Statement of purpose

aneesa chishti | aneesa.chishti@gmail.com

Sunita makes a meager living running a tea stall outside my office in Mumbai. She supports a family of 8 on under 120 US dollars a month. To potentially triple her income as a cook, she has been teaching herself popular cuisines from Youtube videos. She cannot read, and for most of her life, her only exposure to technology was a tube television shared by an entire village. Yet, Youtube's interface is intelligible to her. This exemplifies the advantage of design that does not presume digital familiarity. It also reminds me of my first interaction with a computer. I was 8, living in Kashmir when I first used Crayola Art. The application replicated my physical world using familiar symbols and sounds; the undo tool was a bandaid, and a voiceover said 'undo the boo-boo', much like my mother saying 'let's fix that boo-boo'! I took to it immediately. Years later, Don Norman's work on the power of leveraging existing mental models helped me understand Crayola Art's intuitive appeal.

While I was at design school, I felt an affinity for UX design that I could not articulate and found little opportunity to develop. I had a breakthrough moment at my first job with an apparel manufacturer. The installation of computerized machinery to increase efficiencies ended up leading to an increase in injuries on the production floor. In one instance, a worker's hand was nearly dismembered because the operator could not find the stop button. The obvious big red button one would expect, had been replaced by a traffic light icon with a tiny red dot. Deeply shaken by this, I read about control panel design, and found, among other things, Jakob Nielson's work on usability heuristics. While this work was new to me, the concerns resonated with my own attempts to think about the ways in which humans and objects interact. I was inspired to pursue a more expansive design practice.

I transitioned to UX design at Kaaryah, a fashion-tech startup. In my first six months, I interviewed women from different socioeconomic backgrounds to understand what made their workday unpleasant. Their concerns ranged from ill-designed clothing to casual sexism. This research transformed Karyaah's clothing line, and helped me tailor the onsite user experience. However, since Kaaryah was operating on a small scale, my learning plateaued and I was eager for more. I decided to go to business school.

At business school, I benefited immensely from a combination of academic and experiential learning, and came to understand the numerous intersections between the business and tech worlds. Abstract concepts such as regression and Z-scores came to life in industry projects. While working on a positioning project for a chain of cosmetic surgery clinics, I discovered alternative methods of research such as netnography. Elective courses on digital product innovation enabled me to develop my first experimental tech product: a mobile application for lifestyle services. Solving hundreds of case studies drove home the importance of constant innovation. With these newly acquired capabilities, and my design background, I got my first product role at a real estate startup, Housing.com.

Housing was my first exposure to tech product development. My time there transformed my design practice: I learned to think about problems and solutions at a structural, and not just a visual level. Four months in, I led a six member engineering and design team to develop a recommendation engine.

Despite adequate supply, Housing had a high percentage of dead-end searches. To maximize successful searches for renters and buyers, we developed suggestion algorithms to guide users to suitable properties, and expose contextually relevant features. Visually, users encountered actionable cards that guided them through the otherwise frustrating home search. Over three months, dead-end searches dropped by 22%, and properties shortlisted per user tripled.

To build my capacities further, I worked on diverse projects; the most stimulating of which was a customer retention project for BrowserStack, a SaaS company battling high churn. Subsequently, BrowserStack hired me to build their enterprise product, targeted at long term customers with a high revenue potential. In 2017, the enterprise product contributed 9% of the annual revenue and improved retention by sealing multi-year commitments. As the product owner for Pricing and Billing, I implemented plans for three core products, optimized the checkout experience - which increased conversion by 11%, and phased out legacy pricing versions to eliminate engineering overhead and increase agility. Presently, I am revising BrowserStack's information architecture to accommodate upcoming product additions, while balancing user experience and search engine rankings.

My experience as a product manager has taught me to ask two fundamental questions: what problem am I solving, and is it really worth solving? I have come to wonder, can 'worth' mean something more than simply increasing revenues? As I work towards identifying definite goals, I have a broad, but reasonably clear, vision of what I want in the future. Having witnessed the generational impact of opportunity, or the lack of it, in my own family, I want to use technology to promote equity through inclusive products. There is so much more to the internet than e-commerce, even, and perhaps especially, for people in developing countries, with low-priced phones and shaky 2G connections. I want to create a platform that allows these people to take advantage of the greater things that the digital revolution has to offer, such as the democratization of education.

CMU's HCI program is exceptionally well-suited to my aspirations, given its cross-disciplinary nature and the focus on inclusive design. From a student's work on context dependent disability to Professor Ogan's work on improving public school education, CMU's ecosystem will help me think beyond limited frames of reference. Rigorous training in computer science will help me understand the possibilities and constraints of digital technology. The training in psychology will give me an understanding of human cognition and motivations, and transform my diffuse empathy for users into an acute sense of how people think. If accepted, I look forward to learning from the wide range of electives such as 'The Role of Technology in Learning' and 'UI in Developing Worlds', peer interactions and the Capstone project.

4 years of experience in product management and UX design, leading cross-functional teams to successfully conceptualize and launch B2B and B2C products, a lifelong interest in usability design and a commitment to learning make me a suitable candidate for CMU's HCI program. I would be honored to get an opportunity to contribute to the CMU community.