

6th Sense Travel App Trial Report: Maiden Newton

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1.0 Introduction

The 6th Sense Travel App is an outcome of the 6th Sense Transport research project funded by the UK Research Councils and run by a consortium of UK Universities (Bournemouth, Edinburgh, Lancaster, Salford and Southampton). The research project investigates the opportunities for collaboration provided by improved visibility of various transport options using mobile communication media (smartphones).

The purpose of this trial was to test the functionality and usability of a purpose built mobile phone application, the '6stTravel' app, which aims to facilitate travel collaboration between users. The app enables participants to see the collective movements of other people in their social network over time and interact with one another by sharing travel information and posting various requests, such as shopping, general help and lift requests. The app was originally designed for use by a campsite community but was adapted slightly to meet the needs of a village community. The app is currently only designed for the iPhone platform.

2.0 Trial Aim and Objectives

The aim of this trial was to enable collaborative travel between app users. The trial had the following objectives:

1. To provide participants within a means to visualise the community travel patterns
2. To provide a platform in which users could communicate and share travel related information
3. To examine the ways in which participants communicate with each other
4. To explore the potential for collaboration amongst a community of users

3.0 Method and participants

Participants were recruited by Neville Higman, a Parish Councillor. This was achieved by:

- placing posters in various locations (chip shop, lamppost and parish notice board)
- a flyer sent home at Greenford Primary School
- an advertisement placed in The Herald magazine
- word of mouth

Following contact, participants were invited to attend a meeting where they were given further information about the project and a demonstration of the mobile phone app. Two participants were unable to attend the meeting and were provided with the same information in a home visit. Participants were either loaned iPhones (n=7) for the duration of the trial or had the app installed on their own phone (n=3). Two participants were visited during the trial to address some technical issues. The trial took place during July 2013 and lasted 10-18 days, depending on when users received or returned phones. Towards the end of the trial six participants were interviewed and four returned a user feedback questionnaire. One participant withdrew from the trial and two participants were not contactable at the end of the trial.

A subsequent trial has taken place at Tom's Field Campsite, Langton Matravers, Dorset for 5 weeks during July and August 2013. Occasional reference is made to this trial for comparative purposes.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Users

Users were recruited across a range of age profiles (see Table 1). All were car owners. Active users were dominated by parents with families which placed a degree of constraint on their time. One of the older users, Julie, withdrew from the study due to problems engaging with the technology, despite her experience of other social media. However, age engagement issues were not evident in the subsequent campsite trial.

Of significance to subsequent findings, users volunteered for the trial as they supported the concept of travel collaboration and were keen to offer help to others. All users were in employment and most had young children; this meant their time was dictated by the routines associated with work and children.

4.1.2 User social ties

Eight of the users met one another at the start of the trial. Some users found they had weak social ties with others in the group. In addition, three users were friends, with strong social ties and this group subsequently appeared to disengage with the trial.

Within the campsite trial it was found that members of large groups with strong social ties were inhibited from engagement with the project. In the tourism setting it was established

that those with a large network of strong social ties at the campsite were already engaged in collaborative travel to some degree. These groups had less need for the app.

Table 1: Participant profile

	Pseudonym	Age	Recruitment	Interview	Questionnaire	Own iPhone	Days with app
1	Nigel	40s	N/A				18
2	Julie*	60s	Herald	Y	Y		11
3	Hannah	30s	Flyer from school	Y			11
4	Tracey	30s	Flyer from school	Y	Y		16
5	Nicola**	20s	Poster			Y	18
6	Martin	60s	Poster		Y	Y	10
7	Annette	40s	WOM	Y	Y		16
8	Mary	40s	Poster	Y			18
9	Freya	20s	Poster	Y			18
10	Denise**	30s	Poster			Y	18

*withdrew; **lost contact

4.2 Collaboration

App users in the Maiden Newton trial were less active in comparison to users in the summer campsite trial. The evidence suggests tourists have more time to engage. Not all Maiden Newton users engaged with the app and the app was not used to its full potential. There was no evidence that the app facilitated a collaborative exchange in this trial.

4.2.1 Lift share

While trial participants offered lifts, there were no requests for lifts. Users explained that in their everyday day life they are restrained by time. They have to be somewhere (e.g. work, school to pick up kids, gym classes etc.) at certain times and these times are not flexible. For example:

“Well, I’ve got a car so I didn’t need a lift, I didn’t want a lift, I work 9 to 5 but I often go after work and do different things so I couldn’t always be available” (Julie)

Users were enthusiastic about the concept of the app and the ability to car share. They saw any attempt to enable this as a positive thing. However, they felt that they could not incorporate collaboration in to their everyday life.

4.2.2 Collaborative shopping

The app was not used for collaborative shopping. All users had their own transport so did not have to rely on others. For example:

“If we’d had somebody in the village without transport who needed things got, that would have worked better” (Julie)

4.2.3 Travel information sharing

Users did not share travel information during the Maiden Newton trial. Within the campsite trial more information was shared such as car park capacity, congestion and bus information. In addition tourists shared information about visitor attractions that might inform travel decisions.

4.3 Engagement with the app

4.3.1 Barriers to engagement

Users gave several reasons why they were unable to use the app to its full potential. Reasons included:

- Lack of time
- Ability to make commitments
- Loss of flexibility
- Technological barriers

While these are genuine explanations they may also mask other explanations for lack of use such as forgetting, not feeling engaged or bothered, or disliking the app. These less socially desirable explanations are likely to remain hidden as are other deep rooted issues.

Users also commented on app design features with the most frequent problem relating to pop-up messages not leading directly to the message as in other apps like Facebook. One user said her use of the app was reduced as she became more and more frustrated at having to search for new messages. Most users commented on aspects of the app that caused frustration. Subsequent trials have rectified these issues and the app user experience is improved.

4.3.2 Engagement opportunities

Experience elsewhere suggests it would be ideal to have a number of ‘lead users’ who encourage others to post messages. This was reinforced by a user who stated:

“Someone just needs to take it on board and try and organise people” (Julie)

Other users mentioned posting messages and not receiving a reply. A lack of active users impacts on the app experience and more active users may encourage others to become more active.

“I suppose the more people put on it the more useful it would be.” (Tracey)

Lead users require special characteristics and are typically active users of the technology, motivated by the activity, willing to take risks and prepared to take the lead. In the Maiden Newton context potential lead users were constrained by the demands of their day to day lives.

4.4 Reciprocity

4.4.1 Helping

Users actively using the app offered help in the form of lifts. However, such offers were often limited by the user’s personal constraints. For example, Annette illustrates the relatively restricted nature of lifts on offer:

“I did offer a lift, but I didn’t have any takers. I was clear though with my offer that I left at 8.20 from the school only on a Thursday and Friday.” (Annette)

It is unclear what ‘critical mass’ of users would be required to enable paths to cross such that these lift offers would receive takers. This would require a number of lift receivers as well as lift givers.

4.4.2 Asking for help

Most users felt uncomfortable asking for help e.g. for a lift. This issue was also encountered during the campsite trial. However, as Julie acknowledges below, she would feel more comfortable doing so if she had already provided assistance to someone else.

“If I’ve taken half a dozen people in I’d be quite happy to say – like yesterday – right, I need a lift in.” (Julie)

Users were also in a position to not require help as all had independent means of transport as car owners.

4.5 Trust/security

The main security problem raised by participants was the character of the person they might collaborate with.

“It’s tricky because.....yes, you can’t CRB check everybody who uses the app.” (Mary).

However, most felt that they would be able to overcome this with a quick face-to-face meeting or more contact with the person through the app. They felt that this would enable them to judge if someone was trustworthy or not.

“I think in a village you’ve got more....you tend to be more trusting about people that you have in your car, I wouldn’t want toI wouldn’t want a strange man to get in my car. I mean Neville, I would happily have him in the car because I’ve met him and I’ve spoken to him and I judge that he’s alright” (Julie)

Many were open to collaborate with people they did not know but most wanted some kind of loose tie with them (e.g. friend of friend), some way of judging if a person was trustworthy or not. Most participants acknowledged that there would be a chance they would encounter someone who may not be trustworthy, however they also acknowledged that this was a risk they took when partaking in this type of communication/collaboration.

Security issues such as identity theft were not a major concern. Participants felt in control of the amount of information that they shared about themselves.

“I think if you’re sensible with who you sharedI think you have to be careful of you share your information with.” (Tracey)

4.6 Motivation

Many were motivated to take part in the trial by the idea of creating a car share scheme as they thought this would be beneficial to the community. Other motivations included:

- creating a sense of community
- financial benefits of sharing the cost of a journey
- altruism as it was something they were able to do

It is important to acknowledge that all participants volunteered to take part and are likely to be of a disposition to offer assistance, hence the number of lift offers and lack of requests.

4.7 Time/Planning

All users explained that the app did not impact on their travel time organisation or planning. Relying on their own cars is engrained in their everyday routine. For example:

“I think I’m too used to having independent travel and being able to go where I want, when I want. And like I say, it doesn’t work quite so well for me because I have to be more flexible with work, being able to stay behind and things like that.” (Freya)

“I’m just so used to having my own car now that I’ve forgotten really about asking for lifts.” (Hannah)

One user described being in their own “bubble” in terms of routine. Users felt that any involvement in collaborative activities would impact on their rigid routines.

4.8 Critical mass

The scale of the trial was small as were the subsequent campsite trials. It is not known whether a larger group of participants or longer trial would have generated more activity. The 'critical mass' of users that might enable travel collaboration in a given context remains unknown. This is likely to vary according to the type of users, the strength of their social ties and the geographical context.

5.0 Concluding comments and recommendations

This trial did not see any evidence of travel collaborative activities facilitated by the 6th Sense Travel App. Key issues to note are:

- The trial context was limited both in terms of timescale and number of participants.
- Compared to the campsite users, the Maiden Newton participants were not particularly active, not just in terms of travel requests or offers but also information sharing. This probably reflects busy people going about their lives as oppose to tourists with time on their hands. Whether a larger group of users would have reached a critical mass to enable collaboration is hard to say.
- No participants were in real need of a lift or shopping as they were all independent car users.
- Users taking part in the trial all volunteered to do so; they are prone to offering help which is reflected in the results.

The challenges experienced in this trial are summarised by Mary who says: *"I think the problem is that the 10 people that volunteered are the sort of people that do volunteer for these things and we've got transport and we've got you know....busy lives and what have you. We don't really need people to do us favours because we've got the structure."*

Any further development of the app would need to engage a more varied group which includes people who do not have access to a car and would benefit from improved accessibility. The recruitment of a number of lead users prepared to drive app use would also facilitate a more robust trial.