Promoting Meaningful Social Interaction Between Intercultural Strangers in Public Places: the case of migrants and locals in Istanbul

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F2F social interactions contribute to developing emotional, psychological, and physical personal benefits [2, 3, 15, 22], besides shaping the social connections with the ones around us. Thus, they have a great impact on human wellbeing. Moreover, social interactions contribute to creating healthier social fabrics. For example, interacting with new people can promote a sense of trust and community building with others, supporting the integration of different communities as part of the same social system [5, 26] and fostering collaboration among different communities [11, 13, 18, 25]. Also, it has been shown that meaningfully connecting with someone from different ethnicity, social background, or age group makes people more likely not just to view that particular group positively, but to have more confidence in people as a whole [5, 26], which promotes social cohesion.

Engaging in F2F social interactions is a challenge in big cities where the sense of disconnection from neighbors and the sense of loneliness is rapidly increasing [8, 9] despite the increased connectivity enabled by technology [8, 9]. One example of such cities is Istanbul. This disconnection occurs due to different reasons. Modern city life does not provide individuals with sufficient time for establishing meaningful connections with others (i.e., rush, high stress). Besides, the excess of environmental stimuli often provokes deliberate avoidance of things that surrounds them, which has been explained by the concepts of civil inattention [7] and cocooning [17, 21]. Promoting F2F social interactions is even harder in intergroup conflict contexts where people can avoid others that are perceived as different from the self. One such case is intercultural contact. For instance, external migrants arriving in a new country need to develop their social connections from scratch, which presents additional barriers if social contact is avoided between migrants and locals [6, 8]. Therefore, this study tackles this significant problem, the avoidance of social interactions between intercultural strangers, from a design perspective.

HCI has previously explored positive and meaningful experiences within the scope of interactions between humans and technology [10, 12, 16] as a way of promoting user engagement with and through such technologies. However, we argue that positive and meaningful interactions can be of use in other contexts within HCI, for example, for promoting positive contact with and among migrant groups and locals. Previous work in social integration explains that developing positive connections is essential to decrease biases among different social groups (i.e. migrants and locals) since they promote a positive perception and learning from the outgroup [1, 5, 23, 24, 26]. Therefore, promoting positive memorable interactions can be a way of facilitating future positive interactions with different purposes and different "others". In the case of HCI, meaningful interactions are promoted with and through technology. However, I think meaningful interactions could be of use to promote future positive contact between people as well, for example in the case of migrants and locals. Therefore, it is plausible for meaningful interactions to also contribute to migration studies within HCI. As the concept of positive and meaningful experiences has not been deeply explored concerning human-to-human and/or human-mediated in my research I am trying to explore how design and technology can promote meaningful social interactions between intercultural strangers where the originality of this work relies on.

Even though technologies are sometimes judged as detrimental for human-to-human interactions, they can be used to support meaningful interactions. For instance, the HCI field has explored this area through collocated interactions, which are interactions held with people located in the same or nearby places. However, studies in this area have focused mostly on fostering encounters with unacquainted others through serendipitous interactions, which are not planned but positive in result [4]; playful interactions which are pleasurable and joyful experiences [14], opportunistic interactions, which are daily-unplanned social interactions in public places [19]; and emergent interactions, which are imminently initiated interactions [20].

In summary, previously studied interactions in HCI have focused on the way interactions are started by promoting serendipity and unexpectedness more than on its development and how those interactions are perceived as meaningful for intercultural contact. Hence, my research aims to 1) create a characterization of MSI between intercultural strangers in public places and 2) frame the design space to facilitate the design of interventions that aim to promote meaningful social interactions between intercultural strangers in public places.

I believe this study can contribute to promoting more design solutions that impact the real world tackling on issues of social integration, prejudice reduction and positive contact between migrants and locals. Even though, it presents struggles as well for example the participants of this study are not expected to be migrants in an emergency context. However, within HCI studies it is sometimes hard to explain that, even though not in an emergency situation, thousands of migrants have experienced difficulties when integrating into a new society, culture or country. So,

there is a space to contribute to the real world as well by exploring the needs of migrants within the diversity of migrants. Hence, we aim to conduct this research with a super-diversity approach.

My methodological stance is from participatory futures, so we aim to build knowledge based on previous experiences from migrants at the same time that we can use different tools to project and imagine futures where prejudices and intercultural/intergroup conflicts are not an issue. This way, we expect to create imaginaries of design solutions that facilitate meaningful social interactions between migrants and locals living in Istanbul.

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