

Press Release

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PolyU Study Finds Context is Key for Mobile Travellers

With travellers' behaviour becoming ever more dynamic and socially connected through the use of mobile technology, tourism practitioners stand to benefit from a distinct conceptualisation of the travel context, observe Assistant Professor Dan Wang of the School of Hotel and Tourism Management (SHTM) at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and her co-authors in a recently published research paper. The researchers suggest a conceptual framework for understanding the context in which travellers' behaviour takes place, and anticipate that it will be particularly beneficial for developing simple to use mobile systems that are relevant to travellers' needs.

Travellers have become familiar with using information technology (IT) to search for travel-related information and organise their trips, the researchers note. The growth of mobile technology, in particular, has significantly changed the way in which the Internet is used for travel-related purposes. One important feature of mobile technology in this regard is that it can take the user's context into account.

The researchers suggest that context is an important factor in human-computer interaction because a context-aware computer can "sense and respond to aspects of the setting" in which it is being used. The information that computers use to situate travellers may include the time and place of use, and can provide "implicit cues about the objects of interest such as people, places, events, things, information, and media". For instance, a user searching for a specific type of product or arriving at a certain location "gives rise to the need for different communication services" and allows tourism businesses to "engage with their potential customers".

Many mobile apps depend on the user's location, which enables information to be provided about nearby points of interest, restaurants, hotels and so forth. The researchers note that the challenge for contextual computing is on how to improve personalised information and recommendations related to tourism, and other aspects related to "social interaction and mobile commerce".

The researchers argue that early examples of mobile tourist guides suffered from a lack of detailed information, but developments in mobile technology now allow a much wider range of contextual information to be put to use. However, developments in this area are still hindered by the lack of a "well defined and articulated" notion of context, which is necessary for the development of effective mechanisms to assist travellers.

In response to this situation, the researchers set out to define the notion of context in relation to the "mobile technological environment in travel and tourism". They aim to offer a richer and more adequate understanding of context in the mobile tourism setting, and then "develop a foundation to understand the new possibilities to support on-the-go tourists' needs".

They begin by developing a conceptual framework that divides the travel context into two domains: personal and trip-related characteristics, and environmental characteristics at specific

stages of the travel process. Although these two domains have been extensively considered in relation to tourism, the researchers argue that context is becoming “particularly salient” with advancements in mobile technology. Today’s travellers, they write, are able to travel both “on the Internet and with the Internet”. Hence, a better understanding is needed of how the two domains affect the nature of travel.

The first domain refers to the traveller’s “sociodemographics, knowledge, personality, involvement, values, attitudes” together with trip-related characteristics such as the reason for the trip, its duration and the distance to the destination. The researchers explain that these characteristics are often closely connected – the amount of time available, for instance, influences the distance the traveller is prepared to travel. The characteristics of the rest of the travel party also influence the range of possible destinations, potential trip activities and other decisions.

The second domain relates to the travel environment the traveller interacts with and includes factors such as location, weather and temperature. The physical environment includes specific tourism attractions, which are regarded as central to the tourism process, as they are often what motivates people to visit a particular destination.

The researchers’ framework considers travellers’ behaviour at different stages of the travel process. The first stage, for example, usually involves planning when and where to go, who to go with, how to get there and how long to stay. Once they arrive at the destination, however, travellers access information that will help them in getting around, making short-term decisions and making on-site transactions.

Mobile technology thus offers new possibilities for on-the-go travellers, the researchers argue, as it allows planning to be more flexible and many decisions can be left until they arrive at the destination. Mobile technology can also offer more “chances for engagement with others” through social media and other resources. As a consequence, the travel context is becoming “more open, fluid and dynamic”.

Having described the two domains of the travel context, the researchers go on to consider how they affect the nature of travel. Using the stage of travel as an example, they illustrate how context influences four dimensions of behaviour – decision-making flexibility, decision specificity, decision-making time frame and information needs.

The researchers propose that mobile technology creates greater decision-making flexibility during trips. Travellers now postpone decisions about certain “micro” aspects of their travels, such as which restaurants and attractions to visit, until they are en route. As mobile technology allows travellers to “obtain a better understanding of their geographic and cultural surroundings”, their behavioural patterns become more refined and their decisions about these micro aspects become more specific.

Travellers also have different timeframes for making decisions about “different kinds of products”, the researchers observe. Whereas pre-trip planning such as determining which destination to visit can take weeks or months, once travellers have arrived at a destination, decisions need to be “immediate, unreflective and spontaneous”. Smartphones are ideal for making these kinds of instantaneous decisions.

Finally, the researchers argue that mobile technology, particularly location-based services, make places more “immersive and captivating” for travellers. With the development of social, communication and location-based technologies, such as location-based social gaming, tourists have an enhanced sense and experience of place through “emotional, aesthetical informational, playful and social engagement”, which allows them to be more creative and hedonic.

In providing the first comprehensive definition of the travel context, the researchers offer a conceptual foundation for designing innovative mobile systems for travel and tourism. As travellers are constantly “sending signals and generating new information” about their location, information search history and engagement with social networks to information providers, inferences can be drawn about their travel behaviour. Such information can ultimately be used as the basis for designing new and more effective mobile systems for travel and tourism.

Lamsfus, Carlos, Wang, Dan, Alzua-Sorzabal, Aukene and Xiang, Zheng. (2015). Going Mobile: Defining Context for On-the-Go Travelers. *Journal of Travel Research*, 54(6), 691-701.

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