

Acculturation through Food Design:

Playful Small-Talk Interactions in Shared Kitchens

Research Background

Acculturative stress is a universal challenge faced by millions of international students worldwide, representing not just academic difficulties but profound psychological burdens that impact daily life. For Chinese international students, this stress is dramatically amplified in the micro-context of shared kitchens—a space that becomes a "social theater" where "small talk," seemingly simple interactions, becomes a source of anxiety. Students know they "should" engage in small talk to build relationships, yet struggle with how to initiate these conversations, creating internal conflicts that are particularly pronounced in the "parallel work" environment of shared kitchens.

Research Process

This study employed a Double Diamond framework, using a funnel-like research process to progressively focus the problem. Beginning with introspective methods to explore personal experiences, we conducted online ethnography analyzing 52 RedNote posts discussing kitchen social interactions, followed by 11 semi-structured in-depth interviews to understand user needs. This process helped us narrow from broad acculturative stress to the specific challenge of kitchen small talk. Initial "content-driven" approaches (such as TV apps providing recipe topics) failed in usability testing, prompting our pivot to an "atmosphere-driven" design philosophy.

Design Outcome

Based on this new design philosophy, we developed "Fruit & Veggie Fireworks"—an ambient interactive installation. The core logic is that unconscious sounds from cooking "seed" the screen, and when someone begins speaking, these seeds "bloom" into beautiful fireworks. This design reframes solitary cooking as "preparing for a shared moment," while conversation becomes a beautiful moment of surprise and reward. Rather than attempting to directly stimulate conversation, the design reshapes the atmosphere of the space itself, creating fertile ground for natural interaction to emerge.

Evaluation Insights

Cross-cultural user testing revealed that firework blooming moments served as perfect "third-party topics," naturally breaking the ice of first encounters and initiating conversation. More importantly, the design transformed the meaning of silence: even when not speaking, the accumulation of seeds on screen transformed solitary "parallel work" into "shared anticipation" rather than awkward silence. These findings demonstrate the effectiveness of "atmosphere-driven" strategies for addressing social challenges in "parallel work" spaces, offering designers a new paradigm: when facing social challenges, don't directly stimulate conversation—first reshape the environmental atmosphere.

Graduation Committee

Dr.ir. H.N.J. (Rick) Schifferstein
Z.(Zhuochao) Peng

Designer

Zikang Zhang

