

#ThisMyMob App Connects and Celebrates Indigenous Identity

1. Summary of the impact

Social and cultural dislocation are among the key causes of disadvantage and vulnerability in Indigenous communities. Although technology offers connectivity beyond geographical boundaries, the lack of Indigenous input in digital development and design is evident in the continuous emergence of racist content.

A national, Indigenous-led and owned research project has seen the creation of the #thismymob app which provides a safe space for Aboriginal Australians to find, connect and stay in touch with their community.

Headed by Indigenous researcher and UTS Associate Professor Dr Christopher Lawrence, the app is currently in testing stage and hopes to reclaim digital land rights for Indigenous users.

2. Problem

Indigenous communities continue to suffer the effects of low social and economic capital as a result of being dispersed, with many members disconnected or isolated from their mob.

While some try to connect through digital means, they continue to be the target of abuse and racist content, with no safe online spaces for them to interact. According to Dr Lawrence, much of the issue is due to the lack of Indigenous participation in the development of technology and software.

This was reflected in a 2015 game, available on all major app stores, called “Survival Island 3: Australia Story 3D”. The game portrays players as white men armed with bows and arrows, who are told to “beware of Aborigines”, and must shoot or beat Indigenous people to death to survive and earn points.

Although the game was removed following public outrage, Dr Lawrence says it was the catalyst for him to actively do something about the representation and participation of Indigenous Australians in the digital world.

3. Beneficiaries

The main beneficiaries of the #thismymob research project are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the country. In addition, the outputs will benefit anyone who wants to connect with Indigenous people online.

The development team further hopes that the app will be rolled out internationally and benefit Indigenous communities outside Australia as well.

4. Approach to impact

According to Dr Lawrence, the most important element of the #thismymob research project is that it is Indigenous-led and owned. By using a Postcolonial Computing framework, the research team has established the notion of ‘digital land rights’ which asserts the right of Indigenous peoples to a safe online space that they design and control.

The team set out to develop a culturally appropriate platform which is based on research into how Indigenous Australians are currently using technology and connecting, and what issues they encounter in the online sphere.

During the first round of fieldwork, conducted during October to December 2017, the team reached out to four Indigenous communities and discussed how a new platform could provide a useful addition to their existing array of technologies. Participants strongly supported the project, feeling the need for a safe space, and a tentative app design was agreed upon in collaboration.

More than just instilling a sense of belonging to the digital world, the app is designed to boost social wellbeing among Indigenous Australians by connecting them to their communities, or 'mobs'. Dr Lawrence stresses the significance of such a function as many Indigenous Australians have been separated or disconnected from their mob and, by extension, their cultural identity.

To do so, it will offer a 'find my mob' function in which users can enter information about themselves and connect, or re-connect, with their communities regardless of their current location. By offering such a function, users can trace their family history and relatives, and discover more about their own heritage and identity.

The app offers chat functions where users can talk, exchange information or organise events. This will provide a safe digital refuge for Indigenous users in which they can share their thoughts, feelings and experiences as Aboriginal Australians.

Bringing community members together is especially important because social and cultural dispersity are among the key causes leading to their low socio-economic status. According to Dr Lawrence, this opens up the potential to collaborate in many areas, such as business and tourism.

As a second step, the research team will create an online portal as an extension of the app and will allow non-Indigenous people from all around the world to get in touch with Indigenous Australians. The aim is to design a one-stop portal where individuals, corporates, government and industries can access Indigenous communities and get their message out to them. Just like the app, the portal will be designed, owned and controlled by Indigenous people.

5. What has changed as a result of this work?

5.1. The Outcomes

The app is currently in its prototype stage and is expected to be deployed for trial in mid-2018. Once the app is up and running, the team will focus on the development of the online portal.

In creating and testing programs that will improve connectedness and wellbeing for Indigenous Australians, the team has also established a national framework for technology research and development which will create pathways to support Indigenous developers, entrepreneurs and start-ups.

5.2. Impact

The project itself is still in its early stages and is only the first step towards the desired impact, which is to boost the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Australia.

By re-establishing lost connections and introducing young Indigenous people to their mob, the team hopes to eliminate some of the social and cultural barriers that continue to send Indigenous people to the bottom of wellbeing statistics.

In addition, the project aims to spark a deep cultural shift in the digital world by enabling Indigenous participation and ending the continuous emergence of racist content. Through their work, the team is paving the way for more Indigenous developers to take the lead in designing online platforms and content – and claim their digital land rights.

Finally, by offering safe and useful technology, the researchers endeavour to boost digital literacy among Indigenous Australians.

6. What has helped you accomplish this work?

6.1. Personal enabling factors

Dr Lawrence is particularly driven by his own experiences as a Noongar man who experienced life before the 1967 referendum gave Aboriginal people Australian citizenship. Having first-hand experience of living in a reserve, having a welfare officer and being separated from his family, he has been particularly concerned about the representation of Indigenous identity and history in Australian institutions.

He remembers history lessons at school in which Aboriginal history was talked about in the past tense, claiming that Aborigines were dead and no longer existed. However, Dr Lawrence says Indigenous Australians are very much alive, motivated and eager to claim their rights and space both offline and online.

Most importantly, his work is inspired by a desire to celebrate Indigenous identity and boost wellbeing. His drive to make a difference has seen him become the first Aboriginal student from The George Institute for Global Health to be awarded a PhD.

#Thismymob is further supported by UTS Associate Professor Tuck Leong who specialises in Human-Computer Interaction and Participatory Design as well as Melbourne University's Dr Greg Wadley who studies technology for health and wellbeing.

Other chief investigators include Dr Simon Graham, a scholar in the area of technology-for-health, Prof Nic Bidwell (University of Namibia), a leading author on the design and evaluation of technology to support Indigenous wellbeing, as well as world leader in Indigenous health research Prof Sandra Eades (University of Melbourne) and Prof Paul Dourish (University of California), a world leader in the field of Human-Computer Interaction and co-author of the Postcolonial Computing framework.

The team also has access to an advisory group consisting of experts in health, wellbeing and computing.

6.2. External enabling factors

This collaborative research project was initially developed at The University of Melbourne who partnered with UTS in 2016 in leading the team.

As a national-scale Indigenous-led digital project, the team has secured a \$473,000 grant under the Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Indigenous scheme.

7. Challenges

One of the key challenges of the project is to merge the complex aspect of culture with technology, and reflect the result within an app.

In order to find one's mob, users must either be able to enter cultural information about themselves or be able to access other users who may be able to assist. Grasping cultural data is certainly not an easy task due to its complex nature, which is why it is crucial to have Indigenous people working on the project.

According to Dr Lawrence, while an individual user may not have much information about their mob, the community is often able to identify mobs and members based on simple things such as family members and names, and this is a valuable consideration when designing the app.

The team is guided by research findings that give an insight into how Aboriginal users are using technology and what issues they might encounter on currently available platforms such as Facebook groups. In addition, the prototype will be tested and reviewed by its end-users before its launch to ensure it meets their needs.

8. Associated research

<http://thismymob.org/>

9. References

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