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Experiential Approach to Social Platform Design: A Case of Social Travel Application

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Experiential Approach to Social Platform Design: A Case of Social Travel Application

TREO Talk Paper

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Abstract

Digital platforms focusing on tourism have become increasingly popular as companies implement them to reach out to a broader audience (McKenna et al., 2018). However, there are limited practical design guidelines that help these platforms to create values beyond marketing and outreach. Hence, this study is an attempt to explore the current state of social platform design in the context of tourism and offer a new framework to design and evaluate the next generation of social travel applications.

We used a case study including a series of end-user interviews to understand how different design features of social travel platforms shape users' experiences and how they ultimately contribute to the platform's survivability, scalability, and profitability. Our case study included the examination of market response to a mobile application recently launched to encourage and facilitate travel by connecting travelers through shared experiences and interests without the superficiality of social media. As part of this study, we developed a series of questions regarding the design, functionalities, utility, and overall user experience of this application. The data were collected through 90 email interviews of recently joined members with 10 open-ended questions. A total of 900 anonymous responses were recorded and openly coded. Then, we categorized initial codes into four categories, *value capture*, *value communication*, *value creation*, and *value delivery*. Each category consisted of a set of sub-categories that were associated with a set of platform design features and design outcomes (user experiences).

The value creation category rendered the design features related to the application's functions such as identifying the right events, finding a travel companion, and connecting to local tour guides. The design outcomes were mainly associated with the utility of such design for potential users. For example, the findings revealed that social connections offered by the application would fail to attract a large user base if they were not tied to explicit *behavioral experiences* such as travel co-planning, co-organization, and co- (e.g., following a user without being able to invite her to an event). The next category, value communication, mainly included the design features related to the navigation of the socialization opportunities offered by the application. The related design features mainly evoke users' *emotional experiences*—the main reason behind user retention. A successful example of value communication was the gamification of discovering different travel destinations. Further, the value delivery category reflected the mechanisms that facilitate *social experiences*, from creating and participating in events to obtaining social recognition by rewards, discounts, or badges. These design features were the key to differentiating the application in the market. Lastly, the value capture category rendered how the platform should generate revenues through social mechanisms. The design features were related to the business model and associated mostly with *cognitive experiences* (e.g., the value of money, Offer relevance). The final set of features and user experiences was translated into a list of design recommendations. While we are not able to generalize these findings to other types of digital platforms, we believe the list of design features and corresponding affordances can help with more systematic investigations of similar platforms and ultimately successful design solutions.

Reference

McKenna, Brad; Cai, Wenjie; and Tuunanen, Tuure (2018) "Technology Enabled Information Services Use in Tourism: An Ethnographic Study of Chinese Backpackers," *Pacific Asia Journal of the Association for Information Systems* (10:4), pp 37-64.