An Exploration of Self-Transcendence Through Solo-Travel

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Abstract

Self-Transcendence (ST) and related topics have gained increasing popularity among populations such as Americans. Strong evidence of ST's positive effect on individual's life has been found in literature across disciplines. Despite its importance and popularity, research in this topic has remained rather silent in the design community. In this paper, we explored and constructed a framework to help understand ST experience through the study of solo travelers. Solo travelers were found to have ample opportunities to reflect, especially outside of themselves, and thus studying solo travelers provided us with a platform to understand ST experiences.

Author Keywords

Self-Transcendence; design framework; methodology; spirituality

ACM Classification Keywords

J. Computer Applications: SOCIAL AND BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES; Psychology

Introduction

Self-Transcendence (ST) has been widely studied across disciplines and its importance in human existence has been well-supported [4]. Research has shown that populations such as Americans have readily

requested ST-related information [1]. However, despite its importance and popularity, research on ST has been remained rather silent. In this paper, we examined literatures from other disciplines such as Psychology to extract methodologies to study ST. Using solo travelers as a platform to study ST, we explored and constructed a framework of using STS and related methodologies to study their ST experience. Through this study, we aim to provide future researchers in the design community a framework to study ST and directions for future iterative work.

Background

Self-Transcendence

Self-Transcendence (ST) is a concept closely related to spirituality and has been widely studied in the western society by scholars such as Abraham Maslow. It refers to a state where individual experiences meaning and communion from surpassing their self-ego and boundary. [7] As Maslow described, ST "refers to the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature, and to the cosmos." [8: p269].

Research has shown that ST is "associated with multiple indicators of well-being". [10] The positive effect of ST on one's mental and physical well-being [12], relationship with others and quality of life [6] has been well-supported. The concept of ST is widely studied in the field of healthcare [11] and can be readily found in religious and spiritual practices [9: p30] as well as across the lifespan of human in different culture [11].

Past report had shown ST-related information such as spirituality and religious information had been readily requested by Americans [1]. Further, by 2013, it was estimated that there were at least 6000 iPad and iPhone applications existed for spirituality-related purposes [3]. Despite its popularity, research in spirituality-related topics have remained rather silent [3]. Researchers such as Bødker had urged that further development of technology and HCI needed to encompass holistic human experience [2]. Given that ST is an essential part of human existence, a more critical understanding of it is needed in the HCI field.

Various ways to study and measure ST has been explored by scholars across disciplines [4]. One of these approaches was Reed's *Self-Transcendence Scale* (STS) [11], which was a questionnaire of 15 4-point (from "not at all" to "very much") Likert-scale questions. The points on the STS were summed and the average was taken to indicate the level of ST of certain individual. For example, using STS, researchers investigated the impact of nurse-patient interaction on nursing home patients' ST [5]. To measure the extent of impact to patients' ST, nursing home patients were asked to complete the STS along with a survey to rate their interaction with the nurse. Data was analyzed and correlation was drawn between patients' STS and their level of interaction with the nurse.

Solo-Travelers

We conducted a thematic analysis of four interviews with solo travelers. The interview data came from an ongoing PhD dissertation work where 26 semi-structured, in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted to understand the use of technology by solo travelers. (See sidebar on page 2 for more details)

Example Quotes

Phone usage
"I run social media which is great because I still have my phone, thank god that I could do a lot of that on that..."

Opportunities to reflect outside of themselves
"I think that without solo traveling, it would just have taken longer (to get over my personal issues). I am forever changed by the amount of new experiences that I piled in but also always asking myself how is this affecting me and is this who I want to be?"

"I was like who am I and what does that even mean, so reflecting allowed me to just go [travel], I'm here in these cultures to learn about them and for me to learn about myself…"

Journal Keeping
"I [sat at] markets just watching people, writing in my journal which is where I wrote for my blog posts. I hand wrote my blog posts first…"

From the analysis of interviews, we found that solo travelers had more opportunities to reflect, especially outside of their own boundaries, compared to traveling with others. Thus, studying solo travelers provided us with a great platform to study ST. Also, we found that it was not uncommon among solo travelers to keep some forms of journals. Lastly, despite the wish of not bringing too many items with them, solo travelers seemed to take their mobile phone with them. Thus, the idea of tracking their ST experience using mobile phone seemed fitting. (Example quotes from the interview can be found on the side bar of page 3.)

Research question
With the understanding of ST, we determined that a critical methodology to understand one's ST experience is needed in the design community if future effective design related to ST were to be generated. Given that solo travelers served as a rather promising platform to study ST, we employed the research through design methodology [13] and defined our research question to be "How can we design to understand the ST experience of solo travelers?"

Method

Stage 1: Literature review + interview analysis
The research process started from literature review to understand how ST was studied in Psychology. Keyword strings such as "self-transcendence + health + study" was searched in Google. A collection of ST studies in the healthcare field was found and thoroughly read. A specific emphasis was given on research method. In parallel with the literature review, interviews with solo travelers were analyzed via thematic analysis approach.

Stage 2: Defined research question
With the understanding of ST and solo travelers, group discussions were held on possible design space. Since there was little previous work in the design community available, we determined that our work would serve as an initial exploration in the design space of ST. The research question was then defined by taking solo travelers as a platform to understand ST.

Stage 3: Ideated the concept of the platform
Using the STS and related methodologies identified in the literature review, we employed the research through design methodology [13]. Ideation session was held to brainstorm ways to integrate STS and related methodologies with HCI. Framework of using the STS to filter self-recorded trip data from solo traveler was then generated. To learn solo traveler's ST as well as what happened during their trip, we defined our framework to be "*collect, filter, analyze*".

COLLECT
Qualitative data of activities conducted during the trip by solo travelers as well as their daily STS were collected. To gather data of the activities during the trip, we developed a journal entry questionnaire (Figure 1) asking participants' daily itinerary and their learnings. The questions were designed to be open-ended so that participants could be encouraged to reflect.

FILTER
The use of daily STS allowed specific identification of periods in solo travelers' trip when their ST changed. This allowed a better isolation of the activities and experience they had that led up to the change.

Journal Entry Questionnaire (Figure 1)

1. *What is my participant number?*

2. *Where am I right now?*

3. *What happened today? Try follow a chronological order when describing. The more detailed, the better!*

4. *How do I feel right now?*

5. *What did I enjoy today?*

6. *What did I learn today?*

ANALYZE
After collecting and filtering, the data can then be effectively analyzed according to specific research topic.

Stage 4: Generated prototype
Using the vision generated from stage 3, a prototype was created (Figure 2). To represent and test the framework within a tight time frame, Google Form was used and a web application was implemented.

Stage 5: Pilot study
We recruited solo travelers who fit into our participant profile and tested our prototype on them. A study protocol was generated to ensure consistent manner in the pilot study.

PARTICIPANT CRITERIA
Time constraint was the biggest concern when building the participant criteria due to the time frame of the project. We asked our participants to be solo travelers who would be going on a solo trip for a minimum of three days before January 2017. We defined solo trips to be traveling to an unacquainted location without planning to meet with anyone they previously knew. We also asked our participants to have internet access during their trip so that they could access our prototype platform. Although we realized not all solo travelers had access to internet, this criterion was made to save valuable time for testing as online platform was easier to implement. A screening survey was then made using the participant criteria.

PARTICIPANT PROFILE
Despite our best effort in distributing the screening survey through multiple online platforms, only one participant matched our criteria. Most respondents

claimed that they were planning to travel in March 2017. Thus, to verify our framework, we are continuing recruiting participants until we obtain a robust set of data. The participant (P1) we recruited for the pilot study was a Caucasian female in the age of 22 studying in the University of Washington, Seattle.

STUDY PROCEDURES
Pre-travel
Before the participant left for their trips, they met with one of the team members and were given briefing on the study. An introductory script was read and consent form was signed by the participant. Then, a brief pre-travel interview was conducted asking general questions about participant's plan for the trip. This would allow participant mentally prepare for this study. Link to the prototype and instruction on how to use the prototype was given.

Post-travel
After the participant returned from their trip, the STS data was examined and the journal entries were thoroughly read. A post-travel interview was conducted asking participant questions from the following fields:

- *Travel itinerary and what happened:* this allowed participant to jump into the mindset of reflecting on their trip.
- *How and what they reflected on during the trip:* this allowed us to know their experience of reflection during their trip and what approaches they used for reflection.
- *Experience on using the prototype:* this allowed us to elicit feedback for the framework, the STS, and the questions we used in journal entry questionnaire.

Prototype (Figure 2)

Transcendence
Daily Journal Entry
Link to Journal Entry Google Form

Daily STS Entry
Link to STS Entry Google Form

Results and Discussions

The language used in the STS can be vague
P1 reported that she could not fully understand the relevance of the STS with her trip – "for a lot of time, I was thinking why would this question have to do with my trip…I do not understand what it means." Further literature review has shown that the STS developed by Reed may not be optimal for our framework. There are other measuring scales for ST in the Psychology research field and thus the universal applicability of STS is questioned. [4] Thus, a thorough review of other measures is needed and a scale more relevant to our framework may be chosen.

Misunderstanding of the term "spiritual"
While being asked the reason of putting score of 1 ("not at all") throughout the trip for the question "Finding meaning in my spiritual beliefs", P1 said "I am agnostic, I don't have a religious belief". Here, P1 understood spiritual beliefs as solely religious beliefs. This was a misunderstanding of the term "spiritual" as Reed defined "spiritual" as "having a sense of meaning, acceptance, and living fully in the present". [11] Further literature review is needed to examine the rationale of the question and the word "spiritual" might require further explanation for the participant.

The time of day might influence the STS
P1 reported that her answer to the questions on STS largely depended on the time of day because her stamina varied – "I feel like the answer really depends on the time of day…and how tired I am. I definitely notice the difference." To ensure consistency on completing STS, future participants could be asked to fill out the STS at a certain time of the day. Future testing with a larger pool of participants will also be needed to verify the effect of fixing the STS completion time.

Techniques on encouraging users to reflect should be integrated with our design
P1 reported that she usually takes pictures to record her trip. She also claimed that a photo could let her experience the sensation of the moment again – "[I usually] take a lot of pictures…I want to remember…look at all those in the moment gives me emotions and feeling." Based on this comment, it could potentially spark more reflection by displaying the photos the users took throughout the day along with the journal entry questionnaire. However, a thorough literature review on how people reflect is needed to justify this feature.

"What did you learn today?" encompasses two layers of meaning
Looking at the responses for the journal entry questionnaire, we realized the question "what did you learn today?" could be interpreted in two ways – physically and mentally. The responses for this question were "the layout of the city", "more about the history of the city and of Scotland" and "I feel very comfortable on my own abroad". From the responses, we could see that the first two were interpretations of the physical aspect of the question whereas the third response was an interpretation of the mental aspect. To gather a much more detailed journal entry, the question "what did you learn today?" needs to be better defined. For the physical aspect, the question could be "what new things did you experience today?" For the mental aspect, the question could be "introspecting yourself, what did you learn today?"

Novelty and Contribution

This study serves as an initial exploration to research the design space of ST. With the framework we built, we aim to provide future researchers in design community with the methodology to understand ST experience among solo travelers. Although our study utilized solo travelers as building blocks, the methodology we discovered could be potentially applied to understand ST experience of other demographics. Due to the complex and abstract nature of ST, we suggest future designers who wish to design for ST to collaborate with experts with knowledge of ST, e.g. psychologist. We also advise a more critical examination on the employment of objective measure of ST (such as STS) as the potential demographics might misunderstood its language. Due to its relevance with our framework, methods of how to encourage participants to reflect should also be considered.

Acknowledgement

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