

Motivation Letter

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In the house I grew up in, rice was never cooked for twenty minutes. It was cooked for three whistles. Nobody owned a kitchen timer and nobody needed one: the pressure cooker announced its own progress, loudly enough to reach the balcony, and my mother could count it while doing three other things. I was already a design student before I understood what I had been listening to all my life. It was an interface: audio feedback for a user whose eyes and hands were busy elsewhere, so reliable that no one ever thought of it as designed. Nobody thanked the cooker, and nobody paid for its cleverness. That has stayed with me as a question I have been trying to answer ever since: how do we learn to value what we cannot see?

That invisibility is what made design so hard to explain at home. My parents came from a world in which science and engineering meant security, and when I chose design they worried, reasonably, that it could not hold up a life. I understand their doubt better now. Design is hardest to see exactly when it works. Once I started looking, though, I found it everywhere. My generation grew up speaking in missed calls: one ring meant "I have reached", two meant "come down, I am outside". No company designed that language. People built it around a constraint (a call cost money, an unanswered ring did not), and it worked because everyone using it understood everyone else. It is still the most honest definition of user experience I know.

At the National Institute of Fashion Technology in Bhubaneswar I majored in Fashion Communication, which gave me visual design, UI and UX, and creative strategy. For my minor I chose an IT interdisciplinary module in Java, ecommerce systems and backend development. Most of my classmates took minors close to their major. I wanted to know what happens behind an interface, because I suspected that the designers who would matter most were those who could speak to an engineer without needing a translator.

The project that taught me how to work was a semester with autistic children at a special school. We visited regularly, tested with the children and their teachers, and built an AR application around what we saw rather than what we had assumed. Many of our first ideas did not survive the first visit. That was the lesson: in interaction design, observation comes before invention.

I carried it into a module on Sensory and Virtual Experience Design, where I worked on an AR assembly assistant for IKEA. My starting observation was simple: people rarely give up at step one. They give up at step 23, close to the end, staring at a diagram that has stopped making sense. To find out where, I opened a Reddit thread and asked strangers to tell me exactly when they had abandoned a piece of furniture. The prototype I built in Unity did not follow the user through every step. It appeared only at the points where people broke, combining visual overlays, haptic feedback and an audio confirmation for each completed stage. Looking back, I suspect I borrowed that last idea from a pressure cooker.

The project closest to me had no brief at all. In my housing society lived dogs who had been there for thirteen years, longer than many residents, yet most neighbours did not know them, and some were afraid of them. I made a zine, *They Have a Name Too*, with one page per dog: a name, a temperament, what each one likes and dislikes. I printed it myself and handed it to my neighbours. Then I added an AR layer: scan a dog's illustration and an animated portrait appears while a voice introduces the dog. Someone who is frightened can meet the animal first on a screen, at home, on their own terms. Within days, people who had shooed these dogs away for years were stopping to read about them. It was the first time I saw something I had designed change the behaviour of people I passed every morning.

People often say that a designer needs empathy. Fewer know where the word comes from. In 1873 the German philosopher Robert Vischer used *Einfühlung*, literally "feeling into", to describe how a viewer projects

himself into a form, an object or a space; the English psychologist Edward Titchener translated it as "empathy" in 1909. Before it described how we understand one another, empathy described how we inhabit things. Interaction design asks for both at once: to feel your way into a person and into the object in their hands. It seems right to me to study it in the country where the word was born.

There is a second reason, and it is the one that matters most to the work I want to do. Germany is one of the few countries I know of that treats craft as a profession rather than a memory. A German carpenter or tailor trains through a regulated system, sits an examination before a chamber of crafts, and can earn a *Meisterbrief*, a title the state ranks at the same level as my own bachelor's degree. Some journeymen still set out on the *Walz*, travelling for three years and a day to learn from other masters before they settle. In India we call our artisans heritage, and heritage is something we admire and rarely pay for. I want to study in a country that has spent centuries designing the institutions that make a craftsman's skill legible and valued, because that is precisely the problem I want to solve at home. In a sense, this master's is my own *Walz*.

My first choice is the Master's in User Experience Design at Technische Hochschule Ingolstadt. The programme sits between computer science, design and usability research, and treats multimodal and multisensory interaction, natural user interfaces and AR and VR as core subjects. What draws me most is the Human Computer Interaction Group led by Prof. Andreas Riener, the programme director, whose research includes detecting stress and cognitive overload in users and connecting it to systems that respond. That is the question my IKEA project asked with much cruder tools: how does a system recognise the moment a person is about to give up, and what should it do then? I want to learn to answer it with sensors, controlled user studies and a real usability lab rather than a Reddit thread. The module in Design Strategy and Design Management would teach me what my zine never needed: how a good interaction becomes something people adopt and pay for. And Ingolstadt itself is a city where design is taken seriously enough to be given a museum: its Museum for Concrete Art and Design, which collects the work of the Ulm School and the Bauhaus, is moving into a converted nineteenth century foundry. I would like to study interfaces in a place that keeps reminding me where modern design came from.

I am also applying to Design for Digital Futures at Technische Hochschule Nürnberg Georg Simon Ohm, where I have been in contact with Prof. Moritz Schwind. The programme joins illustration, typography, film, interaction and object design with computational and generative design, AI and physical interaction, and its Design Research department would give my Dilli Haat observations the method they currently lack. Its thesis must begin from a real research question joining technology and design, and mine is already waiting. Nuremberg is also Dürer's city. He was a goldsmith's son who turned printmaking into a way of reaching buyers far beyond his workshop, and he is often remembered for one of the earliest disputes over a copied design. Five centuries later, Prada and the Kolhapuri raised the same question. A few streets from the faculty, the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, the largest museum of cultural history in the German speaking world, keeps whole collections devoted to the history of crafts and to textiles. I cannot think of a better city in which to study how a maker's work travels, and how it is protected when it does.

My third application is to Interactive Media Systems at Technische Hochschule Augsburg. The programme is built around a single master project, which takes half of the first two semesters and most of the third, and the faculty itself calls the result a "master piece". In German craft, the *Meisterstück* is the work that earns a maker the right to call themselves a master; I find it moving that a design programme still measures its students the same way. Augsburg was for centuries a textile city, and its State Textile and Industry Museum keeps more than a million fabric samples from the 1780s onwards. Visitors there can dress life size figures in historical patterns through a touchscreen and projection, which is exactly the kind of work I want to do: an old physical craft made newly visible through a digital layer.

The question I want to carry into any of these programmes began with a pair of sandals. In June 2025 Prada showed sandals at its Milan menswear show that were unmistakably Kolhapuri chappals, without naming their origin. India was furious, and so was I. Six months later Prada signed an agreement with the Maharashtra and Karnataka leather development corporations to produce around two thousand pairs with Indian artisans, at roughly 800 euros a pair. Then I thought about how most of us actually buy a Kolhapuri: at a stall, for a few hundred rupees, after bargaining. We defend our crafts loudly online and haggle them down quietly at the counter.

I do not think this is hypocrisy. I think it is a design failure. At the moment of purchase, nothing in the interaction tells the buyer what they are holding. A price tag is an interface, and a poor one: it shows rupees and never hours. When I helped Pipli appliqué artisans in Odisha set up online listings during my studies, the format had room for a photograph and a price, but not for the days of stitching behind each piece. Campaigns, credit and geographical indication tags all matter, but they act far from the counter, and the counter is where value is decided.

The work I want to do begins there, at the moment of bargaining, which is the craft buyer's step 23. Imagine a tag that shows hours instead of rupees, or a scan that lets the maker introduce the piece in their own voice, the way my neighbours met the dogs on a page before they met them in person. The aim is not to shame anyone out of negotiating. It is to make sure that when someone decides what a thing is worth, they can see what it cost to make. I plan to begin before I leave, with weekends at Dilli Haat in Delhi, where artisans from across India sell their own work: watching where conversations about price turn, and timing, with the makers' permission, how long a few pieces really take. In Germany I want to develop this into a tested system, ideally as my thesis, drawing on multimodal interaction, design research and design strategy. Afterwards I intend to return to India and build these layers with craft clusters and the institutions that support them, so that the people who make our heritage are valued in the place where it is sold.

I currently work as a graphic designer at a marketing agency, producing campaign creatives for eight D2C brands. The work has taught me speed, discipline and the language of clients, and it has shown me clearly that static design is a language I already speak. The DAAD scholarship would let me give the coming years entirely to the one I do not yet speak well. I began with a question about what we cannot see, and I think I now know part of the answer. We value what we cannot see when someone designs the moment in which it becomes visible: the whistle that tells you the rice is done, the page that tells you a dog's name, the tag that tells you a pair of sandals took a day of someone's life. Learning to design those moments is why I want to study in Germany, and making them where they are most missing is why I will come back.