LINGUA
Cultural exchange through language partnerships

Problem
Learning a second language can be the key to appreciating another culture, but the incorporation of culture in traditional language study is superficial and uninspiring.

Culture taught in language classes and textbooks is outdated and irrelevant to daily life.

“You learn about people in Spain taking siestas — it’s kind of antiquated.”
– ESL (English as a second language) instructor

Consuming media from other countries provides some cultural exposure but is difficult to interpret out of context.

“TV shows show me an American life that is not as real as I thought.”
– Spanish student currently learning English

Language exchange websites allow people to find practice partners but do not assist in ensuring they have enough in common to engage deeply on cultural topics.

“I messaged 100 people before I found [a partner I connected with].”
– Current user of language exchange sites

Solution
Lingua is a language exchange website whose interest-based partner matching and media-rich communication foster authentic cultural understanding.

Design process

Competitive analysis
Our review of existing language exchange sites revealed a lack of interest-based matching of partners and an absence of support for media-sharing.

Stakeholder interviews
We interviewed users of existing language exchange sites, students and teachers in traditional foreign language classes, travelers with experience being immersed in foreign cultures and languages, and people in mixed-culture and mixed-language families.

Personas
Based on clusters of user needs and behaviors identified in our research we created three primary user personas: the curious student, the ambitious professional, and the mature explorer.

Affinity diagram
Organizing our interview findings revealed four themes:
1. An emotional connection with a supportive language partner is motivating and reduces learning-related stress.
2. Viewing media from another country can contribute to an understanding of its culture, but conversation with a native of that culture is necessary to contextualize it.
3. Textbooks are not helpful for learning conversational speech and current culture.
4. Being from equivalent cultures in different countries provides common ground.

Lo-fi prototype
Guided by findings from our affinity diagram, we designed partner-matching and multimedia communication features, then prototyped their interfaces on paper.

Hi-fi prototype
We refined and simplified our interface design into a web-based, testable prototype.

Usability tests
Talk-aloud usability tests of the hi-fi prototype confirmed the desirability and usability of our feature set and suggested ways to encourage and optimize long-term use of the system.