



UMEÅ INSTITUTE OF DESIGN
UMEÅ UNIVERSITY

Thesis Report '24 – MFA Interaction Design
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EMOTIONALLY EMPOWERED

ACTIVISM

♦ *designing for momentum and resilience
in Youth-Led Grassroots*



ABSTRACT

Activism is a deeply emotional endeavor, driven by the collective sentiments of individuals advocating for change. However, the intricate role of emotions in activism often remains convoluted, complicating its understanding and management.

Inspired by these observations, I developed an application tailored to support youth-led grassroots organizations in managing their emotional dynamics. The application aims to make emotions tangible within groups, fostering emotional reflexivity and facilitating sustainable activism practices.

This project represents an explorative approach to activism support, intersecting technology with the deeply human experience of emotional engagement.

The development process involved a human-centered methodology, informed by insights from activists and stakeholders and theoretical research spanning various social studies disciplines. Grounded in a value-based design approach, the project merged personal and activist views to ensure alignment with the needs and aspirations of the main target group.

Beyond the application itself, this project yields valuable insights into the role of emotions in activism and the potential for technology to facilitate meaningful social change. The documented process and insights contribute to a broader understanding of how interaction design can intersect with activism to serve activists and support their practices.

◆ My Motivation – the beginning of a journey

Over the past few years, I have developed a strong interest in activism and a deep appreciation for activists. I attribute this to my increased exposure to societal issues and growing confidence in my values and vision of what a better society means to me, which my work as a designer has been amplifying. As a result, I feel a profound connection to those who strive to express and enact those changes I dream of.

I embarked on this degree project with the expectation of experiencing valuable insights and opportunities for professional and personal growth. I aimed to explore how design could contribute to addressing the challenges described and how my design methodologies and approach could offer a unique perspective on the topic.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Activism has served society since ancient civilizations by denouncing societal failures and promoting visions of a better world. Activists, as social agents of change have been working towards those visions by deploying a diverse range of strategies, including petitions, public displays, rallies, boycotts, and more (Ricketts, 2012).

Youth has been at the forefront of many social movements, both by joining established initiatives and initiating their own grassroots organizations, thereby opening advocacy spaces for like-minded individuals within their communities. Moreover, youth has demonstrated exceptional proficiency in harnessing the power of technology and exploring new mediums for activism (Castillo-Esparcia, 2023).

With the arrival of the digital era in the mid-90s, activism welcomed the surge of new communication mediums such as the Internet and social media, incorporating these tools into their arsenal and recognizing the digital space as yet another arena for advocacy (Gerbaudo, 2017). While the digital landscape offers numerous opportunities, including the ability to bridge people, spread information, and aggregate feelings, it also presents its own set of challenges.

The contrast between the nature of activism, a deeply human activity that focuses on agency and expression, and the often restrictive and constrained nature of certain digital spaces, such as social media, proposed itself as an interesting area to explore as a designer.

In light of this dynamic landscape, I undertook this project to investigate how young activists leverage technology to support their practices, identify the challenges they encounter, and explore untapped opportunities. I aimed to dive into the intricate relationship between technology and activism and propose ideas for enhancing or reshaping this relationship.

Along the way, I discovered the convoluted role that emotions play in activism, how they intersect with both the offline and online realms, and how they constitute a key component of activism for individuals and collectives. I then ideated and explored this area through design methodologies, ultimately proposing a digital product—an application—that aims to align itself with the needs and aspirations of grassroots activism organizations.



2. BACKGROUND



◆ 2.1 Activism – embracing it all

Throughout this project, I've been approached several times with the question "What makes someone an activist?" The definition I worked with is as follows:

“An individual who partakes in actions to catalyze, encourage, or bring about change, to elicit social, cultural, and/or political transformation.” (Alastair Fuad-Luke, 2013).

However, this definition only scratches the surface of the complexities inherent in the term "activist." This “title” isn't bestowed based on measurable impact or full-time dedication; rather, it represents an intersection of identity that resonates differently for each individual.

Many embrace the term "activist" once they become part of collectives. In truth, activism draws significant strength from collective action, as groups of people with similar visions or critical attitudes decide to act together to put those visions into motion (Ricketts, 2012). Their motivations and values are more diverse and complex than one can anticipate. Some are motivated by needs of self-efficacy, political agency, a sense of purpose or belonging, feelings of solidarity, or moral duty (Sepúlveda, 2019). Some value inclusivity, diversity, social justice, empowerment, resistance, empathy and so on .

The activities undertaken by activist groups are just as diverse. Offline activities encompass marches, rallies, boycotts, performative acts, civil disobedience, artistic works, social events, and many others. Digitally, activism includes the sharing of personal narratives, the launching of campaigns through platforms like X, Instagram, or Facebook, the use of hashtags, storytelling, multimedia content, etc.



[2] Different types pf activism: Road blockade, craftivism, occupied protest, public performance

There is no singular "correct" approach to activism. For many, activism serves as a response to a range of emotions that cannot be assuaged by passivity or sometimes even socially restricted actions. It becomes an outlet—a means of addressing those needs and effecting meaningful change through the mediums at their disposal.

◆ 2.2 Grassroots – youth-led change

The importance of activism in today's world cannot be overstated. Some of the most prominent activism movements in recent years include the Arab Spring, the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity, the hashtag campaign #MeToo, the Thai-Chinese meme war, and the Black Lives Matter Movement. These movements have not only reshaped the narrative around their respective issues but have also prompted real changes and transformations.

A similar impact can be seen in youth-led movements, such as Fridays for Future, a grassroots movement initiated by Greta Thunberg. The movement gained momentum through regular Friday strikes and protests, where students and activists rallied to demand stronger environmental policies and raise awareness about climate change. It started locally in Stockholm, Sweden, and spread globally (Fridays For Future, n.d.). Digital platforms played a pivotal role in the movement's rapid expansion and coordination. The movement has served as an inspiration for many and attested to the power and importance of youth involvement in advocacy and civic engagement efforts (Dawuni, 2019).



[3] Fridays for Future, March for Our Lives, School Students for Palestine

Youth grassroots organizations offer an efficient way for young people to be directly involved in decision-making and to build their own space in a complex landscape. Grassroots movements are characterized by strong participatory orientations, minimal formal organization and bottom-up approach (Della Porta, 2006). By creating meaningful spaces for dialogue and collaboration, they empower local youth in their communities to take charge of their future (UNICEF, 2021)

Throughout this project, I chose to focus on youth grassroots organizations. By supporting young individuals in grassroots initiatives, we foster inclusive decision-making and nurture future leaders. Through local actions, youth grassroots movements ignite broader social change, catalyzing community engagement and amplifying voices that might otherwise go unheard.

◆ 2.3 Challenges – against the tide

Proposing change in any context can be daunting, as reformulating an established system often invites opposition. As activist Shinden once said:

| "If you are met with resistance, you are probably doing something right." (i-D, 2019).

In activism, this opposition can come from political governments, industry shareholders and leaders, justice systems, communities, and peers who may not share similar viewpoints. Navigating this opposition can be especially challenging for young individuals, even when acting as part of an organization.

Launching successful movements depends on activists' ability to strategically leverage available mediums to generate momentum and elicit collective action involving both activists and outside communities (Gerbaudo, 2012).

Reflecting and understanding one's relationship with activism can be complex, as it transcends mere topics of interest—it involves values and attitudes, managing expectations and perceived impact. The online realm is also often considered a double-edged sword. On one hand, it empowers individuals, allowing them to express their voices, connect with others, and gain reach. On the other hand, challenges such as surveillance, the spread of misinformation, constant exposure to online issues, echo chambers, algorithms, harassment, and cyberbullying can diminish its potential (Graeff, 2016).

These challenges can negatively impact individuals' safety and health, as well as decrease the sustainability of activism practices over time (UNDP, 2021). Through this project, I decided to explore how to support young grassroots activists, by delving into these challenges as a starting point.

◆ 2.4 The brief – why interaction design?

To explore activism at its intersection of both offline and online realms, I saw interaction design as the ideal field. Positioned between technology and society, interaction design often looks for the right spot for valuable interventions. Given the complexity involved, design methodologies of research, sense-making, and ideating would be essential. Additionally, an empathetic attitude would be crucial for gaining a deep understanding of the values, needs, and aspirations at play.

At the outset of this project, my objectives were:

- * First, to investigate the challenges faced by youth activists as individuals and members of collectives. I sought to analyze both general obstacles and those influenced by technology, gaining a comprehensive understanding of the landscape.
- * And secondly, to map the diverse values, motivations, and aspirations of the activist community.
- * Ultimately, I aimed to uncover opportunities for ideation and the development of innovative digital experiences that resonate with the youth activist community and support their endeavors. My goal was to craft authentic digital interactions that forge emotional connections with activists and resonate with their experiences.

3. METHODOLOGY

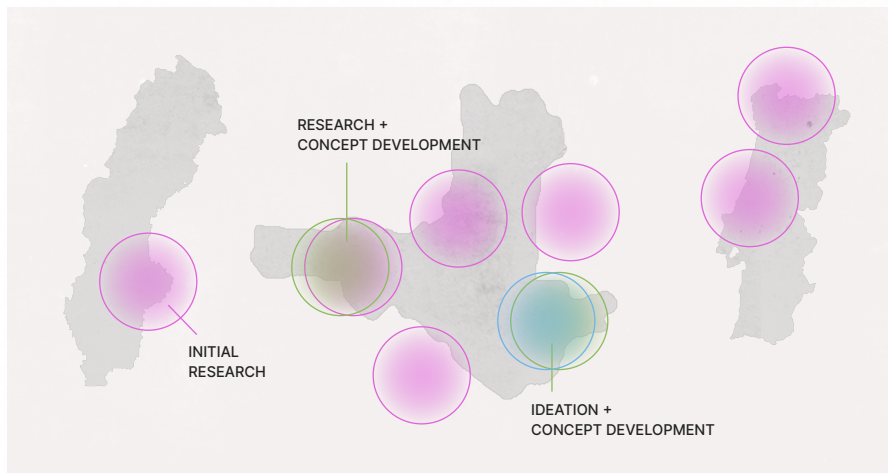
◆ 3.1 Design Stance/Approach

Throughout this project, I adhered to a **human-centered approach**, prioritizing activists' needs and involving them in various stages of the process. Additionally, I employed a **value-driven approach** to guide my design decisions and explorations.

- **Human-centered:**

In my human-centric approach, people were placed at the heart of the experience. Their needs and interests were considered throughout different phases of the project. A blend of investigative and generative methods was also utilized. This included conducting interviews and conversations to gather valuable insights, organizing brainstorming sessions to generate ideas, and facilitating feedback sessions to gather input on concepts and design prototypes.

The primary people engaged were young activists involved in advocacy initiatives or members of grassroots organizations. The project also involved experienced activists, designers working with activism organizations, researchers in social studies and media communications, and the general public.



[4] Activism groups from Sweden, Umeå (Sweden) and Portugal involved in the project

- **Value-driven:**

At the project's beginning, I proposed using both designer and activist lenses to shape my design process. This approach evolved into a framework, resulting from an iterative exercise of reflecting and articulating values to translate into design principles. The repetition of this process through repeated cycles allowed me to keep on adjusting and refining those principles.

The values driving this framework stemmed from my own reflections and expertise as a designer, as well as insights informed by activists and others involved in the process. I utilized these design principles to navigate my decisions. Additionally, they served as a guide for validation and final reflections on the project's outcome.

◆ 3.2 Values Framework

The value framework that I used to guide the design process consisted of 4 groups of values. These groups were used in different phases to help decide on concepts/design directions and areas in need of further development.

Activism Values/Core (to reframe project scope after research phase)

- Holistic Integration:** Interconnect offline and online spaces for impactful activism.
- Individual-collective Identity:** Support individual needs while preserving collective goals.
- Long-term sustainability:** Encourage practices that balance impact and well-being.

Valuable Experience (to select concept/design direction after ideation phase)

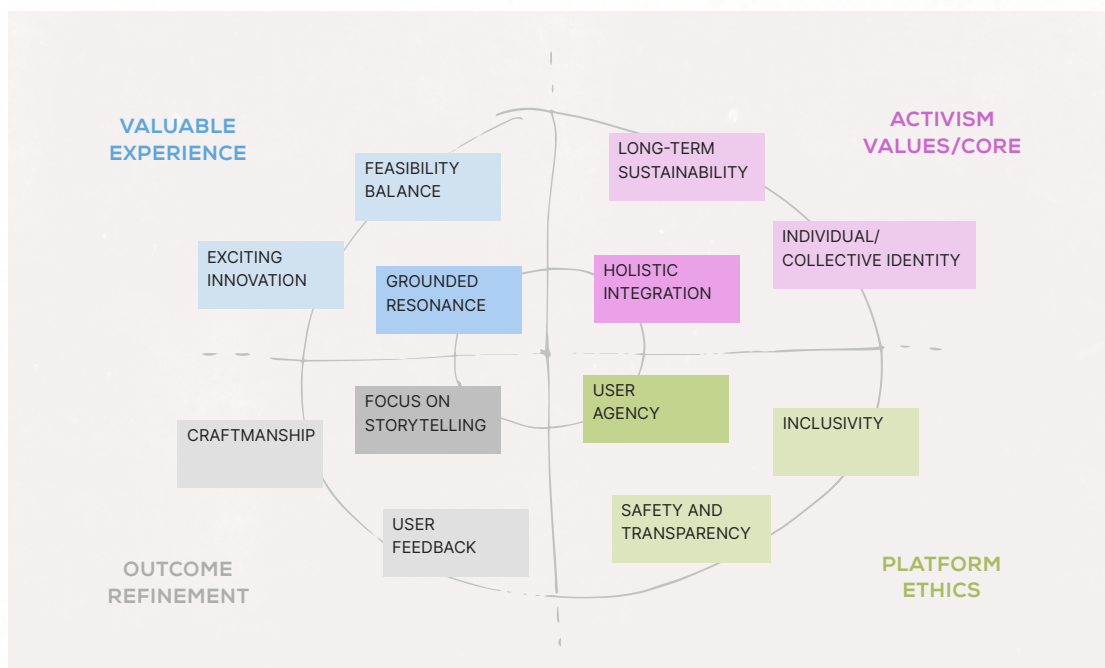
- Grounded Resonance:** Foster valuable users' experiences.
- Exciting Innovation:** Embrace novel ideas and concepts.
- Feasibility Balance:** Ensure practical viability without sacrificing innovation.

Platform Ethics (to guide design exploration)

- User Agency:** Promote user agency, fostering autonomy without enforcing behavior.
- Inclusivity:** Reflect on inclusivity/exclusivity and moderation.
- Safety and Transparency:** Prioritize user safety, transparency, and veracity of information.

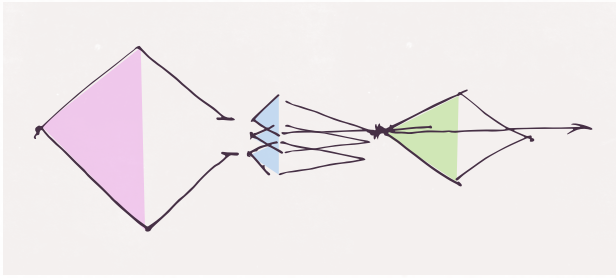
Outcome Criteria (to define refinement)

- Storytelling:** Present the final design through storytelling practices.
- Craftmanship:** Showcase the final design with refined design crafting.
- User feedback:** Reflect on the final design through activists' and peers' feedback.



[5] Values Framework

◆ 3.3 Design Phases



[6] Design Phases

Research and Synthesis

During the research phase, I employed analytical methods including a literature review across the fields of social studies and internet studies. Additionally, I conducted expert interviews with researchers working on the intersection of social movements, technology, and politics. These activities laid the groundwork to navigate the complexity of the topic.

For empirical methods, I conducted several interviews with activists to gain insights into their experiences, needs, and aspirations. Additionally, I used a 'digital ethnographic approach', examining how activism unfolds on social media platforms such as X, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok. Through these activities, I observed and explored user experiences within physical and digital activism spaces.

I gathered the various insights and organized them into three focus areas. Each area centered on a group of challenges and insights collected.

Ideation and Concept-Making

Next, I formulated "How might we" questions for each area and facilitated individual and group ideation sessions with peers. During each session, we examined the challenges reported and identified opportunities for intervention.

These sessions yielded a range of ideas, from which I selected 3 to refine into distinct concepts.

To determine the concept to pursue, I conducted feedback sessions with activists and peers. Drawing upon my values framework, I carefully evaluated each concept before selecting the final design direction.

Design Exploration and Refining

I initiated a new round of research by delving into books and literature reviews on psychology and emotional behavior, within and outside the context of social movements. This enabled me to refine my hypothesis regarding emotional reflexivity practices and how they can support users.

To make those practices tangible through a digital platform, I created personas and mapped out simple user journeys to conceptualize the overall experience and identify key touchpoints within the journey. I also found inspiration in projects related with data visualization and data mining.

Subsequently, I commenced the development of low-fidelity prototypes and sought feedback from activists and peers. Finally, to present the project outcome, I refined the key interfaces of the application to a high-level finish, developing the graphic language, as well as exhibition materials.

Documentation and Reflection

Throughout the project, I consistently documented my process. Through presentation moments I reflected on the project framing, next steps and intended outcome.

At the end of the project, I engaged in reflection, revisiting my brief and values framework to evaluate how well I adhered to my initial intentions.

4. RESEARCH AND SYNTHESIS

◆ 4.1 Research – goals and methods

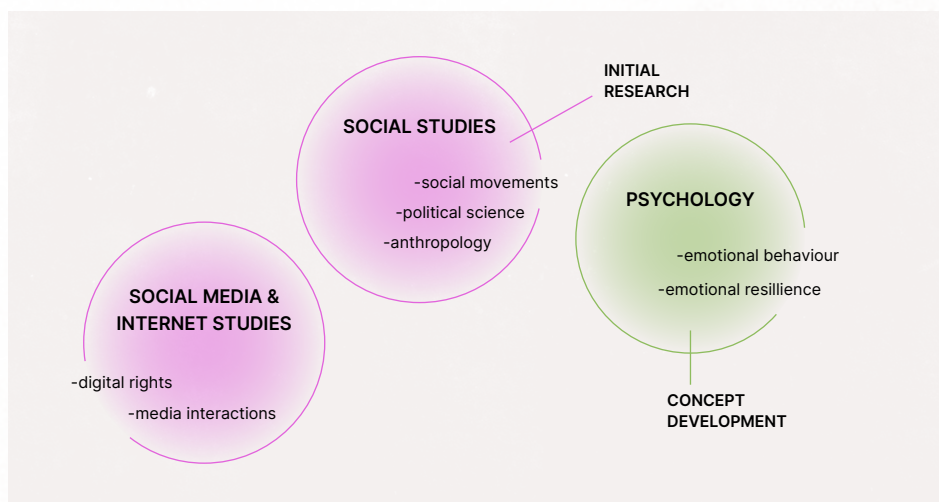
Initiating the research phase, my goal was to understand **how to design innovative digital experiences that support young activists and resonate with their values**. To do so, I sought to understand the current challenges they face, focusing on those unique to or exacerbated by digital spaces, as well as their motivations and aspirations.

- **Experiential/empirical**

To understand how these values change across the activist community, I interviewed 9 members of grassroots organizations in Umeå, Sweden, and across Portugal. Through these conversations, I explored the following research questions: **What are the unique values and motivations driving youth activists?; How do youth activists use digital platforms and for what purpose?; What are the challenges and limitations digital platforms present for youth activists?; How do activists strategically leverage/manipulate these platforms to achieve their goals?** I further observed how activists use social media by daily interacting with their content on X, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok.

- **Theoretical/analytical**

Social movements has been a trendy topic in the academic landscape in recent years and of interest to diverse studies such as political science, anthropology, media communications, and internet studies. That allowed me to conduct a literature review of books, academic articles, and data reports on the topic across the different fields, to explore: **How does the geopolitical context influence the activism landscape?; How do technological affordances and accessibility exert influence on the dynamics of activism?; How does the intersectionality of identities influence participation and impact within digital activism?** I further conducted two expert interviews with a media group member from an activist organization and a researcher working at the intersection of digital technology and society.



[7] Diverse fields explored during the project

◆ 4.2 Insights – that reframed the project

During the research phase, the project underwent several moments of reframing, the insights below kindled some significant changes and decision-making moments.

Geopolitical Context

Social movements are a global phenomenon, and each is “permeated by the political culture of the system in which they develop” (Donatella, 2006). Understanding how activism dynamics and values mutate across different geopolitical and sociocultural landscapes would be too challenging. During the project, I decided to base my target audience on the communities I had access to and was able to communicate with regularly, in Sweden and Portugal.

Technological Influence

While technological tools and platforms play a role in support, activists’ capacity to appropriate any available tool is a strong suit of theirs (Gerbaudo, 2012). Aware of that, I decided to adopt a critical attitude toward technology. My intended outcome was not a technological solution but a new perspective on the relationship between activism and technology and/or the use of technology as a mean to translate a experience valuable for activists (free to be appropriated as however intended).



Online-Offline Dynamics

While looking at digital activism, it became clear the importance of keeping in mind how strong activism relies on physical/offline action. All activists I interviewed used both digital and physical spaces in a mutually reinforcing manner. This realization debunked my misconception of activism exclusively shifting towards the digital realm.



Balancing Impact and Well-being

In activism, there's often a tension between the pursuit of impact and the well-being of activists themselves. While activists are driven by their passion for social change and the desire to make a difference, the high demands can take a toll on their mental, emotional, and physical well-being. One of my aims became to pursue a balance between impact and well-being, in order to cultivate long-term sustainability.



Different Identities

While researching about all kinds of activism and interviewing different individuals and groups, what fascinated me was the diversity of identities and actions. The media often focuses on “loud” types of activism, but there are “soft” and “gentle” kinds of activism as well (BBC Future, 2024) (Time, 2023). Noticing and embracing different kinds was key for this project.

◆ 4.3 Focus Areas – and set of challenges

After analyzing the insights gathered, I synthesized them by formulating three focus areas, each a different direction for exploration and addressing a set of challenges: **Emotional Resilience**, **Agency and Platforms**, and **Engagement and Momentum**.



[9] Focus Areas based on collected insights

+ Emotional Resilience

This focus area underlines the impact that digital activism has on an individual's mental well-being. Based on activists' and expert's experiences I highlighted three insights:

Pressure of Content Creation: The demand for constant and fast production of media content on social media to maintain engagement levels and satisfy algorithms leads to overwhelming stress, affecting organizations of all sizes.

Exposure Amplification: Becoming part of social media networks increases exposure to sensible content, contributing to feelings of overload and overwhelm among activists.

Lack of Coping Strategies: Despite awareness of the risks, activists often lack effective strategies to manage media consumption or production habits, resorting to temporary coping mechanisms like taking breaks and halting activities.

The image shows four speech bubbles of different colors (purple, blue, pink, and light blue) arranged horizontally. Each bubble contains a quote and the name of the speaker. 1. A purple bubble on the left contains a quote from a "MOTHERS' REBELLION MEMBER" about the emotional burden of social media. 2. A blue bubble contains a quote from an "ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL ADVOCATE" about feeling like a hostage to social media algorithms. 3. A pink bubble contains a quote from a "UMEA FOR PALESTINE MEMBER" about deleting Instagram due to exhaustion. 4. A light blue bubble on the right contains a quote from "XR SWEDEN, MEDIA GROUP" about frequent posting on social media. There is an ellipsis "..." between the pink and light blue bubbles.

[10] From activists and experts interviews

Several research articles expose the correlation between activism and burnout among young people, as well as the role that social media plays in it. NGOs like Amnesty and XR provide resources for self-care and specialized teams of psychologists to support their members. However, individuals and smaller organizations remain vulnerable to these challenges. The opportunity that I identified was:

- * HMW support individuals and small grassroots balance mental well-being with digital engagement for sustained and resilient activism?

+ Agency and Platforms

Social media are useful tools and mediums that activists heavily utilize, they create spaces for the expression of ideas and voices, but to what extent do they provide equal and safe grounds to all users? This focus area accents the restrictions and biases these platforms impose on activists, and how they hamper agency and nurture dependency:

Agency Compromised by Platform Participation: Activists often face conflicts of values when using mainstream platforms. Some concerns include practices such as data collection and sale.

Struggles with Censorship and Algorithms: Platforms frequently impose censorship and bans on certain content, particularly regarding sensitive topics like armed conflicts. Algorithms exhibit racial bias, amplifying some voices while suppressing others.

Reach Limitations and Isolation in Alternative Platforms: Transitioning to alternative platforms diminishes reach and disrupts networks, fostering isolation.

When I publish about Palestine, I get shadow banned. Instagram mutes that conversation and other social medias are doing the same. Like, for the group TikTok for example, I only got 20 views, while my personal TikTok account got like 3000 in just one hour. It's different when I'm uploading Palestinian related stuff.
UMEÁ FOR PALESTINE MEMBER

The Arab countries have created new platforms after being shadow-banned. But you can't have a platform for each country. For example, I can't use that Arabic platform because my Swedish friends don't have it. Social media is to connect people with each other, so you can't have a platform for each.
UMEÁ FOR PALESTINE MEMBER

We tried to put our internal conversations on Signal because Facebook supported the military in Thailand and we didn't want to support that as Amnesty. We tried, but on the other hand, you can't isolate yourself, there was no way around.
AMNESTY UMEÁ UNIVERSITY MEMBER

Who should take the lead in protecting digital advocacy - the platforms or the users? Many of these platforms make no secret of the fact that they are out there to basically sell advertisements (...) In that sense, demanding complete transparency and building services optimized for fair political discussions might sound unrealistic.

The complexity of responsibility arises because these platforms become integral to our daily lives while remaining products or services that come with certain compromises.

Choosing alternative platforms may mean sacrificing reach, as political debates often happen on mainstream platforms, even if those platforms come with drawbacks like ads or data collection.
PROFESSOR OF SOCIOLOGY, UMEÁ UNIVERSITY

[11] From activists and experts interviews

Social media were not designed to accommodate activists, rather they were the ones skillfully appropriating these spaces. "Algorithms of Resistance" is a book that presents inspiring cases of global workers, influencers, and activists around the world who develop tactics of algorithmic resistance by appropriating and repurposing the same algorithms that control our lives (Bonini, 2024). Inspired by that, I asked:

- * HMW empower activists to protect/reclaim their agency when interacting with in-use digital platforms?

+ Engagement and Momentum

Transforming interaction with digital content into action is a complex challenge activists face. Crafting engaging content and campaigns that attract the public requires a thoughtful process, encompassing everything from the message and tone to adapting to the medium and target audience:

Public Narrative: Some movements begin as a result of similar and relatable sentiments expressed on social media platforms. Sharing experiences enables individuals to resonate with one another and contribute with their own stories.

Emotional Resonance: Certain groups prioritize fostering emotional connections through their activities and campaigns, effectively conveying the importance of the cause and creating a sense of closeness among supporters.

Challenges in Topic Engagement: Complex issues like climate change pose difficulties in garnering public understanding, interest, and empathy due to their technical nature.



[12] From activists and experts interviews

While analyzing past social movements such as the Arab Spring and the Occupy movement, we can observe that their success stemmed from strategically connecting digital and physical spaces (X, X). They generated emotional momentum in digital realms and translated it into tangible expression in physical spaces. "Tweets and Streets" elucidates how the emotional resonance of contemporary movements transcends mere information dissemination or organizational efforts; much of their potency arises from aggregating individual sentiments into a collective narrative.

Addressing the challenge of instilling empathy on complex issues like climate change, projects such as "Unceded Territories" utilize visual storytelling to foster understanding through immersive experiences (Smith, 2019) and "Meet your carbon footprint" a VR experience about climate change (UNEP, 2020).

However I decided to focus on a different path, as sociologist and political theorist Paolo Gerbaudo suggests, the effectiveness of popular movements still heavily relies on activists' skills and their ability to react and strategize (Gerbaudo, 2012). Therefore, I propose the last opportunity:

- * HMW support activists devise strategies to leverage online engagement to motivate offline collective action?

5. METHODOLOGY

◆ 5.1 Ideation – goals and methods

Moving on to the ideation phase I aimed to generate ideas based on the opportunities identified. To achieve this, I conducted brainstorming sessions both individually and collectively with peers. Both activities resulted in an array of thoughts/ideas, and the group sessions further provided me with stimulating conversations and new perspectives.



[13] Ideation sessions

- Ideation sessions

During the group sessions, I presented the three focus areas, their respective insights, and design opportunities: **HMW support individuals and small grassroots balance mental well-being with digital engagement for sustained and resilient activism?**; **HMW empower activists to protect/reclaim their agency when interacting with in-use digital platforms?**; **HMW support activists devise strategies to leverage online engagement to motivate offline collective action?** For each question, we generated several ideas:



[14] Ideas generated

After filtering and compiling these ideas, I selected one per group to further develop and present as an initial concept. The selection process primarily relied on identifying which ideas had the most potential for development, drawing from intuition, experience, and the after-impression of the ideation process. Additionally, I briefly considered the project's timeframe and my skills as a designer.

◆ 5.2 Concept-making – from ideas to concepts

After navigating all the complexity of previous phases, I arrived at the exciting moment of concept-making. For each of the three ideas selected, I formulated evocative descriptions and illustrations to present: **Rooted Activism, Artifacts of Resistance, and Emotional Reservoir.**



[15] Concepts formulated

+ Rooted Activism

A self-assessment tool for individuals. It provides strategies for activity management. The platform can offer a space for expression, acknowledging achievements, providing inspiration, and suggesting planned moments of disconnection. With potential physical-digital integration, it aims to be a practical and dynamic companion on the activist journey.

Key points:

Digital Activity Management: a set of tools to manage digital activities and promote a healthier online engagement.

Positive Outlook: provide inspiration and motivation, celebrating achievements.

Values Reflection: guiding activists through values reflection exercises, helping connect with core beliefs and motivations as they navigate their activism journey.



[16] Graphic to illustrate the concept

+ Artefacts of Resistance

In a digital landscape where activists grapple with constraints and restrictions, this direction aims to empower within the digital realm. Imagine a toolkit of small, provocative creations – from web graffiti to tools that censor hate speech with playful emojis. These digital artifacts expose issues through tangible acts of defiance, to inspire activists to maintain their agency in the face of online constraints.

Key points:

Digital Tangibility: an impactful way for activists to express themselves within online spaces.

Online Impact: by translating online issues into digital expressions to engage communities.

Collective Action: collaboration and the sharing of digital creations can foster a sense of collectivism.



[17] Graphic to illustrate the concept

+ Emotional Reservoir

In a landscape where activists often deal with intense emotions, the "Emotional Reservoir" aims to explore how a platform can make those feelings explicit to support collective action. Picture a space where activists can articulate rage, sadness, hope, compassion, and become aware of collective synergies. As a dynamic reflection of the emotional landscape within activist communities, it can help locally identify the issues that are currently stirring emotions to create a real-time pulse of engagement.

Key points:

Momentum through Resonance: it explores emotions as catalysts for sustained engagement.

Offline Integration: it connects online and offline activities, promoting holistic engagement.

Emotional Well-being: addresses the emotional challenges of activism



[18] Graphic to illustrate the concept

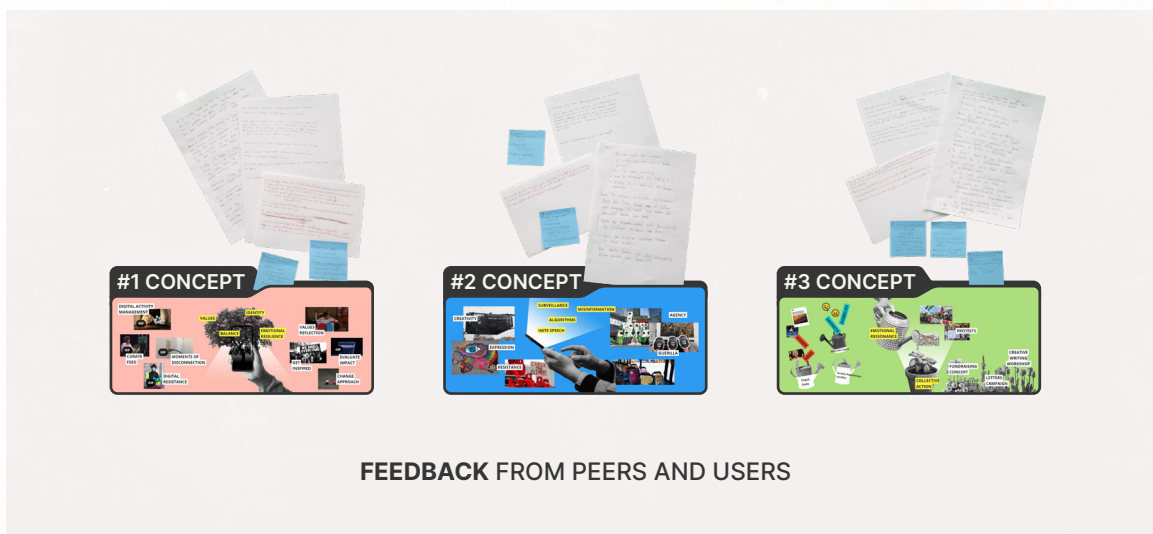
◆ 5.3 Concept selection – final design direction

Selecting the concept to develop/design direction to follow was the most challenging part of the process. To facilitate decision-making I opted for two methods, first I collected activists' and peers' feedback, and secondly, I reflected on my values framework.

• Feedback

To collect feedback I presented each concept. The input I focused on was whether the audience could relate to the ideas presented and resonate with the challenges I was trying to address, plus concerns and development suggestions from activists and peers:

- ♥ **Rooted Activism** – The concept of a self-assessment tool for individuals was well-received, with an emphasis on promoting a positive outlook, values reflection, and self-gratitude throughout the activist journey. The participants expressed their own set of challenges and strategies for self-care learned/developed over time.
- ♥ **Artifacts of Resistance** – The concept was deemed interesting but somewhat challenging to envision. Suggestions included extending the concept through a repository akin to an open-source gallery or a Pinterest-style platform for activism. Participants liked the idea of a platform for activism, where users can engage with articles, art, and music related to activism and be inspired to create and share.
- ♥ **Emotional Reservoir** – Activists and peers found the concept intriguing and potentially useful for organizations to gauge member sentiments and drive action. Privacy concerns were noted, but the idea of creating a real-time pulse of community interests while ensuring safety and engagement was emphasized. Discussion surrounded the options of integrating the concept into existing platforms or designing it independently in a speculative approach.

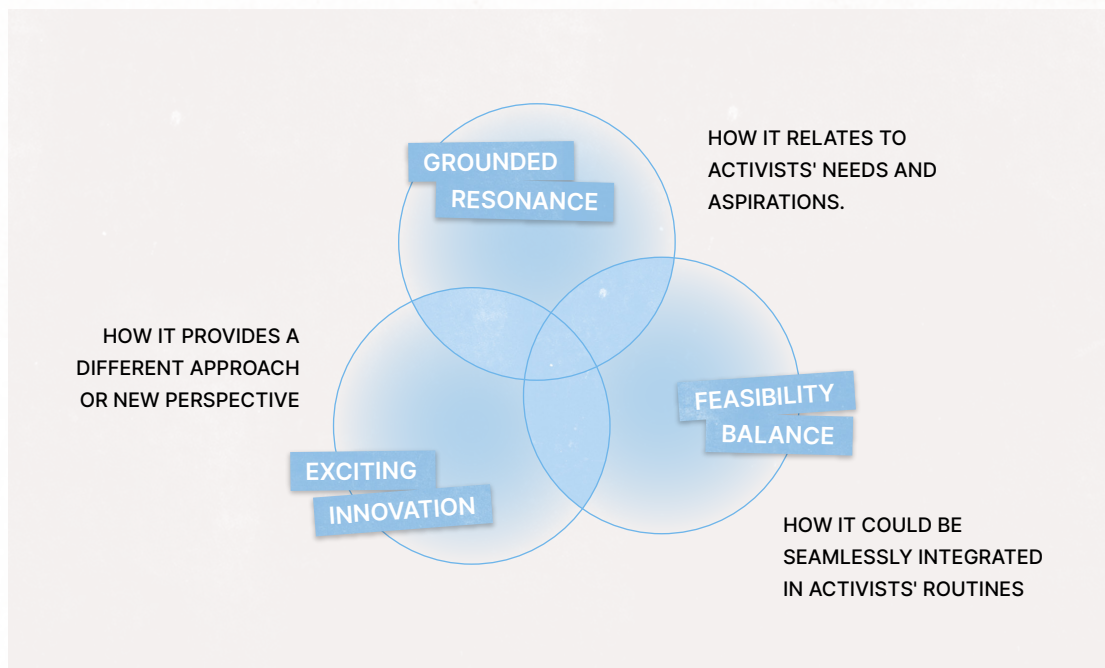


[19] Feedback on the presented concepts

• Values Framework

Finally, I reflected on the type of impact to prioritize for the experience based on three principles: **Grounded Resonance**, **Exciting Innovation**, and **Feasibility Balance**. Each concept's positioning within this framework was assessed based on the feedback collected and my design intuition/experience.

1. **Grounded Resonance**: How it relates to activists' needs and aspirations.
2. **Exciting Innovation**: How it provides a different/less conventional approach or offers a new/unique perspective on the issue
3. **Feasibility Balance**: How it utilizes in-use technology or could be seamlessly integrated into activists' routines/practices



[20] Values Framework

After a long reflection, I decided to move forward with the concept of “**Emotional Reservoir**” and **explore the power of emotion in activism** as a design direction.

My initial hypothesis was that making emotional motivations tangible could make emotional narratives more explicit within communities, helping activist groups strategize activities and mobilization. However, the concept was expanded, and the design direction was broadened to explore other potential layers of emotional impact, such as emotional well-being.

Technology was employed to make the concept tangible. Initially, the focus was on leveraging existing data from social media, but it evolved to include manually inputted data in a more intimate context. Feedback from activists drove these changes, encouraging the concept to be reimagined with small grassroots groups as the primary users, rather than the general activist community.

6. DESIGN DEVELOPMENT

◆ 6.1 Design Development – goals and methods

During the Design Development phase I focused on bringing the concept of Emotional Reservoir to life. To do so, I first engaged in a new round of research, before initiating my design exploration.

- **Desk Research**

The new design direction, the dynamic role of emotions in activism, prompted another round of research. This involved studying articles on psychology and emotional behaviour studies within social movements.

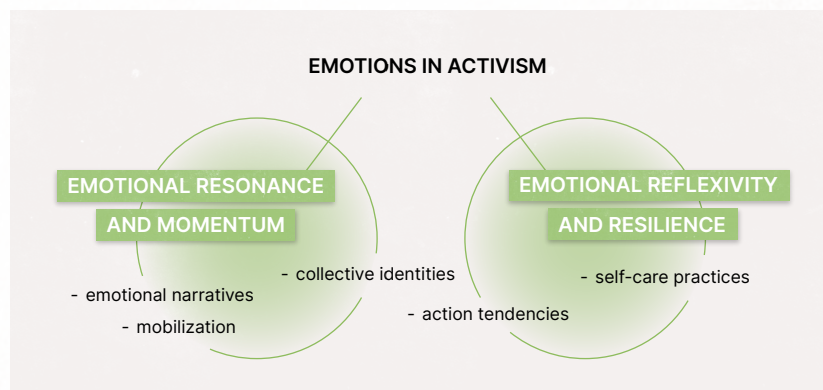
I also deliberated on the medium/format for my design outcome, analysing existing platforms. Finally I gathered design projects for inspiration, particularly in data visualization and data mining, to discern approaches I resonated with.

- **Generative Explorations**

I began my design exploration by creating personas and user stories based on insights from activist interviews. Using storytelling, I imagined how it could fit into activists' routines, aiding in conceptualizing the overall experience and key touchpoints. Afterwards, I developed low-fidelity interfaces and gathered feedback from activists through casual sessions. Iterative refinement of interfaces and graphic style marked the conclusion of the refinement phase.

◆ 6.2 Emotions in activism – core hypothesis

Regarding emotions and their dynamic role in activism, I navigated three main topics: first, recognizing the **potential of emotional resonance in creating collective narratives and sustaining engagement and momentum**; second, understanding **how emotions relate to our behavioural tendencies**; and third, understanding **how emotional reflexivity can support long-term resilience in activism**.



[21] Core hypothesis

+ Emotional Resonance and Momentum

The process of mobilizing individuals into cohesive social movements involves multifaceted endeavors, and identity building stands as a cornerstone. This involves not only delineating shared goals but also forging a sense of purpose and camaraderie among participants (Collins, 2001).

Scholars like Goodwin, Jasper, and Poletta recognize emotion's centrality in shaping collective behavior and fostering solidarity among activists. Whether sparked by outrage, anger, or fear, emotional resonance amplifies individual emotions into a unified sense of purpose. They powerfully permeate the mobilization process with passion, fervor, and conviction (Goodwin, 2001).

Through communal gatherings and shared experiences, individual emotions are magnified and redirected towards collective goals. This emotional energy drives participants to remain steadfast in their commitment to the movement's cause (Collins, 2001).

- * Identity building is crucial for strengthening a group's sense of purpose. By assessing and aligning individual and collective motivations, values, and goals, the group can enhance its cohesion and identify potential conflicts/tensions between individual and group interests.

- * Collective resonance infuses a movement with energy, sustaining long-term engagement. By increasing the sharing of thoughts and experiences within groups, they can identify key moments of resonance, strengthening the emotional narratives that drive the movement.

Social movements are not just fleeting occurrences but rather intricate and evolving phenomena, experiencing fluctuations in their prominence and impact over time. The true efficacy of social movements lies heavily in activist's organizational skills and strategic foresight to galvanize support and amplify narratives (Gerbaudo, 2012).

- * If grassroots seek to mobilize people within their communities, I believe they must remain attuned to shifts in public sentiment, emerging issues, and external pressures, and adjust their strategies and messaging accordingly.

+ Emotions and Behavioral Responses

Emotions are intricate phenomena, intertwined with cognitive appraisals that influence behavioral responses. The study of taxonomy claims that across different emotions, distinct patterns emerge (Keltner, 2010). For instance, the appraisal tendency for anger often involves perceiving an offense against the self, while the corresponding action tendency is to seek restitution or restore justice. Similarly, fear arises from an appraisal of imminent threat to the self, and prompts individuals to flee or reduce uncertainty. These appraisal-action dyads elucidate how emotions guide individuals' responses to environmental stimuli.

However, emotions exhibit a multifaceted nature that challenges simplistic categorizations. For example, scholars have argued that anger may not conform to patterns associated with negative emotions. Instead of fostering pessimism, it can evoke optimism about potential outcomes (Lerner, 2006). This nuanced understanding underscores the need to consider individual differences and situational factors.

When talking with and investigating activism groups, I recognized how different groups exhibit different schools of thoughts when it comes to emotions:

"In fact, every action is motivated by hope otherwise there is no sense in trying to make an impact. The commitment seen in activism indicates it truly being motivated by hope intrinsically"

– Emily Strickhausen (ZfSustainable, 2021)

"It feels like people are obsessed today with asking "Is there Hope? - Because they feel that without it, they cannot act, in fact, it's the exact opposite: When they act, they create hope" – Greta Thunberg

"Our activism is rooted in a sense of justice, perhaps anger..." – Isabelle Axelsson (Time, 2020)

- * There are behavioral response patterns to emotions that albeit nuanced, reveal underlying needs or goals. My hypothesis is that fostering self-awareness can help different groups and individuals understand their own emotional patterns and enable them to navigate emotions more effectively and pursue goals with greater clarity and intentionality.

+ Emotional Reflexivity and Resilience

Activists can engage in emotional reflexivity by consciously examining their emotional responses to activism. This involves not only recognizing them but also understanding their origins and impact on decision-making. Through emotional reflexivity, activists can navigate complex situations with greater self-awareness and adaptability (Pickerill, 2009).

Collective identities within social movements serve as a source of strength and solidarity. However they can also be restrictive, imposing rigid standards and expectations that may alienate certain members. Activists must foster inclusive and equitable spaces (Pickerill, 2009).

Utilizing language, particularly in written form, offers a myriad of benefits for emotional processing and understanding. By articulating the causes and relevance of emotions to the self, individuals can mitigate the physiological arousal linked with emotional suppression. Thus, expressing emotions through language serves as a powerful tool for emotional exploration and well-being (Keltner, 2010).

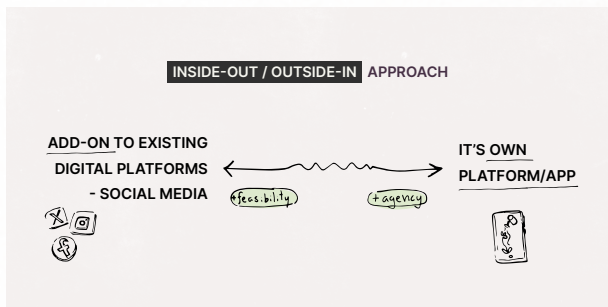
- * Sustaining activism requires more than just passion and dedication. Self-care practices ensure that activists replenish their energy. I believe that by being more aware of their individual/collective emotions, activists can learn to embrace sustainable practices to cultivate emotional resilience together.

◆ 6.3 Desk Research – study cases and inspiration

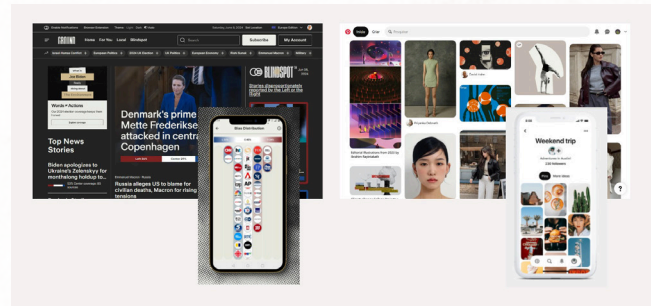
• Outside-in/Inside-out

When determining how to materialize the concept, I deliberated between integrating it as an extension of existing digital platforms/social media, or developing it as its own platform website/application.

Initially, I weighed factors such as feasibility and agency, debating between an "outside-in" vs "inside-out" approach, seeking solutions externally vs initiating change from within the system itself.



[22] Materialization of the concept



[23] Ground News and Pinterest

I also sought inspiration from two platforms mentioned by activists during feedback sessions: **Ground News** and **Pinterest**. Both platforms allow their users to interact with content in a explorative way and accommodate audiences with distinct values and intentions, allowing for agency and appropriation. Ultimately, I opted to develop the concept as its own platform.

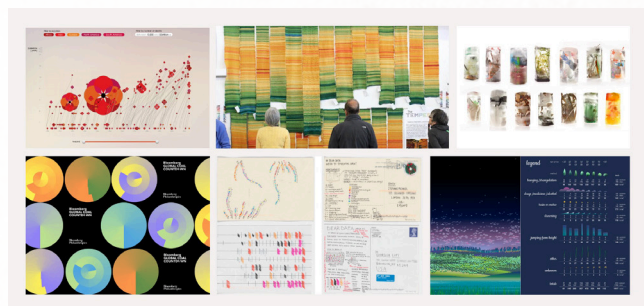
• Data visualization

To work with data visualization of emotions, I searched case studies for inspiration. One project I came across was "Emoto," which depicted the global response to the London 2012 Olympic Games on Twitter through interactive online visualizations. It aimed to convey the positive/negative sentiment each event or social topic generated over time via real-time tweet streams (Emoto, 2012). The way it allowed users to gauge collective interest and engagement, and allowed interactivity was similar to my intentions.

Additionally, I explored diverse data visualizations design projects (static/interactive, digital/physical, 2D/3D) and readings on affective visualization design (Lan, 2024).



[24] Project "Emoto"



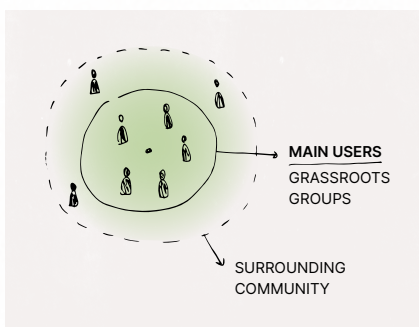
[25] Data visualization design projects

◆ 6.4 Design Explorations – from ink to pixels

Through the design exploration phase, I initiated the process of translating the concept into a digital platform, slowly giving it form and expression. This involved identifying key moments and developing them into interfaces.

• Personas and user stories

As previously mentioned, different grassroots groups have unique repertoires of activities, motivations, and goals. To ensure that all types were embraced, the platform should excel in accommodating and providing space for different "profiles". To better understand how to do so, I crafted three distinct personas based on groups I interacted with through the research and developed user stories.

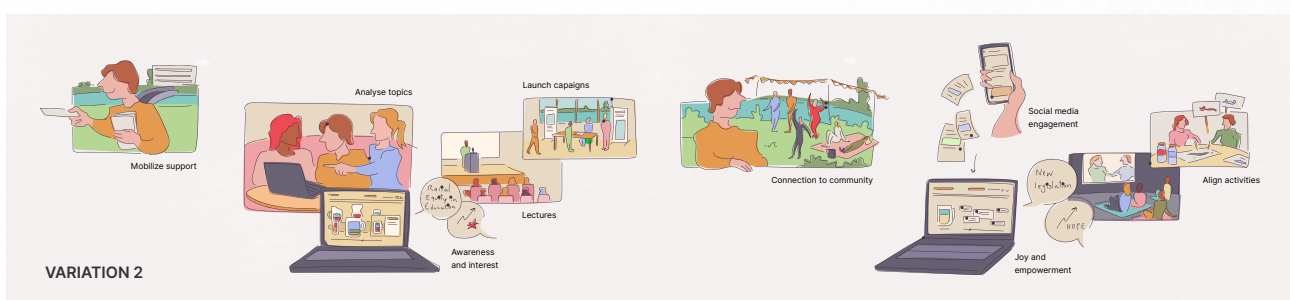
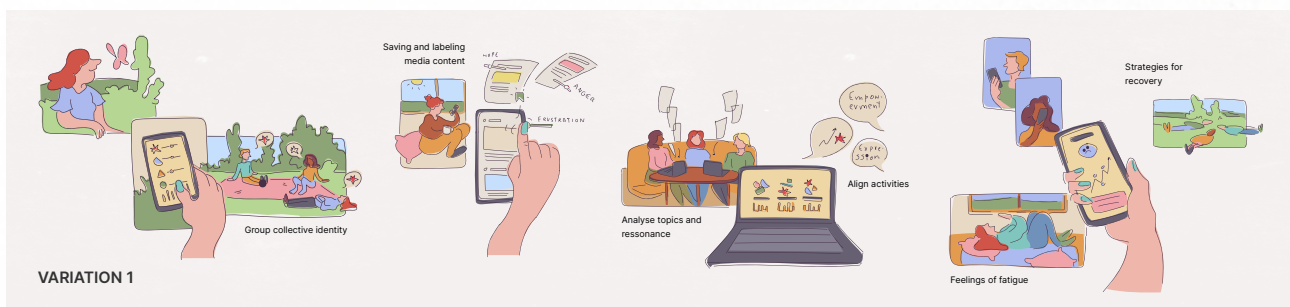


[26] Users of the platform

	CLIMATE ACTIVISTS	HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCATES	LGBTQ+ ADVOCATES
MAIN ACTIVITIES	Marches, artistic performances, non-civil disobedience acts	Writing letters, collecting signatures, organizing lectures	Organizing social events for community and campaigns
MOTIVATIONS	Frustration and anger	Empathy and solidarity	Empowerment and hope
GOALS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Raise awareness about the urgency of climate action; - Influence policy decisions and promote sustainability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Advocate for human rights on local and global levels - Mobilize support through campaigns and education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Create safe spaces for local LGBTQ+ youth - Increase awareness and acceptance of LGBTQ+ issues

[27] Groups to formulate personas

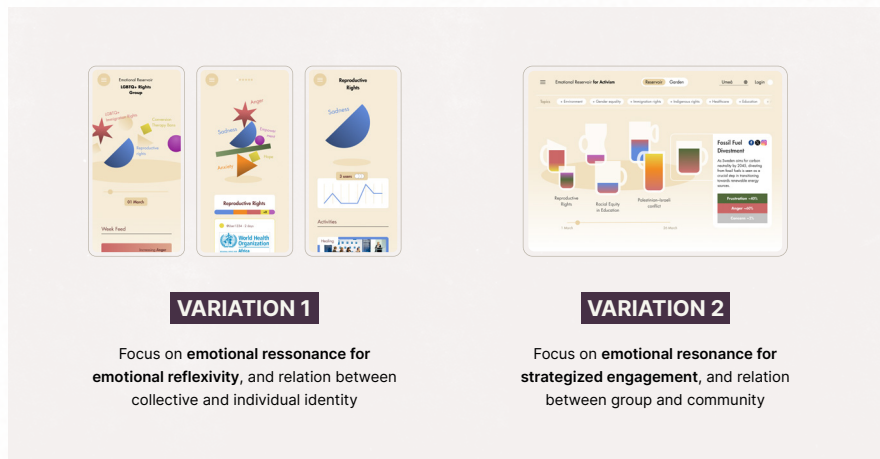
These narratives allowed me to imagine how the platform could fit into the groups' routines and identify key touchpoints. I focused on two different variations: one highlighting the group reservoir and its collective and individual interactions, and the other emphasizing the community reservoir's role in facilitating strategic activities across diverse groups.



[28-29] User stories of both variations

• Developing Interfaces

Drawing from the narratives, initial screens were created for both variations. Starting with rough sketches, they evolved into digital interfaces and were iterated based on feedback from peers and activists. Gradually, these designs were refined into high-fidelity.



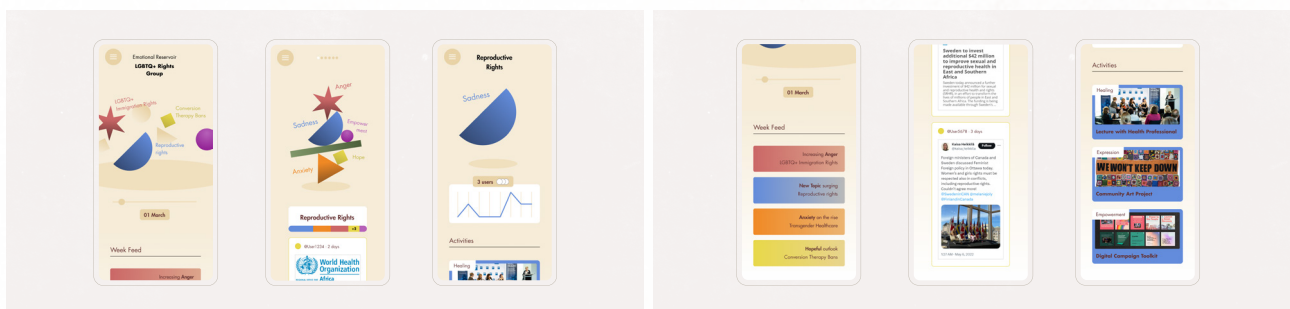
[30] Variations of the platform

Variation 1: For the group's emotional reservoir I explored the following features:

First screen: visualizes the current trending topics among the group and the key emotions associated with them. Additionally, there is a feed that summarizes the rising emotions.

Second screen: displays all the emotions logged regarding a certain topic, including saved comments, social media posts, and news articles. These items are archived for revisiting.

Third screen: users can select specific emotions, providing access to a temporal timeline of their appearance. Additionally, there is an inspiration board featuring activities that relate to the emotional needs of each particular emotion.



[31] Screens of the first variation

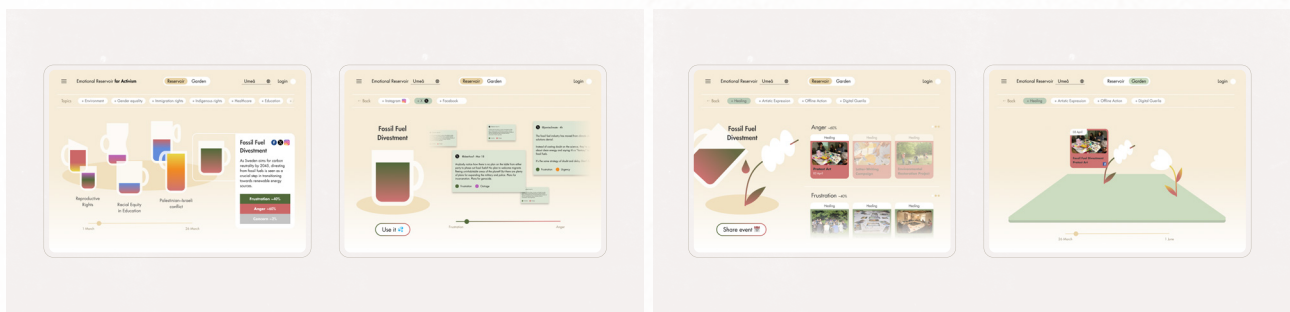
Variation 2: For the community's emotional reservoir I developed the features:

First screen: displays rising engagement with topics and emotional nuances, using the metaphor of glasses filling up. It includes options to filter topics by interest.

Second screen: Offers the feed of social media posts analysed by artificial intelligence to inform the emotional gradient.

Third screen: presents an inspirational board featuring activities related to the main recorded emotions. It illustrates how emotional resonance feeds transformation.

Fourth screen: showcases a notice board of planned activism activities within a community, represented as a garden.

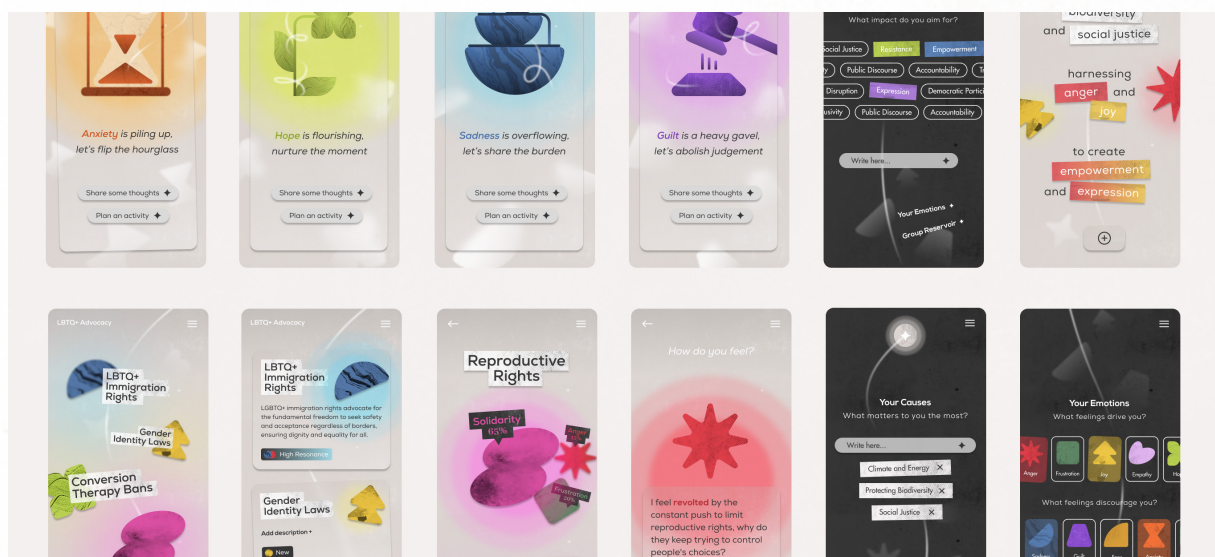


[32] Screens of the second variation

After presenting both variations to activists and peers, I decided to focus on the first one while including the second as an additional feature. The first variation had a clearer target user group and purpose, whereas the second was more exploratory. The final version emphasizes making tangible the emotional resonances within groups, combining the goals of sustained engagement and well-being.

• Graphic Style

While developing the final frames, the graphic style was refined. Different emotions were represented by abstract, colorful shapes, communicating variations of data through differences in scale, blurriness, and intensity of shine. Transparency, texture, and 3D effects were used to merge the digital with a crafty DIY aesthetic of activism. The overall result aimed to be both vibrant, dynamic and engaging.



[33] Final screens sneak peek

• Ethics Reflection

While developing the potential platform, it was essential to consider key ethical questions/values such as agency, inclusivity, transparency and accuracy of information. Through feedback and personal reflection, I continually pondered these issues, assessing how they could guide the design in a more desirable direction. Some of these values are implicit in the envisioned user flows of the features developed while others concern future developments.

User Agency

When considering agency, one of my goals would be for the app to not dictate user's actions, but rather to empower them to reflect and make their better informed choices. Especially when considering well-being, it was crucial to avoid neglecting negative emotions or promoting positive toxicity, as maintaining a balance of both positive and negative emotions is vital and varies from individuals and groups. Allowing users to discover this balance would be key.

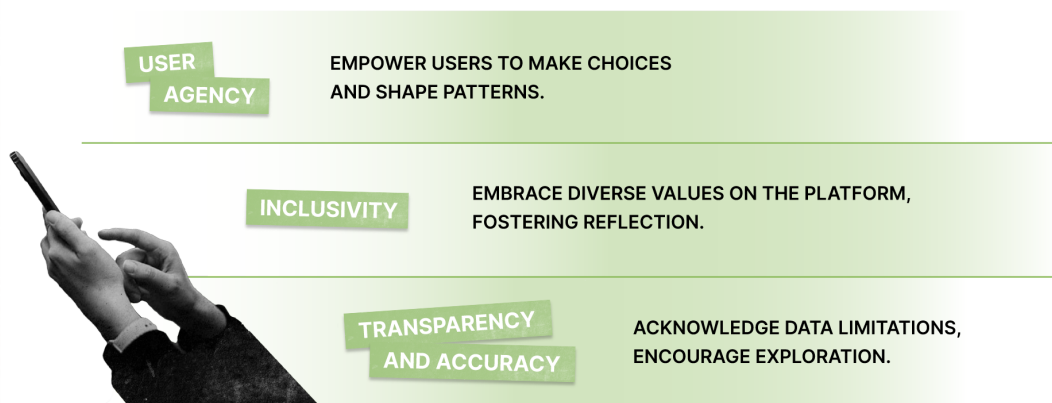
Inclusivity

When considering how different groups operate, it was important to create a space for all forms of activism, from those motivated by moral duty and solidarity to those driven by self-efficacy (seen as less "noble" by some but equally valuable). This inclusivity extends to various forms of activism, ranging from subtle expressions to more overt actions like protests or active disruption.

Additionally, it was crucial to acknowledge that individuals might utilize the platform to support causes I find less commendable. While initially troubling, I've come to accept it. My aim is to encourage conscious decision-making through emotional reflexivity. By prompting users to question their motivations and goals, I hope to foster reflection that leads to meaningful engagement with activism.

Transparency

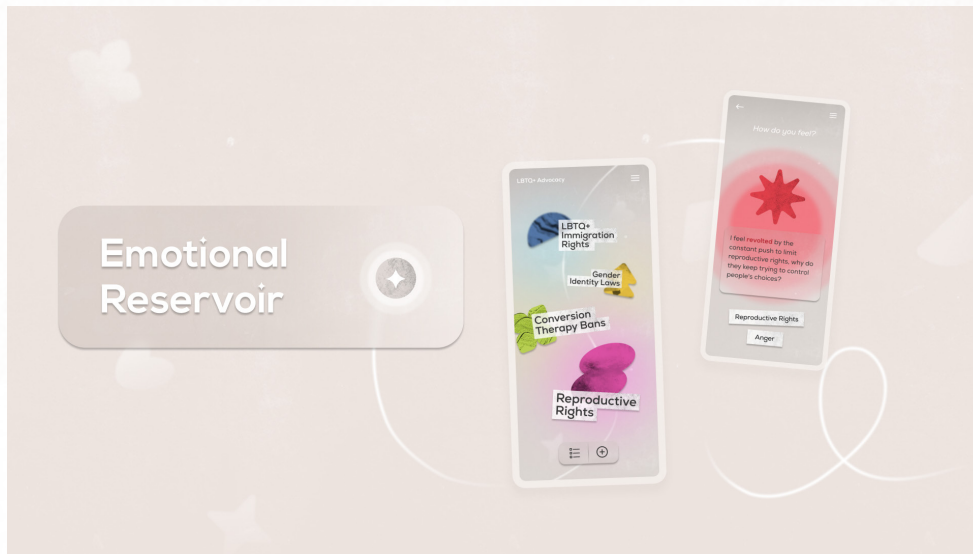
When working with visualizations, and extracting data from social media for analysis using artificial intelligence to determine sentiment, it was crucial to acknowledge that the information presented will not be entirely accurate. It is important to always present data as not entirely definitive but rather as a basis for exploration and discussion. And to bring clarity to the users about data storage.



7. RESULT

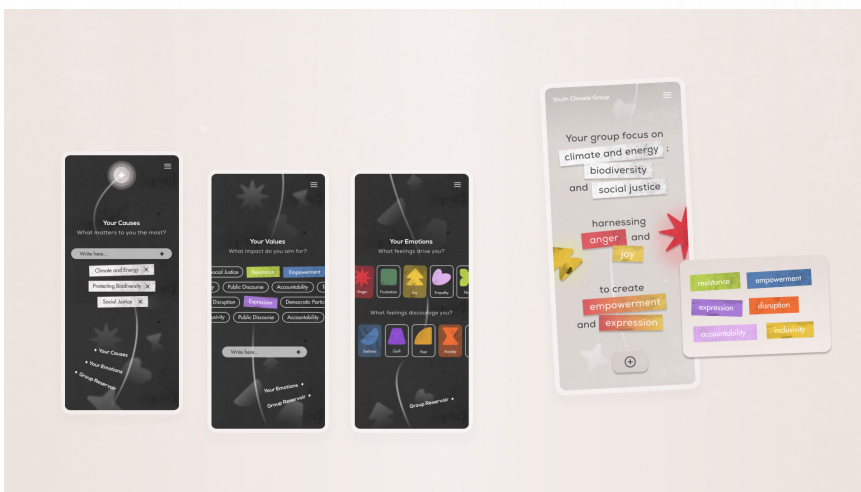
◆ Emotional Reservoir

Emotional Reservoir is the prototype of a digital platform that aims to aid youth-led grassroots groups be emotionally empowered, by fostering awareness and reflection. It visualizes the emotional landscapes within these groups and surrounding communities through interactive data. It presents features to support groups explore resonance for sustained engagement and emotional reflexivity for long-term resilience.



[35] Emotional Reservoir intro

Feature 1 – Group Profile

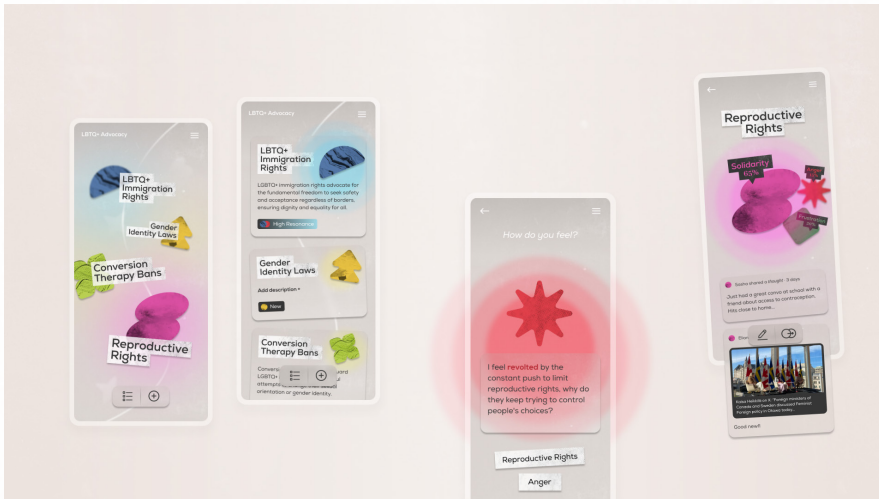


[36] Group Profile's overview

To introduce the group to the platform, the first feature includes a profile section where members can express and select the causes that matter to them, the values and emotions they wish to embody. When this information is collected, a collective profile is generated highlighting the most selected keywords.

This can help understand the group's identity and the spectrum of values it represents. This moment can be valuable for reflecting on the collective identity, strengthening the bond, and discussing compromises between individuals and the group to prioritize or balance certain values and emotions.

Feature 2 – Emotional Reservoir



[37] Emotional Reservoir's overview

The second feature is the emotional reservoir, where members can identify resonating topics and associated emotions. Here, data is visualized in a dynamic and interactive manner. The reservoir is built by group members collected moments of emotional connection, saved through comments, articles, social media posts, or other pieces of inspiration. This creates an archive for the group to revisit together.

By providing insight into the group's emotional landscape, it aims to help identify ongoing synergies, build stronger narratives, and keep maintain inspiration and motivation to sustain engagement.

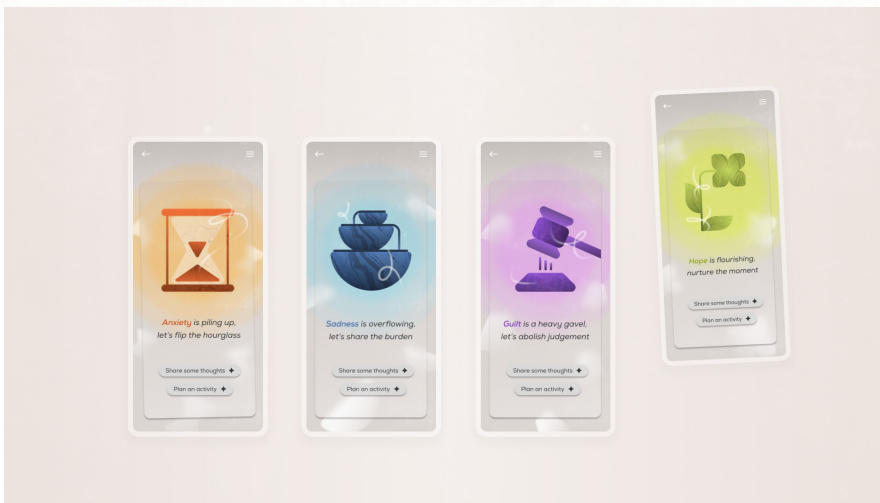
Feature 3 – Aligned Actions



[38] Aligned Actions's overview

The third feature allows a deeper exploration on topics and their associated emotions. Members can reflect on how to transform them into activities that align with their motivations and intended impact. Eventually suggesting or selecting activities for the group to pursue collectively.

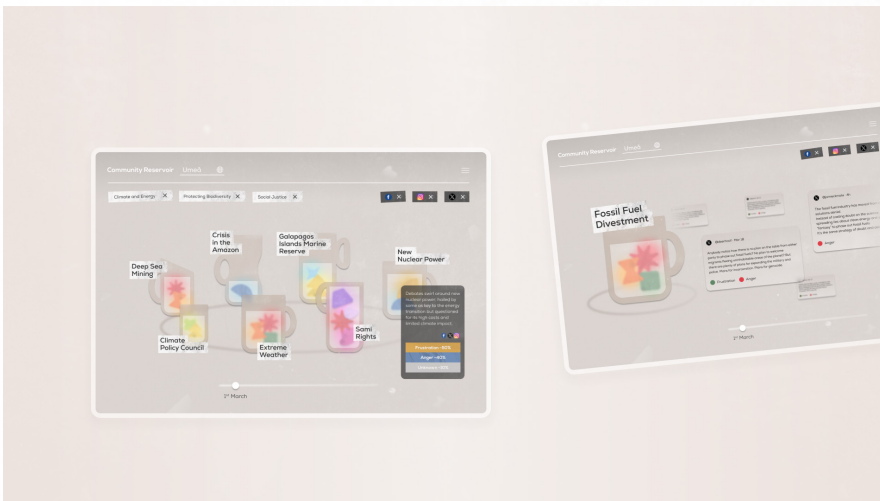
Feature 4 – Balanced Landscape



[39] Balanced Landscape's overview

Resonance notices form the next feature, ensuring a balanced emotional landscape. It releases notices addressing the overflow of certain emotions or the appearance of others that are beneficial for the groups well-being. It aims to facilitate group discussion and activity planning in order to maintain emotional balance within the group.

Feature 5 – Community Reservoir



[40] Community Reservoir's overview

Lastly, the community reservoir presents a data visualization of emotions felt in the broader community, gathered from social media scanning. While acknowledging the potential limitations of accuracy, it serves as a strategic tool for groups to understand their surroundings, gauge emotional responses to certain topics, identify emerging trends for mobilization or celebrate positive moments within their community.

8. REFLECTIONS

◆ From Brief to Final Concept – Finding a Valuable Intervention Space

Throughout my project, I dedicated significant time to understanding the type of outcome I desired. Initially, I aimed to create an authentic experience that resonated with activists' values and needs. However, identifying a valuable space for intervention proved challenging. I soon realized that my goal was not to develop a technological solution but to envision and develop something that could shape and enhance activists' practices. While exploring potential areas of impact, I found the dynamic role of emotions particularly intriguing and an area where insights collected could shape new exploratory concepts.

◆ Project's Approach – Human and Value Driven

What guided me steadily towards my desired outcome was the chosen approach. I used a human-centered approach, placing activists at the heart of the experience and carefully considering their needs, values and aspirations. This allowed me to go beyond problem-solving and strive to create/enhance meaningful experiences. Activists, researchers and peers were involved through a blend of investigative and generative methods. This included interviews and conversations to gather valuable insights, brainstorming sessions to generate ideas, and feedback sessions to gather input on concepts and design prototypes.

Additionally, I employed a value-driven approach to guide my design decisions and explorations. At the project's beginning, I proposed using both designer and activist lenses to shape my design process. This evolved into a framework, resulting from an iterative process of reflecting and articulating values to translate into design principles. The values framework was instrumental to enable me to evaluate how my decisions aligned with my initial intentions.

◆ Technology as a Medium – Insights that Go Beyond

This project presents valuable insights into the pros and cons of the relationship between activists and digital platforms. It proposes alternative concepts for rethinking those relations and explores how interaction design can fulfil different roles in reshaping that relationship. Some proposed concepts aim to aid activists with tools, while others seek to disrupt the existing platforms. The final chosen concept ended up being more detached from technology.

While exploring emotions, I worked to uncover how they shape activism practices implicitly and how making them more explicit could empower groups. I developed several hypotheses around "resonance for momentum" and "reflexivity for resilience." Transforming these insights into features and user flows allowed me to prototype new practices that can enhance activists' experiences. Making it tangible through a digital platform allows for explaining those practices and the hypotheses behind them. I believe this project could interest not only the design community but also the activist and psychology communities, as it offers an opportunity for exploration and understanding. The next steps would include making the platform testable through interactive prototypes, to communicate insights even more strongly.

◆ End of the Journey – Growth Through Design

This project has been an invaluable journey of personal and professional development for me. It has not only developed my technical skills but also nurtured my self-confidence and resilience. Through moments of doubt and challenge, I learned to trust my instincts and capabilities, surpassing my own wrongly perceived limitations. Moreover, the journey has profoundly impacted my perspective on activism. I have gained a deeper understanding of its complexities and nuances, allowing me to appreciate its significance anew. Now, I feel ready to approach activism with a sense of maturity and readiness, eager to contribute meaningfully to causes that align with my values.

As an interaction designer, I navigated complexity and demonstrated how to naiae towards meaningful social change. From the choosing of the topic to the end result, I kept my motivation alive and once again verified that the type of projects that move me are the ones driven by tough, complex, but beautiful and human topics.

9. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank the amazing activists I met along this journey, who lent me their time and shared with me lifetime experiences and knowledge.

Next I would like to thank Stoffel, my tutor Ambra, Cindy, Heather, alumni Toby and Cornelia, and my back-to-back desk mate Yanyi, whose help and guidance during this projects were invaluable.

I also want to thank UID, all my IxD classmates and professors who helped along the way and made my two years in the beautiful city of Umeå, as warm and lively as it could get.

Finally, my utmost appreciation goes to my lovely family — Mom, Dad, and my younger brother — for their support and love.

◆ SPECIAL THANKS – 50 YEARS OF FREEDOM

My Homeland, Portugal, celebrates this year its 50th birthday since the 25th of April, the Carnation Revolution, which marked the end of four decades of fascism.

This event represents a generation brimming with the spirit of protest and resistance, a testament to the power of collective mobilization.

Thank you to those who protest, and may the fight for a better world continue.

Grândola, vila morena

Terra da fraternidade

O povo é quem mais ordena

Dentro de ti, ó cidade!

Dentro de ti, ó cidade

O povo é quem mais ordena

Terra da fraternidade

Grândola, vila morena!

Grândola, Vila Morena,

Zeca Afonso

Não me obriguem a vir para a rua

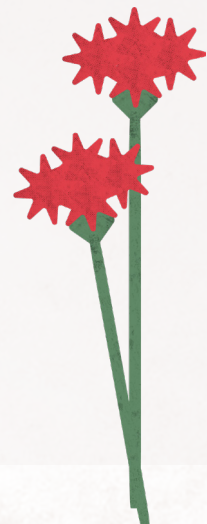
Gritar

Que é já tempo de embalar a trouxa

E zarpar

Venham Mais Cinco,

Zeca Afonso



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