

A DESIGN PHD STUDENT'S EXPLORATORY ACADEMIC JOURNEY: experience report of a solo trip to Canada

EL VIAJE ACADÉMICO EXPLORATORIO DE UNA ESTUDIANTE DE DOCTORADO EN DISEÑO: RELATO DE LA EXPERIENCIA DE UN VIAJE EN SOLITARIO A CANADÁ

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Abstract: This article details the academic journey of a PhD student in design, with a focus on the practical applications of her research. Using an autobiographical narrative methodology, the study covers visits to three Canadian cities in October and November 2022, with participation in scientific events, meetings with research groups and technical visits. The article describes the interaction with local researchers and social organizations, emphasizing how these interactions enriched the research. The results highlight the impact of these experiences on the researcher's personal and professional development. The text concludes with a discussion of the challenges encountered, suggesting how these experiences can promote interdisciplinary knowledge in the field of design.

Keywords: *experience report; women researchers; age-well.*

Resumen: Este artículo detalla el viaje académico de una estudiante de doctorado en diseño, con especial atención a las aplicaciones prácticas de su investigación. Utilizando una metodología narrativa autobiográfica, el estudio abarca visitas a tres ciudades canadienses en octubre y noviembre de 2022, con participación en eventos científicos, reuniones con grupos de investigación y visitas técnicas. El artículo describe la interacción con investigadores locales y organizaciones sociales, destacando cómo estas interacciones enriquecieron la investigación. Los resultados destacan el impacto de estas experiencias en el desarrollo personal y profesional del investigador. El texto concluye con una discusión de los desafíos encontrados, sugiriendo cómo estas experiencias pueden promover el conocimiento interdisciplinario en el campo del diseño.

Palabras clave: *informe de experiencias; mujeres investigadoras; age-well.*

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INTRODUCTION

This article presents an account of an exploratory trip to three Canadian cities, which took place between October and November 2022, during my PhD in design. Although the subject of my research is AgeTech.

The report details personal reflections and transformations encountered at each event of the academic journey, offering practical applications of the lessons learned from the experiences lived during the trip and the challenges and overcoming of a doctoral student in her 50s. The aspects of AgeTech research, although relevant, are presented as secondary and contextual.

The article uses the qualitative method of an autobiographical narrative. This approach facilitates an analysis of the intersection between personal experience and academic development. The method allows for the subjectivity of the narrator, reflecting their perspective as the basis for the construction of scientific knowledge, as advocated by authors such as Stake (2016) and Oliveira and Satriano (2018).

It is a method of understanding others and the world. It is a recurring resource in the social sciences and a research technique that can be employed by the researcher, where the author and the spectator may be the same figure (Oliveira; Satriano, 2018).

The qualitative approach is a pertinent method for identifying the social, political, economic, and cultural opportunities of individuals within a specific context. It enables the examination of connections between individuals, places, knowledge, and other factors. This approach can help uncover intricate aspects of needs, desires, and aspirations that may not be immediately evident (IDEO, 2009).

Dewey's (1910) considerations retain their relevance despite the considerable temporal distance between the time in which they were originally conceived and the present day.

The author hypothesizes that our universities are overly focused on the accumulation of materials and principles, which, given the academic requirements for doctoral-level training, can become voluminous and often impede the creative process inherent in the training of design researchers.

Considering of Dewey's (1910) insights, an attitude characterized by a sense of burning curiosity, a fertile imagination, and a love of experimental investigation can facilitate the emergence of new perspectives in certain contexts. It is often necessary to cultivate a creative mental attitude towards scientific thinking. Among the various attitudes that can be cultivated, an exploratory journey can be a means of opening up new perspectives on the research being carried out.

Avena and Burnham (2006) posit that an exploratory academic journey can facilitate the generation of new perspectives. The endeavor is challenging and requires the researcher to be self-aware and willing to engage in discovery.

Stake (2016) recommends including elements that strengthen the reliability and integrity of the autobiographical narrative in research reports. In accordance with this guideline, this article includes the contribution of the Canadian researcher who hosted the PhD student during the exploratory trip and acted as co-author, reinforcing the authenticity and accuracy of the information presented.

This article contributes insights into how international experiences can enrich academic research and how autobiographical narrative as a qualitative method can be used to describe and discuss the phenomena observed in the initial stage of academic research.

THE CONTEXT OF THE ACADEMIC RESEARCH FOR EXPLORATORY JOURNEY

Although this article focuses on the account of the experiences of an exploratory trip to Canada and its personal and academic impacts for the author, it is necessary to contextualize the importance of doctoral research in AgeTech. In this article, aspects related to AgeTech are secondary elements, serving as a backdrop to the narrative.

It is estimated that the global population aged 60 and over will increase by approximately 2.1 billion, which is double the current number of people in this age group (United Nations, 2019).

It is estimated that by 2030, more than 2 billion people will need at least one assistive device as a result of an aging population. As people age, this need will increase to two or more products (WHO, 2018, 2022).

The global pandemic of 2020 necessitated the creation of remote services, including medical assistance, access to support services for basic needs, and other resources for the elderly population, who were particularly vulnerable during this period (Khasnabis; Holloway; MacLachlan, 2020).

During the pandemic, digital solutions have proven to be a powerful tool in impacting all aspects of people's lives. They have provided access to services that meet users' needs, including those with functional difficulties. Technical support in different contexts has become necessary to provide these services remotely (DATEurope, 2021; OPAS, 2021).

In light of these considerations, the World Health Organization (WHO) has spearheaded a Global Cooperation on Assistive Technologies (GCAT) initiative with the objective of enhancing access to high-quality assistive technologies for all. Digital assistive technologies are more affordable when there are specifications

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and guidelines tailored to the user profile (Khasnabis; Holloway; MacLachlan, 2020; WHO, 2018, 2022).

In the context of the doctoral research topic under development, two research clusters were identified that caught attention and aroused interest. One of these clusters is the Technology and Aging Lab in the United States and the Age-Well in Canada.

The decision to learn more about Age-Well was based on the impact and scope of the research network. AgeTech is being researched in Canada in an innovative, social, and sustainable way, forming a true research ecosystem.

The Age-Well research network is distinguished by its high level of excellence, research maturity, and infrastructure, which place it at the forefront of its field in comparison to other countries surveyed. Currently comprising 50 universities and research centers across Canada, the network engages in multidisciplinary research, develops training programs, and collaborates with over 440 industries, government, and non-profit partners. Additionally, it strives to generate knowledge and improve technologies. The network has over 5,000 registered seniors and caregivers who are invited to evaluate the products and services it develops (Age-Well, [2024]).

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This experience report is an autobiographical narrative that aligns with qualitative research and allows for subjectivity that it is a personal way of understanding others and the world. This is a scientific contribution of a descriptive and phenomenological nature, based on the researcher's narration of the experiences recounted from the perspective of the observer. (Stake, 2016).

Experience report is a research technique that can be used by the researcher, where the author and spectator can be the same figure, and is a recurring resource in the social sciences.

Learning can occur by encouraging methodological innovation, experimenting with the unusual, and being open to the unknown. This approach can broaden researchers' horizons, promote interdisciplinarity, and provide a deeper and more holistic understanding of the phenomena being studied (Avena; Burnham, 2006, p. 15).

Report of experiences can promote opportunities for critical reflection and influence students' metacognition and creative thinking in their learning. The use of autobiographical narratives can encourage self-reflection that leads to discoveries about aspects of oneself that were previously unnoticed, stimulating individuals to make bolder choices about their lives and build on their strengths (Roberts, 2019).

Roberts (2019) proposes that the development of strategies to search for experiences and content with clearly delineated objectives can facilitate the growth of critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, metacognition, flexibility of expression, adaptability, and the capacity to navigate ambiguity. Moreover, it can encourage empathy and connections with others.

Oliveira and Satriano (2018) suggests that experience report can be a means by which the researcher subjectively explores and represents an experience, contributing his experience to others.

Therefore, the aim of this article is to serve as an inspirational guide for other researchers with insights for planning the exploratory research journey based on the goals and expected outcomes of the research.

As Oliveira and Satriano (2018) posit, experience reports can be utilized by researchers as subjective narratives that reflect the narrator's internal construction, thereby enabling first-person narration.

EXPLORATORY EXPERIENCES REPORT

Three criteria were established for the planning of the trip: the scope (clarity of what is a priority), the schedule (time with checkpoints), and the budget (financial resources with strategies to meet the schedule).

In relation to the scope, a layer of protection (or risk assessment) was added, related to any situation of vulnerability, be it financial or phenomena that would occur during my stay. To achieve this, a network of support contacts in Brazil, the United States, and Canada was created.

The main objective was to participate in the Age-Well conference in October 2022 and the opportunity to visit research centers in Toronto and Vancouver. The initial research phase involved mapping relevant cities and centers aligned with my academic interests.

I also identified a contact person, the Director of SFU's Science and Technology for Ageing Research (STAR) Institute, who was also Age-Well's Scientific Director for Funding. An email was sent requesting an online meeting to present the proposed visit to Canada, with the approval and participation of my academic advisor. The online meeting took place in July 2022 and discussed my visit, which was endorsed by my academic advisor, the Director supported me and provided valuable contacts and assigned a research assistant to facilitate my commitments during the conference and subsequent stay in Vancouver.

Following this meeting, I reviewed my travel arrangements to ensure that all logistical aspects were addressed, which included: 1. acquiring a visa; 2. purchasing conference tickets; 3. airline tickets; 4. hotel reservations; 5. travel insurance; 6. mobile internet service; 7. safeguarding emergency funds after all itineraries were mapped out, including internal travel. For security reasons, my itinerary, and locations have been shared in real time with my family.

3.1 TORONTO - ONTARIO - CANADA

Preparing for the Trip: Arriving in Toronto was a remarkable moment, marking my first contact with Canadian soil. The experience brought a mixture of expectation and excitement, accentuated by the fact that I was alone in a new country.

Cultural Aspects: Before embarking, I familiarized myself with Canadian customs and weather conditions, as well as revising some basic French phrases, which revived memories of my elementary school studies. Canada's bilingualism, with English and French, is an important cultural aspect to consider.

Logistical planning: I checked all the necessary documents for the trip, including visa and health insurance. I organized my stay in a hotel that was well located in relation to the main points of interest and planned transportation from the airport to the hotel. I prepared for the changeable weather by selecting suitable clothing and organized all the essential electronic devices, including a universal adapter, an indispensable item.

Description of activities in the city: In Toronto, Ontario, I was greeted by researchers from KITE, the Toronto Rehabilitation Institute. I visited the HomeLab. The full-scale house simulates a retirement home and is ready to receive various technologies for simulated use and evaluation (KITE, 2022).

The HomeLab¹ is a "house within a laboratory" where researchers can devise and evaluate new products designed to assist the elderly and individuals with disabilities in remaining at home for longer periods of time and in a more secure environment. The laboratory is designed to resemble a typical single-story residential dwelling. It was not possible to take photographs within the premises.

1 HomeLab

Figure 1 – Homelab - Toronto



Source: Authors (2022).

The ambient provides a laboratory environment for the initial testing of prototypes and processes prior to their deployment in trials in real homes.

Researchers frequently utilize the home to investigate methods for assisting the elderly and individuals with disabilities to reside in their homes in a safe and independent manner.

Summary of activities in Toronto: Upon landing, I was impressed by the efficiency of Toronto's public transportation system, which facilitated my initial mobility. I quickly observed the accessibility infrastructure, which offered valuable insights for my AgeTech research, highlighting the integration of assistive technologies into urban life.

The visit to HomeLab was instrumental in deepening my understanding of the possibilities for applying assistive technologies to facilitate independent living for seniors in their homes.

REGINA - SASKATCHEWAN - CANADA

Preparing for the trip: My first trip within Canada was to the city of Regina, the site of the Age-Well conference.

Cultural Aspects: Before the trip, I researched the local culture. Regina, the capital of the province of Saskatchewan, is the sixteenth largest city in Canada, with a population of around 226,404 habitants. Regina is situated on traditional lands of the Cree, Saulteaux, Dakota, Nakota, Lakota peoples and is the homeland of the Métis. The area is covered by the Treaty signed with 35 First Nations in southern Saskatchewan, as well as parts of Alberta and Manitoba.

Logistical planning: I organized my stay in a hotel close to the conference venue, allowing me to get there on foot. In addition, I planned nearby dining options and transportation between the airport and the hotel, avoiding any mishaps.

Summary of activities in Regina: The Age-Well 2022 Conference was the participation of Age-Well network members, including the Board of Directors, industry partners, local First Nations, communities, elders and caregivers, as well as interns, start-up partners, innovation hubs and entrepreneurs.

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Figure 2 – Age-Well Conference - Regina



Source: Authors (2022).

During the conference, in addition to lectures in the auditorium, there were workshops with discussions on the eight challenge areas for co-creating solutions.

Figure 3 – Workshops - Regina



Source: Authors (2022).

On the last day, there were awards for the work presented in the poster session and a round of pitches where researchers, undergraduate and graduate students were able to present a demonstration of technology, website, product, toolkit and methods for incubator companies.

Figure 4 – Session of pitches - Regina



Source: Authors (2022).

Afterwards, the Age-Well board and members took part in an open debate on the activities carried out during the year, closing the conference.

Figure 5 – Open debate - Regina



Source: Authors (2022).

VANCOUVER - BRITISH COLUMBIA - CANADA

Preparing for the trip and Logistical planning: My second trip within Canada was to Vancouver, where I organized my stay at an acquaintance's house, located just a 15-minute walk from Simon Fraser University (SFU). In addition, I identified public transportation options available to ensure mobility around the city.

Summary of activities in Vancouver: In Vancouver, I got to know the Department of Gerontology at the Simon Fraser University.

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Figure 6 – SFU's Gerontology Centre



Source: Authors (2022).

I was welcomed by researcher from SFU's Gerontology Centre and local partners who took me on a tour of four projects with older people in the city of Vancouver:

1. Vancouver Second Mile Society;
2. West End Seniors Centre Network Society;
3. South Granville Seniors Centre;
4. 411 Seniors Centre.

Interaction and comparison of research data from Canada and Brazil: At the 411 Senior Center, an interaction was held with questions about the use of digital technologies by the seniors present. The questions were based on the same ones asked by a group of seniors in Brazil. The project coordinator helped with this interaction, as did the doctoral and master's students who accompanied the tour.

The responses of the Canadian seniors during the dynamic showed similarities between the problems related to digital interactions, use, and acceptance of digital technologies by Brazilian seniors.

Visit to the Senior Living Expo and Job Fair in Vancouver: During my visit to Vancouver, I explored the Senior Living Expo and Job Fair at the Vancouver Convention Center, which featured booths of specialized companies providing seniors, caregivers, and family members with technical information on products and services. The expo was divided into five sectors:

- Senior Living and Care: Focus on housing and care solutions that promote autonomy and independence for the elderly.
- Health Services and Home Support: Innovations in health services and home support essential for maintaining the health and well-being of the elderly in their own homes.
- Senior Wellness: Programs and products aimed at well-being and maintaining physical and mental activity.
- Finance and Insurance: Information on financial planning and insurance options tailored to the needs of seniors.
- Government: Access to information on government resources and policies to support seniors and their families.

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Figure 7 – Senior Living Expo and Job Fair - Vancouver



Source: Authors (2022).

Integration of Services and Professionals: In addition to the stands, the expo included a job fair, offering private spaces for interviews and meetings between professionals and companies. This initiative facilitated the connection between the supply of services and the demand for qualified professionals in the elderly care sector.

This event broadened my understanding of the global AgeTech market. The diversity and integration of services presented at the Expo provided valuable insights for my research, particularly in relation to the application of assistive technologies in residential settings. Observing the interactions between suppliers, professionals and older people demonstrated the importance of an integrated approach to developing solutions that meet the needs of older people.

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RESULTS

The results are considered in two ways. First, I address the findings relevant to the research, in the context of the cities visited. Secondly, I present my perceptions of professional development as a researcher from the perspective of a mature woman based on my understanding of the experiences reported, and the lessons learned during the trip.

TORONTO, ONTARIO, CANADA

The visit to the Toronto Rehabilitation Institute's KITE, and especially the HomeLab, provided me with information to define the themes of my doctoral research. It also increased my understanding of trends in the incorporation of assistive technologies in environments for the elderly and the challenges for Brazilian reality.

Challenges and solutions: The impossibility of taking photographs was a limiting factor, however, being present on site allowed me to observe details that go beyond the visual. This direct contact with the technologies and methodologies used at HomeLab showed the relevance of my research and the importance of immersive experiences in applied research.

Based on these insights, a research project was developed and submitted to a call for research proposals run by the Department of Science, Technology and Higher Education (SETI) and the Araucária Foundation to Support Scientific and Technological Development in Paraná (FA). The project was accepted.

REGINA, SASKATCHEWAN, CANADA

The Age-Well Conference represents Canada's largest aging research network. It is dedicated to the advancement of research and entrepreneurship, with the objective

of developing economic and social solutions for elderlies. Its approach aligns with the triple helix model, as proposed by Etzkowitz and Zhou (2017), which aims to foster a knowledge-based society through collaboration between universities, industry, and government. The model has the potential to benefit a diverse range of actors, including students and policymakers, in fostering economic, social, and sustainable innovation.

Challenges and solutions: The diversity of stakeholders at the Age-Well conference, each with different approaches and objectives, was a challenge in selecting which practical areas would be relevant to apply to my research. Participating in the workshops was even more challenging. I realized the need for greater mastery and fluency in the technical terms used. This limitation made it difficult to present my arguments clearly and during the discussions, which may have limited my contributions.

As a solution, I adopted a strategy of mapping out areas of interest in order to attend sessions and workshops aligned with my research, interacting with particular researchers on points of common interest and asking questions on points I hadn't understood. This generated connections and networking with these researchers.

VANCOUVER, BRITISH COLUMBIA, CANADA

The interaction with the elderly at the 411 Senior Center demonstrated that the issues related to the utilization and acceptance of digital technologies by the elderly are not geolocation-related. Conversely, they lie in the support that society provides to the elderly at this stage of life and in the social policies available to this age group, which has its own specific characteristics that must be respected and valued. This result provided me with certainty and conviction regarding the approach of my doctoral research.

Challenges and solutions: Logistics and accommodation: Finding suitable accommodation for short stays in a city like Vancouver is expensive and difficult. Staying with acquaintances near SFU helped me save resources, immerse myself in the local community, and adapt more easily to the dynamics of the city.

Planning routes and understanding the local transportation system to get around efficiently was a time-saving strategy. Having the alternative of walking to SFU allowed me independence and mobility during my stay.

Interacting with local seniors and gerontology experts in a multilingual and multicultural context was a challenge. As a strategy, I used standardized questions, previously applied in a group in Brazil, to make it easier to compare answers and ensure clear and objective communication during the interactions.

INTEGRATING THE RESULTS OF THE EXPLORATORY TRIP WITH PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Toronto, Ontario, Canada: The visit to KITE and HomeLab was fundamental in refining my analytical and observational skills, allowing me to apply the knowledge acquired more effectively in defining the topic of my doctoral research. The need to adapt assistive technologies to the Brazilian reality also reinforced the importance of taking a collaborative and well-planned approach with local institutions.

Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada: Participating in the Age-Well Conference exposed me to the complexity of working with a diversity of stakeholders. This experience highlighted the need to improve my fluency in technical terms and strengthened my network of contacts. The discussions and workshops helped develop collaboration skills, which are essential for advancing research and forming interdisciplinary partnerships. The workshop model helped me develop the dynamics and conceptual tools I wrote about in my thesis.

Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada: Interaction with seniors at the 411 Senior Centre revealed universal challenges in embracing digital technologies. It's not about local conditions, the challenges of the elderly population in adopting digital technologies are a universal challenge for the digital inclusion of seniors. This interaction with Canadian seniors broadened my understanding of the paths needed to implement AgeTech solutions. This visit highlighted the importance of social support and appropriate policies for integrating technology into the lives of seniors that respect the specific characteristics of this population group.

DISCUSSION

My perception of the research environment in Canada offered a new vision of the possible paths for AgeTech and design research. Here, I highlight three key points that align directly with my experiences:

- 1. Interdisciplinary Collaboration:** The experiences in Regina and Vancouver showed how research can be enriched when it allows for the integration of different perspectives and areas of knowledge as suggested by Dewey's (1910) and Stake (2016). The multidisciplinary approach opens up possibilities for new ways of approaching complex problems in the field of design.
- 2. Research infrastructure:** In Toronto, the visit to KITE at the Toronto Rehabilitation Institute and, above all, to HomeLab and Canada's research infrastructure allowed me to compare with the Brazilian reality and assess the pioneering spirit, innovation, and resilience of Brazilian researchers, given the great results achieved despite the scarce resources available. On the other hand, it offered new perspectives on how the union of academia, industry and government, in the triple helix model, as suggested by Etzkowitz e Zhou (2017) can provide more comprehensive scenarios for carrying out more efficient research.

3. **Identification of a Trend:** The challenges facing the emerging need for digital inclusion of seniors, especially in their homes, was observed during interactions with seniors in Vancouver. The importance of developing solutions that respect the particularities and resources of the elderly are one of the greatest challenges, especially for those on low incomes (Chan *et al.*, 2022).

CONCLUSION

The final considerations and conclusion are addressed in two ways. First, I approach autobiographical narrative as a tool for generating knowledge from the experience of an exploratory academic trip.

Avena and Burnham (2006) state that an exploratory academic journey can facilitate the generation of new perspectives. However, it is challenging and requires the researcher to be self-aware and willing to engage in discovery.

Stake (2016) states that qualitative research is experiential and provides multiple realities and a collection of interpretations. There is no single best explanation, but rather an effort should be made to analyze experiences and describe how things work from different points of view. By defining and understanding a particular aspect, Stake tells us, we gain an understanding of complexity.

Dewey (1910) discusses the processes of knowledge generation, particularly regarding thinking and creativity, and it can be argued that the academic demands during doctoral training can impede creativity, creating a tension between the need to meet rigorous academic standards and the creative freedom of design.

In this sense, the incorporation of new approaches and multidisciplinary interactions beyond the confines of the research field, such as exploratory academic journeys, are pointed out as possible ways of creating knowledge.

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The opportunity to engage with a subject from a different perspective in a culturally diverse context can facilitate the identification of new opportunities and experiences that can foster creativity and innovation, especially in academic research in the field of design.

The experience in Canada provided a broad view of the different paths that academic research can take. During the pitch session at the Age-Well Conference in Regina, it became clear that the purpose is to respond quickly to social needs, promoting effective integration between academia, industry, and society.

In this context, Canada is leading the way with an approach that favors convergence between these sectors to develop practical solutions that benefit society. This strategy, experienced during the conference, directly influenced the development of my research, inspiring the formation of interdisciplinary partnerships that leverage knowledge and innovation, based on the experience at Age-well.

In this second moment, I present my personal reflections on this exploratory academic journey.

International academic travel presents significant challenges, especially for mature women traveling alone. These journeys, however, are opportunities for empowerment, allowing you to explore autonomy, independence, and self-esteem. Realistic planning and defined goals are the tools for a successful experience, which paves the way for creative, personal and academic growth.

Although I faced challenges such as the language barrier, which impacted my communication, I tried to overcome them with determination. Having this experience was extraordinary, and the highlight of this journey was becoming a member of the Age-Well network.

Reflecting on my academic goals helped to align the opportunities I encountered with my professional aspirations. According to Dewey (1910), intellectual growth arises from reflection on concrete experiences.

I end my autobiographical narrative by hoping that this account can inspire researchers, especially mature women, to recognize and face the challenges of the academic and personal fields. Every research experience offers the chance to contribute to knowledge.

I encourage other women to embark on their own exploratory journeys, adjusting the lessons learned to their unique circumstances.

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