

CHITA 08: COLLABORATIVE SERVICE AND MOBILE COMMUNICATION: A SERVICE DESIGN WORKSHOP ON CHINESE SUSTAINABLE LIFESTYLES AND INTER-CULTURE EXPERIENCES¹

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ABSTRACT

Collaborative services (Jegou, Manzini 2008), implicated in the creative communities have been regarded as a new tool to promote the sustainable lifestyles. While the Open Source, P2P, Free Software for collaborative productions in digital world bring out new possible opportunities to an everyday lifestyle guided towards sustainability.

The paper reports a joint workshop, Chita 08 between School of Design, Jiangnan University (JU) and Indaco department, Politecnico di Milano (Polimi) in 2008 on the subject of collaborative service and mobile communication, organized as a parallel course of LSF 07 in Polimi. The research project informed by the paper is to investigate the service design approach to promote the collaborative service particularly in the context of China and how mobile communication enables it.

The discussions and conclusions have been done taking into account the service design approach and the inter-culture experience.

Keywords: Collaborative service; Service design; Sustainable lifestyle; Inter-culture; Mobile communication

Everything changes and the only certain thing that we know about the future is that the current change must change direction, it must find the way to sustainability. In this process, China has the concrete possibility to surprise us, more than it did in recent times, and to leapfrog (Manzini 2006). Facing the pressing problems (in environmental, also social perspectives) and visions of society (harmonious society), it's a good moment to promote the design research and action agenda for sustainability in China. Sustainable everyday life (also called sustainable lifestyle) is one of keys to open the windows of a sustainable and harmonious society.

1 DESIGN FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION IN NETWORK SOCIETY

1.1 Social innovations and collaborative services

Social Innovation, defined as “innovative activities and services that are motivated by the goal of meeting a social need and that are predominantly developed and diffused through organizations whose primary purposes are social.”(The Young Foundation 2006, 11), has been widely discussed in the field of civil society and is becoming a new wave in the human evolution. Our environmental and social problems are increasing all over the world on a much larger scale and faster than the innovations in technologies and businesses that can propose solutions to them. Given that, social innovation could be a strong driver towards a sustainable society.

Collaborative service that emerges from grassroots social innovation is a new typology of service. It is generated by groups of people, to which we will refer as creative communities, or diffused social enterprises that collaborate in the co-creation of commonly recognized values (Manzini 2008).

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1.2 Promising cases in China and their implications

As one of the biggest emerging country, China is becoming an experiment base for social innovation both because of fast changing context and needs called by social problems. A cluster of cases in grassroots social innovation have been collected and investigated as creative communities and collaborative services (CCSL 2007). Here a promising case is introduced as an example: Agri-Fond Association--A self-organized network between community and small traditional Agriculture producers.



Figure 1: AgriFond Association

A community support agriculture action and system, Agrifond Association connects consumers who have the need of high quality food and countryside experience with small agro-producers who keep the traditional species and planting way.

As indicated in the promising cases, the creative communities and their sustainable initiatives can be found in China such as communities that support agriculture, carpooling, purchasing group, co-house, mutual elderly services, mutual neighbourhood, time bank, rediscover of bicycle transportation much like in Europe. Even though these cases with same ideas have different contents from European experiences, they could be seen as the anticipation of the Chinese sustainable lifestyle (Gong 2008). To promote the promising cases and their initiatives could be therefore a real step ahead towards a Chinese sustainable society.

1.3 Social networking and digital services

In the last decade the advances of the Internet provoked radical changes in the social behaviour at global scale. The notions of time and space have been redefined in the virtual environment and that phenomenon enabled the emergence of small and large-scale social networking communities. It is very common nowadays to rely solely on the Internet applications as working and socializing tools. We are witnessing the slow disaggregation of the real life communities and the aggressive spread of the virtual communities. If the older generation still maintains the traditional ways to connect and keep in touch with each other, the digital native generation relies mostly on the virtual environment using it with extreme ease and efficiency.

In this context the mobile communication devices bring in discussion another level at which the users could interact remotely with each other. Considering that the last generation of mobile devices comes with extended access to the Internet, also the social aggregation mechanisms are in continuous change.

2 CHITA08 WORKSHOP

2.1 A teaching and researching project

The CHITA08 workshop is an teaching and research collaboration between the School of Design, Jiangnan University (JU) and the INDACO department at the Politecnico di Milano (Polimi), focusing on how to promote the sustainable everyday life by service design approaches and how it can be empowered by mobile communication.

The workshop was organized to be a service design exercise that has different phases and lasted for five months starting with July of 2008. It had a co-lecturer team with teachers and researchers from JU and

POLIMI and 26 student participants. The POLIMI lecturer team, which included 6 PhD researchers, visited JU 7 person*times for two weeks or three months during the workshop in order to launch and co-organize the activities, 3 lecturer teachers from JU joined the group during this period.

2.2 Parallel courses structure

The Laboratorio di Sintesi Finale in the master programme of service design (second year), took place from October of 2007 to January of 2008 at the Politecnico di Milano in collaboration with Telecom Italia Lab, Provincia di Milano and Nova IISole 24 Ore (the main Italian financial newspaper).

Twenty-two students participated and they were divided in seven groups of three to five people. The course process had four phases: 1) Case study and field research, 2) Idea generation and concept definition, 3) Project development and service simulation, 4) Project communication.

Following the completion of the LSF, the workshop in JU was intended to be a parallel course this time placed in a different cultural context. Taking into account their own social environment, the Chinese students had to generate or improve the service ideas and define and develop the concepts of enabling solutions with mobile communication.

2.3 Proposals for Chinese sustainable lifestyle

Based on the local context, 6 groups of students developed 6 service concepts employing the collaborative services and indicating the Mobile Communication Technologies (MCTs) in system and the ways used. Here two of them are presented as follows.

Concept-1 Yesterday Once More

Service idea: through mobile phones and digital platform, People who have experiences in the same place can keep the memory and share the story among them.



Figure 2. Concept-1, Yesterday Once More

This concept evolved from the large-scale local context of the city rebuilding and extending and population migration, which results in the collapse of social fabric and infrastructure. The idea of “yesterday once more” aims to protect the remaining social capital and common resource in a bottom up way to finally enrich the everyday life and reinforce the social cohesion. Given its ubiquity, accessibility and versatility, in this case the MCTs and mobile phones are fundamental to the idea implementation.

Concept-2 Pride House

Service ideas: by the mobile phones, migrant workers can show and exchange the pride experiences, skills and facing the problems among them or between local communities and them.

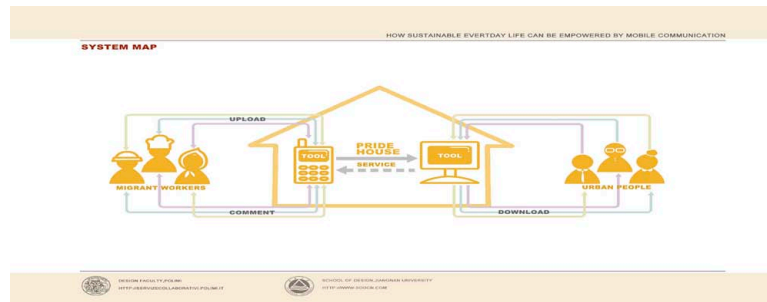


Figure 3. Concept-2, Pride House

Pride House is a service concept for the migrant workers who are special social group in China in this particular period for the historical and economical reasons. This new phenomenon, poses many problems in physical condition, social and cultural environment, including the social isolations, which still need to be addressed. This concept aims to use mobile phones as a communication channel to involve social communities and social resources using the p2p model.

3 DESIGN EXPERIENCES

3.1 Design for Chinese collaborative services

CHITA08 is a pilot design action for social innovation. As service design, the process and results of workshop brought out some experiences on design for collaborative services in China.

Firstly, the service ideas are strongly connected to the local context, as in the case of “Yesterday once more” concept which is based on the context of large scale rebuilding cities in China; the concept of “Pride house” is cohesive with the “Migrant workers”, and both respond to specific social phenomena or problems in China. Given that, the field research at beginning of design process was a fundamental step to understand the context and problems. As indicated by the facts: the problems individuated by the student teams after the field research are quite different from those perceived before.

Secondly given the complexity of the context and issues, defining and clarifying the problem sets up a challenge to designers. The migrant workers concept gives a good example of such a challenge. We learned from the design practice that we have to define the key or specific problem to orient the idea generation. In most cases, the new ideas, concepts or solutions cannot be expected to solve totally but decrease the complexity of the problems and reorient the situations.

Thirdly, the target group involved in the collaborative services are all particular cases. The meaning of “particular” here is beyond of the demographic groups or market segments, meaning those individuals who have the qualities or personalities of engaging in collaborative activities. Most likely the service will not be intended to a large public, however the designer has to properly individuate the interested target group. In a certain way, the idea of collaborative services presents the subjective condition of the particular group. The designers can only anticipate the users’ behaviour. What we investigate are “possible” rather than “necessary” solutions.

Finally, a strong delineation has to be drawn between the motivation of target group and the designer’s or service organizers expectation. Although the indirect impact of the solution can only be anticipated, a thorough explanation has to be provided. As an example, the concept of “Yesterday once more”, although allowing people sharing their stories while exchanging contacts could have a positive impact, it might not be enough to become the main motivation of service users. This is why the designer can only provide an enabling collaborative platform and leave more possible results and impact to be generated by users.

3.2 An inter-cultural experience

As parallel courses, we organized the similar design process in different local contexts and by different designers. In the case of the LSF the students had to work on a predefined context, namely the southern hinterland of the Milan, while the CHITA students had the freedom to pick the Chinese local context of their choices. In both cases the most successful concepts came through when the student was able to picture her / himself as a participant to the service and so was motivated to find a solution to a personal

problem. This acted as a trigger for developing and subsequently enabling possible solutions that will work also for the community, while encouraging the cooperation within the given group.

Both groups of students proposed solutions that used the mobile technology but also took advantage of the human relations developed using the communication devices. The cellular phones were used merely as tools for getting easier in touch with each other, and did not substitute the person-to-person real life interaction. From this point of view the groups successfully met the claim of the brief: How sustainable everyday life could be empowered by mobile communication technologies.

To draw a conclusion to the above presented teaching and learning experiments, the intercultural exchanges took place on different levels: 1) a disciplinary level and 2) ethno-cultural level. While in the LSF, the term “language” was purely related to the different disciplines from which the participants came, in CHITA 08 workshop the “language” referred to both linguistic and disciplinary interpretation. The success of the workshop stayed in the capacity of shifting from one level of understanding to the other. The verbal language barrier was trespassed by means of visual communication so familiar to the design discipline.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Chita 08 workshop is an experimental design activity and together with a parallel structure between Chita08 and LSF 07, we can draw the conclusions that service design can be an approached to promote the collaborative services and social innovations. As service design experience, it needs to be highlighted in terms of local context, problem definition, targeting group and users’ motivations. As inter-culture experience, the different local contexts and disciplines background underlined the differences of the two workshops in process and results.

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