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Note

Managing passengers’ experience through mobile moments

Alessandro Inversini

Henley Business School, University of Reading, Henley on Thames, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Travelers' experience is dramatically affected by the use of digital technologies. On the one side, travel companies use them to support management and marketing practices with the purpose of fostering efficiency and ultimately increase competitiveness. On the other side, travelers heavily rely on their digital devices to organize, personalize and to a certain extent ‘live’ their travelling experience. Within this scenario, mobile devices are seen from both ends as crucial mean for location and context based interactive communication. Mobile devices are here discussed as personalization tool for leisure air passengers' experiential journey in an airport starting from customers' journey analysis, along with information sources used within the whole journey.

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1. Background

Over the years, researchers have tried to define the concept of experience which, anyway, remains loose given the complexity and multifaceted nature of the notion (Same and Larimo, 2012). Schmitt (2011) described the customer experience as multidimensional yet holistic concept, composed by multiple dimensions of how a human's mind works. Millard (2006) defined the experience as an expectation gap between promised services and the result of what the customer receives. Morgan, Lugosi, and Ritchie (2010) agree and describe the customer experience as a continuous process of diminishing the space between promises a company gives to its consumers and the distributed experience. Academics and practitioners agree that the creation of exclusive and memorable experiences creates added value for consumers and generates competitive advantages (Morgan et al., 2010) for the company leading to customers' satisfaction and loyalty (Cetin and Dincer, 2014).

Within this context mobile technologies are transforming travelers' experience, by enabling the co-creation, co-delivery, and co-consumption of personalized activities (Neuhofer et al., 2013). Recent evolutions indicate that mobile devices are becoming travel buddies (Tussyadiah, 2013) and their use is profoundly influencing the different phases of a travelers' journey (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2013). The contextual and mobile interactions (Wang et al., 2016) between consumers and the travel and tourism providers are rapidly germinating into mobile moments (Stickdorn and Schneider, 2009) where a new purposeful connection is created between travelers and the tourism organization. Therefore services providers have, for the first time ever, the possibility to establish meaningful relationships with their customers while the actual experience is taking place (Tussyadiah, 2015) by using mobile touchpoints as bi-directional point of interaction (Inversini et al., 2016) with consumers. Google refers to this rising phenomenon as “micro-moment”: micro-moments occur when people reflexively turn to a device - increasingly a smartphone - to act on a need to learn something, do something, discover something, watch something, or buy something (Ramaswamy, 2015).

Customer experience in the aviation sector is regarded as one of the major issues for the industry (ACI EUROPE, 2014) which, is always investigating customers’ perceptions of service quality (Fodness and Murray, 2007). New technologies are seen as a key tool to support and enhance customer experience (Tnooz, 2013) with personal devices such as mobile phones but also thanks to digital self-services kiosks and mobile check-in. Furthermore, a CISCO study (Fattah et al., 2009) recognized mobile devices as one of the biggest opportunity for enhancing customer experience in the airport environment.

This research argues that mobile technology can give a personal added value (being it hedonic or utilitarian) to passengers only if the customers’ journey (Maechler et al., 2016) and the possible (mobile) touchpoint are identified and triggered to establish meaningful relationships between the company and the passengers.

E-mail address: a.inversini@henley.ac.uk.

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2. Methodology

This short article presents a preliminary research on mobile touchpoints in airport passengers' experience. Moving from the academic concepts of customer experience (e.g. Millard, 2006) and mobile touchpoints (e.g. Inversini et al., 2016) as well as from relevant industry-based reports (e.g. ACI EUROPE, 2014) this study was designed to tackle three primary objectives: (i) to identify experiential activities performed by airport passengers before, during and after their customers' experience at the airport terminal; (ii) to identify information sources used by airport passengers before, during and after their customers' experience at the airport terminal; (iii) to generate an initial understanding of the customers' journey and possible mobile touchpoints to create valuable connection between travelers and the airport managers.

The research adopts a qualitative approach based on 170 semi-structured interviews to air travelers. Interviews were collected in two international locations served by international airports. To be considered eligible for the research an interviewee should have taken at least one flight in the year before the interview (interviews took place March and April 2016) from the international airport of the given location. This exploratory research only considered leisure travelers as relevant for the sample. After a series of demographic and profiling questions, interviewees were asked about their travel experience before coming to the airport, at the airport and after leaving the airport. Particularly they were asked about the five main activities and the five main information sources used in these their last trips.

Results were then analyzed with computer-based content analysis thanks to the web-based service Voyant (voyant-tools.org). Answers were reduced to lemmas in order to (i) examine lemmas frequency within the answers and (ii) assess key concepts proximity (Flament, 1981). Results were then plotted into a customers' journey map. In order to compile a relevant customer journey map, secondary resources have been used such as the hallmark report “Guidelines for Passenger Services at European Airports” (ACI EUROPE, 2014), the CISCO report “Smart Airports: Transforming Passenger Experience To Thrive in the New Economy” (Fattah et al., 2009) and the preliminary results of “PassMe – Fast Airport, Stress Free Journey” project funded by the European Commission (PASSME, 2016).

3. Results

The majority of respondents were male travelers who travel 1–5 times per year. Most of the respondents in our sample travel with a mobile device (54%), and some with laptop (23%) and tablet (21%). Wearable devices, such as smart watches, are still in their infancy with only 3% of the interviewees travelling with them.

Travelers were asked the five main activities and the five main information sources used before coming to the airport, at the airport and after leaving the airport. Fig. 1a, b and c present the proximity of higher frequency terms with regards to the activities performed in the three moments.

The sample described the moments before going to the airport (Fig. 1a) with activities mainly related with checking all the issue related the trip (e.g. passport, luggage) and planning their way to the airport (e.g. private transportation, public transportation, taxi etc.). Stronger lemmas proximity ties link the core concept of ‘check’ to the words ‘luggage’, ‘documents’, ‘flight’, ‘time’ and ‘pack’ highlighting a series of organizational activities carried out by air travelers. Most frequent words in the corpus are: check (n = 212); luggage (n = 51); documents (n = 41); flight (n = 34). Main information sources used in this stage are the airport website (13%, e.g. to reserve a car park), the carrier website (19%, e.g. to check ticket and luggage allowance) and in general transportation and navigation website (13%, e.g. how to get to the airport – transport websites and/or google maps). Activities related to checking the destination are also popular (e.g. weather checking).

While at the airport (Fig. 1b), main activities refer to personal relaxation and passing time (e.g. shopping, eating, reading) and checking the information provided by the airport (e.g. gate). Proximity ties link the core concept of ‘check’ to ‘gate’, ‘eating’ and ‘buy’.

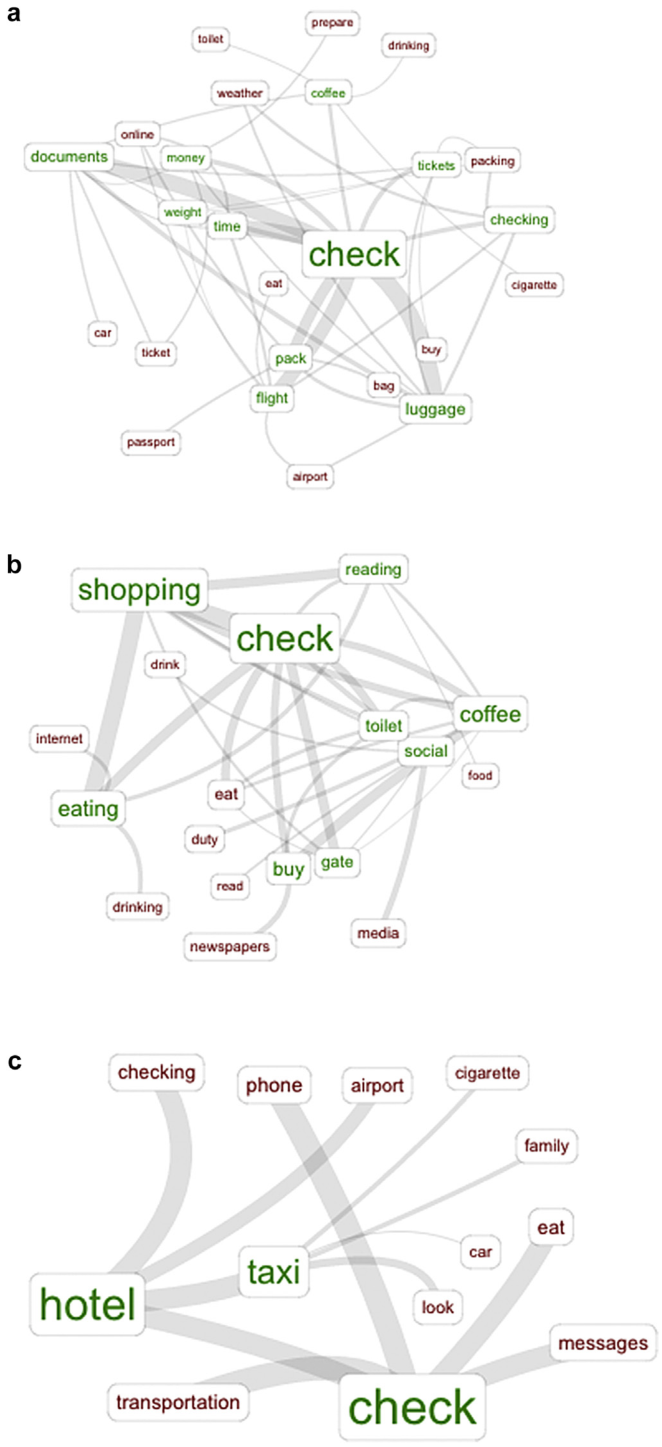

Fig. 1. (a)Proximity of higher frequency terms before airport experience. (b) Proximity of higher frequency terms during airport experience. (c) Proximity of higher frequency terms after airport experience.

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