

Exploring Human Values and Trust in User Generated Content Among Independent Travellers

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Abstract

The digitalisation of daily life has given us novelty forms for information consumption. For independent travellers, it has provided new opportunities for communication and decision making. Users look for products that meet expectations. These expectations are making designers jobs evolve and face new challenges. This study explores the values and trust travellers put into user-generated content. The intention is to help designers to understand and address those new challenges.

Keywords

Interaction design, user-generated content, human values, value-centred design, trust, HCI.

1 Introduction

Tourism Research Australia reported that about 6.9 millions of tourist visited Australia in 2015. The economic spillover was worth 36.6 billion dollars. Eighteen per cent more than the previous year. The group of travel labelled as backpackers represent more than eight per cent of the total visitors. More than thirteen per cent of the total Australian tourism income. [1].

The backpacker's community and the independent travellers are the foundation of this research. Not only their economic contribution is significant, their travel behaviour is of interest. They are responsible for own travel arrangements and have flexibility in their itinerary.

This research looks into the way backpackers and independent travellers use online information and how influences them to make or change travelling decisions. The norm, notably among backpackers, is to share travelling experiences with others of their own. They perceive themselves as a better form of tourism and tend to be very social individuals. They also spend a fair amount of time online maintaining and forming their social connections [2].

2 Literature Review

Backpacker and Independent Travel Culture

Backpackers are often portrayed as a group of tourists on a prolonged and multiple-destination journey with flexible itineraries. Still, this categorisation cannot be used objectively to describe members of this community because not all individuals fit the description. Instead, Sørensen argues that backpacking is more understandable if viewed as a travel ideology rather than a definition. His findings explain that the only shared feature among backpackers is the flexibility in their itinerary. Considering that some backpackers pre-organise activities for their travels, it could lead to debate their travel autonomy and to categorise them as regular tourists instead. [2].

Among independent travellers, information tends to have a heavy influence on decision making while travelling. Most backpackers have a desired or intended set of activities to do in their journey. They also plan and research activities after they have arrived at their destination. Information gathered and destination flexibility allows them to make and evolve itineraries at their will [3]. Backpacker's most common sources of information are word of mouth, internet and travel guides. Travel guides are seen as a symbol of their culture and values [2, 3].

User Generated Content

The influence of guidebooks in the backpacker and independent travel culture has been noted numerous times [2, 4]. Though the digital era offers backpackers other sources of information. The increasing internet usage provides opportunities to a large group of travellers not only to communicate with likeminded people but also to share interests and to socialise with them [5].

A quantitative study conducted among Australian travellers, shows that consumers tend to trust more the information provided by the State tourism entities through their website than online reviews published by other travellers [6]. Why is it that travellers find the information provided by official entities more trustworthy than other sources? Let us take the popular travelling site TripAdvisor as an example trying to answer this question.

In comparison to other major sites that rely on customer feedback, in TripAdvisor, any user can publish hotel reviews regardless if they were a guest or not. Research suggests that the reviews published in TripAdvisor are generally a reliable source of information [7]. Though user-generated content users do not share the same perception. Travellers have expressed that they can be persuaded by ‘fake’ reviews usually published by business owners or promoters. Owners acting as independent reviewers do it in order to attract more clientele [6].

Human Values and Design

The word *value* can be interpreted in different manners depending on the context. The Oxford dictionary, for example, defines it as “*the material or monetary worth of something*” [8]. However, *value* referred to “*what a person or group of people consider important in life*” [9] suits better as a definition for the purposes of this study.

Human-Computer Interaction, unlike other disciplines that have studied how humans interact with computers, has the ultimate intention “*to improve design*” [10]. It has been said that “*to design is to attempt to put specific values into a product*” [11]. It is expected the users who interact with the product, to also experience those values. If the goal of the designers is to achieve that, then who determines those values and how do designers embody them into their products? Where those values come from? To find answers to these questions, we should have a brief look at the evolution of Human-Computer Interaction over the years.

Decades prior to the nineties, HCI was used to model user’s interaction with desktop computers in order to optimise interfaces. Experts in computation put users in controlled conditions and studied their behaviour [10, 12]. It was in the 90s when HCI went through a major turning point. The growth of interconnected computers opened new doors to researchers. They started questioning how humans could interact with each other aided by computers. As a result, social sciences took a spot in HCI exploring not only the effects of computation but also the social and emotional aspects humans experience with technology [12]. As a consequence, the discussion about HCI started to be more thought-provoking. Arguing that, although “*the knowledge of computer usage is essential to successful design, it is not enough*” [10]. Furthermore, studying user’s behaviour in laboratories had failed to gather the necessary data to “*assess the fit between an interactive system and its intended context of use*” [10].

Value-centred design, in recent years, materialises itself as “*a process that begins with value representations and ends by measuring achievement*” [10]. Values can be referred “*as what people aspire in their lives and which they hope to partially realise by using products or services*” [11]. These values are determined by explicitly addressing them during the design process of products and services [12].

3 Methodology

Interviews have been known as an effective method to collect qualitative data in HCI research [13]. The aim of the study is to explore the human values and the level of trust independent travellers put into the user-generated content they consume, thus qualitative data was necessary. The research consisted of interviews formulated in a semi-structured format to identify users needs, expectations and the experiences users had when consuming online content generated by others alike.

All interviews were conducted in casual locations. Participants were comfortable to talk freely about their travelling experiences, technology usage and information consumption. Some interviews were conducted in open spaces sitting on the grass or while having lunch at a café. Participants had with them an information sheet explaining the purposes of the study and how their participation would contribute. After the agreement, they proceeded to sign a consent form and to answer the questions.

The interview was structured in a form where participants could firstly talk about their previous travel experiences. They also talked about their travel decision-making process and technology usage. Secondly, I asked about their preferred sources of online information. I used visual props with the names of popular websites including Google, Facebook, TripAdvisor, Reddit and Instagram among other social networks, search engines and online communities. Participants selected and arranged the pieces of paper allowing them to talk about how they used the chosen sources of information. During this activity, I also asked them to match keywords against the visual props to visualise what information they looked for when visiting the website. For example, if they used Google for answers and reviews, they would match the keywords “answers” and “reviews” against the Google visual prop. This exercise helped participants to talk more in-depth about how they consume user-generated content. I asked participants to give examples of how they use selected websites before and while travelling. I also asked them how they take into account or dismiss information and the reasons behind it.

Lastly, the final stage of the interview was an exercise where participants reviewed wireframes of 'online recommendations'. These recommendations were published by three different fictitious entities. Someone named Jon, a travel agency and the State Minister of tourism. The recommendations given by Jon asked the participants to avoid visiting a place: *'it's not worth it'*, one said. On the contrary, the recommendations given by the remaining two entities encouraged the participant to visit a place. The wireframes had text notes explaining the context of the recommendation. For example, one explained that the recommendation was given by "Jon", a user the participant did not know at all. Another one said that Jon and the participant had similar interests.

The printed recommendations were arranged differently in all interviews before I handed them. Participants reviewed 9 recommendations in 9 different contexts. They were asked to dismiss those which they would not trust and keep those which they would take in consideration or completely trust. When they were done, I asked the participants what had motivated their decision.

In total, the study involved 8 interviews with participants from Australia, Spain, Brazil, Sweden, Netherlands and Italy. Participants were recruited via Facebook groups. Three of the participants were travelling in Australia at that time while the rest had extensive travelling experience.

4 Findings

All participants agreed to be user-generated content consumers in different stages of their journeys. They acknowledged that it has influenced or contributed to their travelling decisions. Moreover, they have admitted how this information has helped them to accomplish their travelling goals. For instance, maximising their travelling time by organising a more effective itinerary and budget. Goals can be accomplished finding the answers to simple questions like *"which airport should I fly to"* as one participant mentioned. More complex information helps them to organise how much time should they spend in a city or what places of interest to visit.

Whilst some rely on the information found regardless of its origin, others are more selective and judgemental. Participants mentioned they select information based on the person who is behind it rather than the popularity of the platform. For example one participant mentioned Facebook as their preferred source for travelling information because *"it's the people who use Facebook... it's more credible, so there is no extrinsic motivation of trying*

o sell you something, it's just people telling you about their experience".

Human Values

*Awareness

Not to be confused with Dourish and Bly's definition of awareness in CSCW of *"knowing who is around"* [14]. Instead, awareness is defined as what users seek to shape their expectations when visiting a place, like a country, a city or a place of interest. Knowledge and experience were mentioned as the reasons why participants like travelling, and this value seems to be related to this goal. UGC consumers are not only interested in how the local transportation system works and how can they can commute within a city. They are also interested in the local culture, customs and history. The information is gathered to be aware of the place, for instance, locating places of interests and history. Also finding out what is popular among the local population or learning about their customs in advance.

*Confidence

Confidence can be defined as to be mindful about oneself when travelling. Although the information is somehow related to awareness as they look for similar content, it is used for different purposes. This information helps UGC consumers to learn about local issues, understand and avoid possible risks, take precautions and have a better understanding of the place. All in terms of comfort and personal safety. Twitter, for example, was mentioned as one source of information for this purpose, *"if you go to Indonesia you can go on Twitter and find like if there's like a war happening or something"*

*Sense of Belonging

It can be defined as the aim of not being categorised as a tourist or visitor. Participants mentioned their interest and preference in experiencing life as the local people do when travelling. They copy local's leisure activities and avoid tourism presence as much as possible. When consuming UGC, they appreciate to a great extent the local knowledge and trust highly what the local population say and recommend.

Trust

Participants revealed a greater inclination to trust hotel reviews than any other type of online recommendation for travelling purposes. Moreover, participants who recognised to voluntarily have published recommendations or online reviews at least once, it was done about their accommodation experiences. This suggests that the level of trust put into UGC is somehow influenced by the level of participation the user has within a platform. All participants reported finding the user-generated

content a good source of information, though they do not completely trust what they read. Credibility on accommodation reviews was particularly emphasised it helps them to make an informed decision. Nevertheless, other types of reviews do not have the same fate.

Cross Referencing.

Participants reported the adoption of a cross-referencing methodology when looking for travelling information. Particularly due to perceiving it very generalised and not personalised: “*they [users] might have different interests... what pushes their buttons might not be what pushes my buttons*”, said one participant. Additionally, the possibility of encounter obsolete information during their research makes credibility more difficult. On the opposite, there were times when no specific reason was given on why the information could not be completely trusted. Seems like their travelling nature of world explorers is also extended to their information consumption; they have become more interrogative individuals. The recommendation exercise showed how participants considered trustworthy the information published by recommenders that at least had similar interests like them. None of the participants considered unknown recommenders, travel agencies and tourism state as trustworthy sources. Recommenders who were real-life acquaintances were selected as their preferred source of information.

5 Conclusion

Acknowledging the importance of values within the design process is a method to achieve better outcomes. Determining what values travellers put into the information consumption helps designers have a better understanding of the use context of products. The values presented in this paper serve as a starting point to analyse the current state of technologies and information systems offered to travellers. It also helps reflect on future developments. Work needs to be done in evaluating concepts or products that address these values and validate their contribution.

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