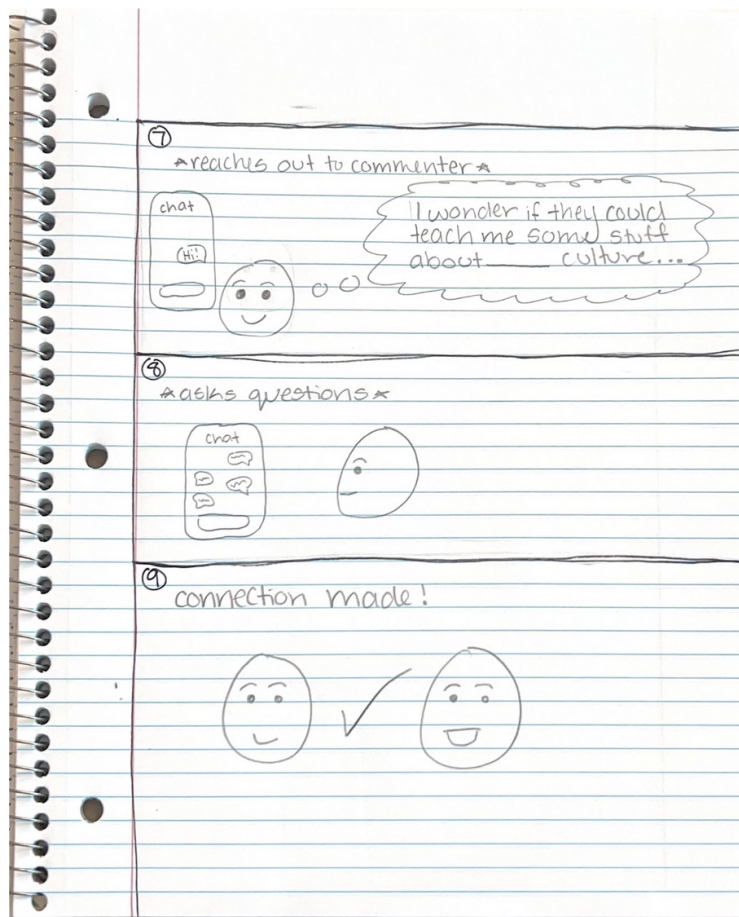
Weaknesses

- Reliance on active user participation - low engagement can limit buddy options.
- Sharing location or personal interests may raise security or data privacy issues.

Global Daily Video App

Storyboard 1





This storyboard is of a user browsing the application and making a connection. The user opens up the app and lands on the main “feed page,” where they are shown videos from various places around the globe. This feed is designed to be serendipitous, with an algorithm that ensures users see videos from a variety of places rather than the feed being hyper-personalized to their interest or past behavior. The user then searches for a specific location out of curiosity and explores its dedicated feed. In doing this, they find something interesting and decide to reach out to one of the commenters who was giving a lot of information in the comments of the video. The two chat for a bit, and from there, a connection has been made.

Design Decision Justification

This design decision aligns with the goal of ensuring balanced cultural representation by avoiding algorithmic echo chambers or cultural bias, encouraging exploration and discovery of new cultures rather than reinforcing the user’s preferences. Additionally, allowing the user to search by location enables genuine curiosity to flourish as well.

The design also allows for a low barrier to entry, as users can engage with the application through simple and noncommittal interactions like browsing or more involved interactions like commenting and messaging.

Strengths

A strength of this application is the ability for connections to be made everywhere. With all of the afforded interactions being on the platform, users don’t have to majorly disrupt their daily lives in order to use it. Another strength is its low entry barrier. There is no complex setup, and videos create natural conversation

starters to foster connection. The app is also a great learning space, with opportunities to discover new things about different cultures coming from videos and commenters.

Weaknesses

A weakness of this idea is that it has more of a potential for superficial engagement. Connection relies on user initiative. The ability for the application to lead to sustained social connection relies on individuals continuing their conversations after the initial topic is complete.

Storyboard 2





This storyboard depicts a user who is wondering how people live across the world. The user receives a notification from the proposed app, prompting them to take a video of what they are doing at that moment. The user takes the video, uploads it, and then explores a feed of videos, designed intentionally to create a diverse range of content from various places around the world. The videos allow the user to see what people from other cultures do in their day-to-day lives. The user is able to facilitate and engage in conversations with other people across the globe, while sharing each other's culture in the process.

Design Decision Justification

This app concept allows users to explore and interact with other cultures whilst combating two of the major barriers to cross-cultural connection we discovered in our secondary research. These barriers are homophily and structural barriers. Homophily is the tendency for people to only interact with those within their immediate cultures, and is exacerbated by the design of many modern social media algorithms, which perpetuate negative consequences such as echo chambers. A social media platform with an algorithm intentionally designed for diverse content can mitigate this challenge. Another significant barrier to cross-cultural connection are structural barriers, including geography, time zones, etc. A mobile app circumvents those barriers by being accessible from anywhere with an internet connection, asynchronously.

Strengths

The main strength of this app design is that it allows people to engage in cross-cultural content wherever they are. The app can be integrated seamlessly into their daily lives, using familiar methods and interfaces.

Weaknesses

The main weakness of this app idea is that there is limited opportunity for sustained social connection between individuals. While this app may facilitate spontaneous connections, it doesn't have any functions that encourage to people keep in touch afterwards.

Conclusion

Our design problem centers on facilitating meaningful cross-cultural connections for young adults, with our MVPs focusing on creating structured yet flexible digital environments where users can meet, interact, and explore cultural diversity. Both concepts address the same core user goals but through complementary approaches: one focuses on **direct interpersonal connections** via shared interests, and the other on **indirect cultural connections** through global cultural exposure.

Design Solution Choice

CHOSEN SOLUTION: **Cross-Cultural Buddy Finder**

Our chosen solution is the Cross-Cultural Buddy Finder, a platform that connects people from different cultural backgrounds through shared interests, hobbies, and activities. Initially, we sought critique from a non-teammate to help narrow down our two concepts. We then chose this solution over Global Daily Video App as our final direction by reaching out to our interviewees for feedback to understand which concept would better suited their needs. Their feedback (presented after this section) led us to choose the Cross-Cultural Buddy Finder.

Users can use the app to find friends from different cultures, and facilitate connections that may not have happened organically. The application will allow users to create personalized profiles to reflect various aspects of their cultural origin, allowing users to use their profile pages as a means of self-expression and helping to increase trust between individuals, particularly those who may feel skeptical meeting new people online. The solution focuses on 3 key goals: *connect, engage, and learn*.

These goals are addressed through the following features:

- **Personalized Cultural Profiles:** Each user has a profile showcasing their cultural background, interests, hobbies, etc., allowing other users to quickly learn more about them before initiating connections.
- **AI-based Matching System:** AI automatically matches users with the same or similar interests/hobbies and will intentionally match different cultural groups to form a diverse pairings.
- **In-App Chat:** The chat feature allows for users to connect in the application itself, giving users a chance to sync before meeting in person or meeting online to chat, exchange stories, or plan activities together.
- **Anonymous Discussion Portal:** Users can participate in anonymous Q & A or discussions to ask questions or share thoughts that they might not feel comfortable expressing publicly, allowing safe and pressure-free engagement.
- **Events and Activities Hub:** This section allows users to stay updated as well as create invites for local cultural events and activities, enabling other users to discover things to do and find people to do those things with.

- **Teach 'n Learn Spaces:** Users can share traditions, recipes, dance, music, etc. through these interactive spaces or can use the platform to plan in-person meetups for these activities.

The above features meet our user needs as the app...

- **Supports connection through shared interests and activities, encourages genuine connection.** It connects users from different cultural backgrounds through mutual hobbies or passions (e.g., cooking, dance). Shared experiences reduce initial hesitation and help users bond naturally.
- **Ensures balanced cultural representation.** It uses an AI-based matching algorithm to ensure diversity, giving users equal opportunity to connect with people from varying cultural backgrounds.
- **Encourages intentional and meaningful cross-cultural interactions.** It promotes sustained engagement by suggesting recurring activities or challenges that users can participate in together.
- **Embeds learning and teaching opportunities.** It enables users to share cultural practices, traditions, and skills during their interactions, encouraging mutual learning and cultural appreciation.
- **Has a low barrier to entry.** It has minimal profile setup and intuitive matching, allowing users to connect quickly and comfortably regardless of technical or social confidence.

Additionally, the Buddy Finder addresses a number of social concerns. First, it tackles the issue of rising cultural polarization and social isolation among young adults by enabling sustained cross-cultural connections. By facilitating diverse environments, it helps encourage empathy and reduce prejudice among users. The app also helps young adults learn new traditions, rituals, and activities from other cultures.

The Buddy Finder app is also a very adaptable platform to various environments and needs. Its use cases are flexible enough for applications in workplaces, organizations, universities, and event platforms, to name a few. As a result, adoption of the platform is highly scalable. Additionally, our target user demographic is already highly integrated into social media applications such as Instagram, Hinge, Discord, among others. The app is also highly feasible on a technical level, as all the technologies that would be needed to build it are mature with many existing examples of successful implementation. The matching algorithm can also benefit from collecting anonymous data over time, improving matching accuracy.

Interviewee Feedback

1 -

Monday 10:45 PM

Solution 1, because it will help me connect with people better.

It's more of my style. It resonates with me more than the 2nd option.



2 -



I think I like the 2nd app more. I'm weary of meeting people through an app so I think something that's more content based would suit me better.

3 -



I love both, but I have safety concerns about #1 :(i would be concerned about attracting ppl with fetishists to search out ppl and make the connections more.

#2 is the best to me bc it helps ppl upload what their culture means to them and interact with it. Videos like cooking, weaving, and other customs can be showcased and even encourage tourism! That would be huge for those who are looking for places to travel to and connect to a video.

4 -

9:49



< 188



Dipthi Dinesh GTech

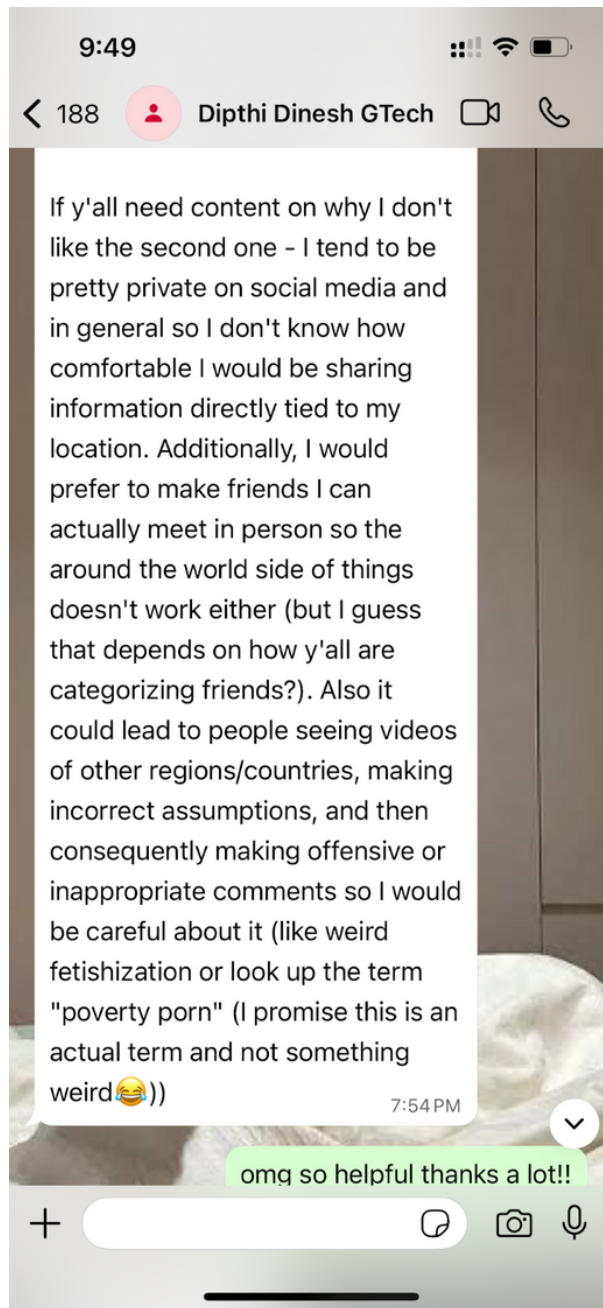


I'd prefer the first design idea - Cultural Buddy Finder. I feel like my cultural background shapes a lot of my personality and hobbies and would probably give me common ground with someone - if nothing else, a language we both speak. It doesn't guarantee anything but it's a good starting point and even if I find someone who isn't from my culture but is from somewhere I am interested in or someone I share hobbies with, I'd be open to that.

I don't know how I feel about the AI aspect of it tho because it's like a personal relationship/friendship situation or I may be more subtle with how I phrase that part.

If y'all need content on why I don't like the second one - I tend to be pretty private on social media and in general so I don't know how





5 -

heyy! i really like the 2nd idea since it's a low effort way to get a "sneak peek" into others lives. i could see myself using it and wanting to see others in my age range, where we have something in common but our surroundings shaped us differently. it's also a more unique idea, as the 'matching' idea has been done well by many other apps.

let me know if u need more info!

6 -

I like the first one more

This is very knee jerk reaction
- Lemme try to think why...

For the 2nd one, it's maybe cuz the second one feels kinda replicable with your existing social media - I could potentially train my algo to do that for me but I get having a dedicated app that would help me learn about different cultures

For the 1st one, somehow my brain is perceiving it as more feature packed than the second

7 -

Thanks, that's helpful! IMO, the "Buddy Finder" idea matches the problem space based on the description. I think the feature / concept that makes idea #1 more viable is that in that scenario, each user is taking an active role in trying to find someone. Compared to in idea #2 where users might be passively viewing cultural ideas, but not necessarily making direct relationships as an intended result. I think #2 is a cool concept and could be adjusted to fit that framework, if that is something the team is excited about. #1 is a little more "oh build that!" to me

8 -



05 PM

hi! I think if I were a user I'd probably prefer to use the cultural buddy finder one



Trade-Offs/Challenges for Other Stakeholders

Universities

There are many aspects of this solution that universities may benefit from. For instance, there will be encouragement of cross-cultural exchange and inclusion on campus. It may also support the integration of international students into the school. However, there may be some challenges with this application that will affect these institutions as stakeholders. For instance, the university may already have some sort of a student networking/buddy system, so getting the two to work together may present a problem.

Cultural Organizations

Cultural organizations may benefit from the fact that there is a new channel to promote their events and programs. They may also be excited about the potential to reach a more diverse audience through this solution. However, challenges with the goals of our chosen platform may occur if an organization prioritizes being a safe space for people of the same culture over being a learning space for people of different cultures. On the other hand, if the organization were to want to engage in more teaching-focused programs, the Teach 'n Learn Spaces in our solution may draw participants away from these events.

Employers

The buddy finder solution could support DEI initiatives within companies, allowing employees to have a more genuine way of learning about these concepts. It may also help recently hired employees socially acclimate more quickly into the social circle of the company, enhancing company culture and belonging. However, there are also risks of blurring personal and professional boundaries with this platform if employers encourage its use for workplace networking.

Ideation and Brainstorming Design Reflections



group design session

Medhavi Sabherwal

It was interesting to learn brainstorming in class and be able to apply that in this project. I learned that sometimes the best ideas are generated when away from the usual work environment. I would ideate when taking a walk or exercising which helped me think more creatively. I also dedicated time to sit and reflect on ideas. My ideation process evolved over time: in the first few sessions, my ideas were broad and vague, while in later sessions, they became more specific and well-defined. One of the ideas we shortlisted came from my very first session, which taught me that all sessions, whether early or late, play an equally important role in the creative process. As a team, we would put our individual ideas on sticky notes in Miro and then discuss them. Ownership over ideas was shared, as we collectively built on concepts.

I preferred beginning with individual brainstorming, which allowed me to explore ideas without any external influence. After that, group discussions helped me get feedback and hear others' ideas. Then I again returned to individual reflection to refine or expand upon the ideas we discussed. Pairing sessions were definitely helpful, as bouncing ideas back and forth with one teammate felt more manageable than group sessions with multiple people.

During group sessions, I felt curious, often asking my teammates to explain their ideas, and probing the ‘why’ behind each suggestion. At times, ideas were ambitious and we had to pull back and think practically. I noticed that I sometimes struggled to think deeply in larger groups and needed personal time to reflect. In the final individual session, I felt demotivated, as I had exhausted my creative ideas and found myself forcing concepts that didn’t feel necessary. I also faced challenges in tying my ideas back to our user needs and requirements, as I occasionally went off tangent.

One of my strengths was my curiosity, which encouraged teammates to articulate their ideas more clearly and helped me understand their thinking better. Having teammates who encouraged open communication and were willing to explore ideas without judgment helped me share freely. This also led to our ideas becoming more well-rounded and specific over time. Some concepts that seemed vague initially became stronger through discussion and iteration. While I didn’t have sudden “eureka moments,” the process of consistently engaging and revisiting ideas allowed me to refine them meaningfully.

Equity, diversity, and inclusion were central to our discussions, especially as our target users are individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Considering how our platform could be welcoming, accessible, and inclusive for diverse users influenced the features we prioritized and how we evaluated ideas.

I enjoyed the structured yet flexible approach, as it allowed ideas to evolve naturally. If I were to do this again, I would make sure I am clear about the user needs and requirements to generate suitable ideas, and will ensure I do an individual reflection session after each group session to get some time to think about the ideas discussed.

Olufunmilola Obielodan

Brainstorming, while familiar, is something that I have never enjoyed. I’ve always found it difficult to come up with ideas (especially on the spot) and would feel self-conscious of them when I did, often being very critical and hesitant to share because I did not think my ideas were good enough. However, in class, we learned about brainstorming individually before coming together and being comfortable with coming up with wild (and even bad) ideas. This approach took a lot of the pressure and stress out of brainstorming, and I felt able to actually contribute and produce some strong ideas.

In our first group brainstorming session, we each brought five initial ideas. This gave us time to think independently before coming up with the remaining 15 needed to reach the 35 total for the session. I found that doing this helped me to come to a better understanding of the design requirements before going deeper into design ideation. Seeing my teammates’ ideas then allowed me to better understand the realm of possibility in ideation. Both the first brainstorming session and the second one, where we partnered with another person not in our group, were helpful because we were able to build off of each other and bring our own personal perspectives and experiences to design possibilities. I found that seeing other people’s ideas helped me to come up with more of my own that I may not have thought of when I was by myself. This is when I realized, “Oh! I can take something I already know about and remix it to align more with what we are going for.”

However, during the large group session, I felt a bit overwhelmed. In particular, after we had each come up with our final 35 individual ideas and we began trying to narrow down to the top 10, it felt like too much

information to consider. At this point we had come up with over 200 ideas in total, and while it was amazing to see all of the possibilities and how one problem can turn into so many ideas, it was very hard to choose between them. One thing I liked that we did was to each pick our top 10 and then group those 40 into similar categories. After this, we started to cut ideas we felt did not match with the problem statement as closely or that we thought would be more of a feature rather than an entire solution. There ended up being a lot of great concepts, and I had to remind myself that the goal is to solve the problem rather than pick the thing I would want to do most.

One thing I wish I had done differently is to spend more time reflecting on the design ideas that had already been presented before going into ideating new ones. I think if I had reflected more on how the current ideas fit the problem space, the user goals and challenges, and the identified design requirements, I would've been able to better refine subsequent concepts. They would've been less vague and more focused and specific to the needs of the user. I think things worked out, but in the future, I would like to be more intentional about my individual ideation process.

In terms of diversity, equity, and inclusion, I think these are central parts of our overall problem space and so were naturally integrated into our design ideas. However, I think we could've done a better job of understanding how certain features are used and done in different global contexts. For example, most of our ideas centered around applications that require the Internet, as users would have to connect with each other over long distances. I know for a fact that in Nigeria, electricity, and thus Internet, are not always available. So, users may not be able to easily access the product consistently. We could've taken some care to think about some ideas that provided additional offline access or usability.

Overall, this was the best brainstorming experience I have ever been a part of. The structure allowed for me to experience different types of brainstorming contexts and understand what works and does not work in each. There may not have been any specific concept that stood out as "the one," but through this process, we were able to produce several solid ideas and have backup for possible features or other solutions if we run into a problem in the future.

Sizhe Luo

As someone who comes from a design background, brainstorming and critiques are my old friends. Brainstorming is almost always the first step for me to start a design, however, it is a bit different this time, the amount of ideas that we had to come up with was completely out of my comfort zone. But I did find this process helpful: by squeezing out every last drop of my creativity. That deliberate overproduction actually showed me exactly where the friction points were: where my ideas started to get stale or predictable. It was a serious push, but going past my usual limits definitely broke me out of a rut.

My biggest takeaway from that high-volume brainstorm was noticing how much I got in my own way at the start. I realized I was taking the initial ideas way too seriously, almost paralyzing myself. For the first few, I set a ridiculous standard: every single idea had to be great, something immediately ready for a working prototype or design. To meet that bar, I felt compelled to mentally map out the entire product development route for each one before I wrote them down. The first five were alright, but as I kept doing it, I realized this is not a sustainable brainstorming strategy. Once I stopped demanding "perfection" from every idea entry, the process started to get productive. I was able to stop planning and start exploring, which led to bolder ideas

instead of just a handful of safe ones. My team played a big role in this process, we were able to get inspired by each other during discussion and spark new ideas together, that was much easier than sitting in the corner and trying to grind alone. I've noticed that good ideas come better when we use the "Yes, and..." "Yes, but..." structure. When a teammate's off-the-wall suggestion was met with positive building, it exponentially lowered the collective creative barrier. I've found my role and strength in group discussions is often to propose a challenge—not to critique, but to encourage deeper thinking and stronger evidence. For me personally, this technique has been highly effective; by framing the discussion as a collaborative effort to solve a difficult problem, people tend to accept the challenge more easily and actively work to elevate the quality of their contributions. Especially given the fact that we have a lot of aspects to cover for this design project, and our topic. We agreed that it's crucial for us to think as inclusively and comprehensively as possible.

In the future, if I am ever going to do this with a team again, I would definitely manage the process better strategically. By clarifying the scope and expectation at the beginning: not setting too high of a bar, but to encourage more rapid ideation and bold concepts. That way our group discussion can start with a lower creative threshold and promote a sense of psychological safety within discussion, making it easier for the team to find the "seed and fuel"(means basic stuff) instead of being stressed out about coming up with polished safe ideas and getting bogged down in internal feasibility checks. And also, try not to include too much into one idea while remaining cautious and mindful about DEI. Many of us including myself had a tendency of fitting as much as we can into one concept.

Steven Yang

For me, brainstorming was the last familiar part of the process. I had never thought of brainstorming a structured activity in the past, and more so as an open-ended question. I think being forced to sit periodically and brainstorm across multiple sessions, while inconvenient, did end up producing better ideas.

For some of my brainstorming sessions, I would look at my teammates ideas, and try to iterate or draw inspiration from them. That led to a lot more variety in my idea output than if I hadn't referenced them at all. I think having a variety of viewpoints and approaches is almost always beneficial to the brainstorming process.

It was very important for me to remember that ideas aren't valuable – I think it is a natural human tendency to become attached to ideas; however, this attachment often hampers objective judgement of the idea, and prevents the discovery of new ideas too different from that one. Some of my early ideas that felt like bombshell winners in the beginning ended up being quite weak overall.

Something I wish I did more of was pay closer attention to our primary goals as I went through the process of brainstorming. In the future, perhaps I can try keeping the goals and user needs visible during the process of brainstorming, so I can better align my ideas with the problem statement.

One of my best sessions happened with someone outside of our group, where I got an idea that may not have been in consideration for the final project direction, but sparked a feature that I really like, and would like to incorporate into our final product if it fits the project needs. I think the addition of external perspectives helped our project greatly.

Overall, most of the brainstorming process did feel very grinding, and a lot of it did feel like I was just sitting there and not making progress. There weren't any real "eureka" moments, but rather, smaller discoveries of "ooh, I kinda like that!" These incremental changes were what led us to our final design ideas – small advances, as opposed to major breakthroughs.

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