Hybrid Touchpoints for Relational Service in Social Innovation: A Case Study of "Eat Me!"

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Abstract

This paper: (1) proposes an analytical framework using hybrid touchpoints (interweaving of online and offline service touchpoints) to facilitate relational service in social innovation, and (2) through a case study of social innovation "Eat Me!", examines the link between theory and practice by analysing how hybrid touchpoints are applied in service design for social innovation. Initiated by interdisciplinary collaborations and empowered by enterprising initiatives, Eat Me! is a case of social innovation that demonstrates positive impacts of connecting academic researchers, design industry professionals, users, enterprise experts and multidisciplinary team. It is an award-winning holistic service system that helps people grow fruits, share a hobby, exchange experiences, harvest homegrown vegetables and share the fruits of their labour. Features of Eat Me! include: Participatory digital maps that show locations of sharable fruits, and service platforms that cross the boundary between online interactions and real-life events to connect local communities.

Keywords: Hybrid touchpoint, service design, social innovation, relational service, social enterprise

1   Introduction

Recent decades have seen increasing design and research efforts being geared towards sustainability. Among the three pillars of sustainability [1], social sustainability (as a contrast to environmental sustainability and economic sustainability) is in need of further development [2-3]. For instance, community cohesion is declining and sustainable social interactions in local communities need to be facilitated. Social innovations are explored as solutions to tackle these challenges. Social innovations often involve the design of holistic service systems, including service procedures, service tangibles, digital interfaces, and online and offline service interactions.

To contribute to the development of both social innovation and service design, this paper aims to achieve two objectives: (1) propose an analytical framework using hybrid touchpoints (interweaving of online and offline touchpoints) to facilitate relational service in social innovation, and (2) examine the link between theory and practice by analysing how hybrid touchpoints are applied in the service design of a social innovation through a detailed case study of the Eat Me! project. This paper starts by defining social innovation and relational

service. Then it proceeds to propose the framework of hybrid touchpoints for relational service. The case study of Eat Me! is offered and the paper rounds up by demonstrating how the proposed framework is applied to analyse a design case in practice.

2 Social innovation

Social innovations can vary hugely across different contexts, but they share common principles – responding to societal challenges, working through networks, designing solutions with people, and engaging communities in systems of activities and service. They all aim at meeting social goals [4-5]. Mulgan et al. defined them as "innovative activities and services that are motivated by the goal of meeting a social need and that are predominantly developed and diffused through organisations whose primary purposes are social." [4] Manzini emphasized that social innovations harness collaborative creativity in everyday life, manifest in creative communities, to generate and diffuse new and more sustainable ways of living in urban environments [6].

According to BEPA, social innovations are innovations that are social in both their ends and their means. Specifically, social innovations are defined as "new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs (more effectively than alternatives) and create new social relationships or collaborations" [5] The "social" aspect is a value that is less concerned with profit and more with issues such as quality of life, solidarity and well-being.

A recent example of social innovation is GoodGym. Good Gym combines exercise with volunteering in local communities [7]. Through an online network, runners schedule regular runs to visit elderly people living alone, carry out community service (such as clearing a river of rubbish) or help disabled residents clean their gardens etc. Sport trainers also participate to offer fitness training and extra help in the volunteering service. This social innovation enables people to keep motivated to exercise regularly, carry out good deeds in the local community, and build social relationships.

3 Relational service

Social innovations require interactions within a community and often involve service. At the same time, service design is proliferating and service designers are playing an increasingly important role in tackling societal problems [8-9]. It is beneficial for designers, researchers and social innovators to consider the relational dimension of service design. For example, the concept of "relational messages in design" suggests that both product design and service design embody psychological and social impacts [10-13]. Positive or negative relational messages can be conveyed to influence the relationships between users, thus altering users' emotional experiences. The concept was originally derived from communication theory of interpersonal communication [14-15], developed through empirical research in both hospitality service and product design contexts using research methods of photo elicitation, in-depth interviews and critical incidents techniques [10-13], and then applied to the analysis of design. The concept advocates that designers should take relational factors into account when designing products or service. The ultimate aims are to maximise harmony and minimise conflicts. In service context, positive relational messages such as care, importance, and trust can be communicated to facilitate pleasant interactions between users (including service providers and receivers) [10-13].

Another useful concept to understand is "relational service" suggested by Cipolla and Manzini [16-18]. According to them, the design of relational service is deeply rooted in relational qualities. Cipolla and Manzini emphasized that relational service is "designed in

such a way as to start up, support, and continuously sustain interpersonal encounters between the participants." [17] They also mentioned that, "Participants, in a relational perspective are co-producers, bringing knowledge and will, but above all else, they bring relational capabilities." Relational service embodies a circular interactional model, in which benefits are reciprocally produced and shared by the participants [17]. Cipolla and Manzini cited "Walking Bus" as an example of relational service (as opposed to the standard service of school bus). The service encourages children to walk to school on foot, under the supervision of adults (often pensioner volunteers) in safe routes. The efficacy of the service is strongly based on relational qualities between teachers, parents, children and volunteers [17].

Increasingly, relational service relies not only on face-to-face interactions, but also online interactions. The proliferation of digital media and peer-to-peer technology (such as social media, websites, apps, crowdsourcing, and online communities etc.) has enabled relational service to be delivered across online and offline platforms in inter-connected ways. GoodGym, which is mentioned above, is an example of leveraging online network to facilitate real-life relational service and interactions [7].

4 Framework of hybrid touchpoints for relational service

In view of the growing demand for social innovations, increasing importance of relational service, and orchestration of both online and offline interactions, this paper suggests that instead of looking at online and offline service components as separate entities, it is more helpful to examine a pair of online and offline service components as "hybrid touchpoint" when designing or analysing relational service for social innovation. The term "hybrid touchpoint" is proposed here to refer to the interweaving of online and offline service touchpoints. The characteristics of a hybrid touchpoint are:
1. A pair of online and offline touchpoints that connect service users
2. The online component often involves the use of peer-to-peer digital media
3. Interactions usually start online and trigger offline real-life interactions
4. Online and offline components support each other in achieving relational goals

The framework of hybrid touchpoints for relational service is proposed here for systematic analysis of relational theme, relational service goals, hybrid touchpoints and enabled interactions. Figure 1 below shows the proposed framework graphically. The paragraphs following the figure provide explanations of each element and their inter-connections.
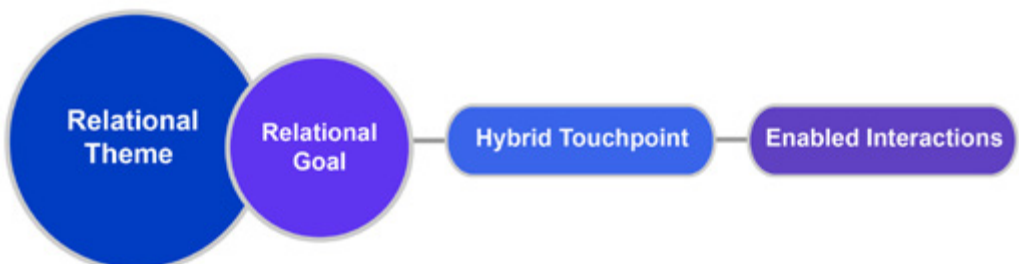

Figure 1 Framework of hybrid touchpoints for relational service (Source: Original work by Kathy Pui Ying Lo)

Relational theme: The design of relational service starts with clarifying a relational theme - an overarching, conceptual theme that highlights the relational nature of the service. This

relational theme acts as a guiding point to influence design decisions in other parts of the framework.

Relational goal: Relational goals define the specific service goals that need to be achieved. They state the actual service objectives based on the relational theme, providing clear goals that will be actualised through service touchpoints.

Hybrid touchpoint: A hybrid touchpoint is a combination of online and offline service touchpoints that achieves the relational goal. The online and offline components should be designed in a pair to strengthen the connection between online and real-life interactions.

Enabled interactions: This part of the framework lists the interactions enabled by the hybrid touchpoint so that resulting social interactions can be clearly seen. These interactions embody high relational quality in the users' provision and consumption of service.

The significance of this framework is that it adds a relational dimension to studying and designing service touchpoints. For researchers, the framework is useful as a tool of analysis. It can be applied to analyse design cases to show the relationships between relational theme, relational goals, hybrid touchpoints and the enabled interactions. For designers and social innovators, this framework can be used in the design process as a guidance for clarifying elements of relational service that involve a combination of online and offline touchpoints. The framework will be applied to analyse hybrid touchpoints in the social innovation called "Eat Me!" in Section 6 of this paper. Details of this case are provided in the next section.

5   Case study: Eat Me!
Eat Me! is a social innovation that fosters social sustainability by encouraging local communities to grow and share vegetables and fruits. The project has won Think BIG Award. It also attracted other funding for carrying the project forward. Through collaborations between academia, industry and users, Eat Me! has developed from a concept in intensive workshops to a social enterprise. To write this case study, the author has conducted research on the details of the Eat Me! project through the following methods:
  (1) Participant observation – The author observed the design process of Eat Me! in the service design workshops.
  (2) In-depth interview – Interviews were conducted with team members to understand their design motivation, procedures, methods, project development and future plans.
  (3) Secondary research – Information related to the development of Eat Me! was gathered from multiple sources, including original materials provided by the team and electronic publications.
The following subsection gives a detailed account of the project's development and outcomes.

5.1   Project origins
The project originates from Lufbra Service Design Jam in March 2013. It was a regional event of the yearly Global Service Design Jam in which three-day intensive service design workshops take place across the world. People who are interested in service design gather, form multi-disciplinary teams, conduct research, apply service design methods, and design new service [19]. The common theme for 2013 was "GROW". The Eat Me! project team chose to design a new service around growing vegetables and fruits. The original project team had seven members who came from diverse backgrounds. They included: Professional service designer (the team's mentor), visual communication undergraduate student, product designer (from vacuum manufacturing industry), researcher from another university, PhD in design

candidate, retired local resident, and Master in sustainable design student. Diversity within the team offered a good mix of skills, experience and viewpoints. The team had also taken advice from a range of other participants, including service design consultants, lecturers, researchers, other design professionals, and enterprise experts. The current team has three active members who are steering the social enterprise forward.

5.2   Service design procedures and methods
The project team made use of various methods to clarify the design problem, generate a new service concept, produce prototypes, demonstrate the user experience, present the pitch [20], test with users, and refine the design.

5.2.1   Clarify the design problems: Field observations and user-centered interviews
The team started by researching about gardening activities in the neighbourhood. They carried out field observations by visiting local allotments and gardens in people's homes. They also conducted user-centered interviews with local residents to understand their experiences of growing vegetables and fruits. They asked questions to find out why people grow vegetables (motivations), how and what they grow (habits), as well as the issues they have (problems).

From their research, the team found that residents growing vegetables and fruits often do not know other people using the same allotment area. Some less experienced growers don't have anyone to ask for advice, while experienced growers often end up with too many grown fruits and vegetables that go to waste. Research findings from field observations and user-centered interviews enabled the team to clarify the design problems and inspired them to design a service system as a solution.

The team aspired to create a service that can encourage people to grow their own vegetables and help local people to connect. "We aim to create communities to connect people currently growing and people who are not growing yet. We want to bring them together for sharing a hobby and the fruits and vegetables," one of the team members, Sally Wood, said. "We also want to help people save money by growing their own vegetables instead of going to the supermarket."

Figure 2 Photo taken in resident interviews (Source: Eat Me! project team. Reprinted with permission.)

5.2.2   Generate a new service concept: Personas and customer journeys
During the design process, the team used two classic tools in service design: Persona and customer journey. Personas are clearly defined archetypes of target users. The team focused on two personas:
   (1) **Mario the explorer**, a young international student who enjoys eating fruits and vegetables. He is eager to try growing his own but lacks the skills and patience.
   (2) **Sarah the grower**, a 65-year-old lady who has been growing vegetables all her life. She wants to share her homegrown vegetables and gardening knowledge with others.
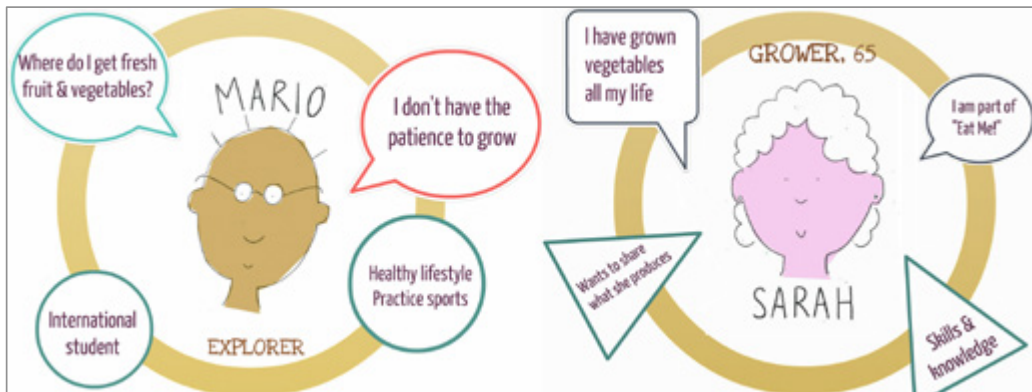
Figure 3 Two personas: Mario the explorer and Sarah the grower (Source: Eat Me! project team. Reprinted with permission.)

5.2.3 *Present the service experiences: Service storyboards and rapid prototyping*
Service storyboards and rapid prototyping were used to generate visual materials and artefacts for pitching the new service concept. The project team used a storytelling approach to present the service experiences of Mario and Sarah (personas). Using pictures and concise captions, the project team showed service storyboards to explain the key points of the customer journeys. Combining team members' visualisation skills and prototyping skills, they produced rough prototypes of tangible service elements (such as a "grow pack"), as well as digital prototypes of online interfaces. In the final pitch, prototypes were smoothly woven into the showcase of service storyboards, which made the pitch strong and convincing. Selected service storyboards can be seen in Figure 4 in section 5.3.1.

5.3 A holistic service design solution
Eat Me! was given the Best Design Award at the regional Service Design Jam. This service design solution aims to connect local communities by encouraging people to grow and share vegetables and fruits, as well as knowledge and skills. The main concepts are community networks, friendships, exchange, urban farming and guerrilla gardening. Components of Eat Me! include: holistic service system, customisable grow packs, outdoor visual tags for geotagging, participatory digital maps of sharable fruits, online knowledge-sharing platforms, real-life sharing events and branding design. The idea of geotagging sharable fruits by visual tags, the participatory digital map of sharable fruits, and the blend between online and offline activities are service features that show strong potential in making positive social impact. The following subsections highlight the main components of Eat Me!.

5.3.1 *The service system*
The service system is targeted at both new and experienced growers. From the website of Eat Me!, a new grower like Mario can order a grow pack to get started. Once he has planted the seeds, he can tag the location with plant tags to show people fruits and vegetables are for share. He can log on to the website or mobile app to add this location on a digital map that shows sharable fruits and vegetables in the neighbourhood. The map can also be updated to show locations of wild fruits. For example, when Mario is out walking, he notices wild apple trees. He can use his mobile phone to take a picture of those trees and upload it to the Eat Me! mobile app. Then he tags the location on the map of sharable fruits to let others know there are wild apples that they can pick and take home.

For an experienced grower like Sarah who always grows vegetables at home, she can share excess vegetables through the Eat Me! website. On the digital map of sharable vegetables and fruits, she can add her location and specify types of vegetables available for share. The search function enables her to search for local sharing events. She can attend the events to share not only excess vegetables but also her skills and knowledge with new growers who need advice.
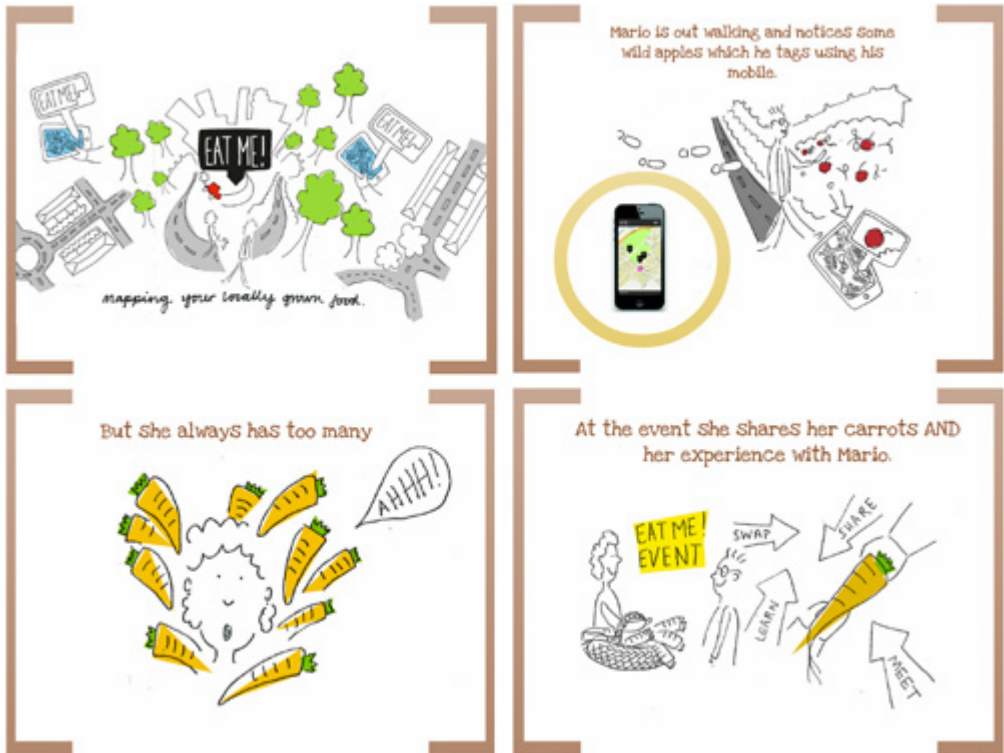

Figure 4 Selected service storyboards (Source: Eat Me! project team. Reprinted with permission.)

5.3.2   Grow packs

The customisable grow pack contains seed packs, instructions, planter box, plant tags, tree hangers, stickers and recipes. It is produced with biodegradable materials. Figure 5 shows the prototype version. The Eat Me! project offers a variety of customisable grow packs containing different elements for growers to choose and customise, for example, types of seeds, planter boxes and visual designs.

Figure 5 Prototypes of the grow pack (Source: Eat Me! project team. Reprinted with permission.)

5.3.3 Digital map of sharable fruits

The digital map of sharable fruits and vegetables is a crucial feature in this project. The map is highly participatory and it engages community members in the Eat Me! campaign. It offers a constantly evolving online element to encourage usage of the website and mobile app. It is also easy and fun to use. On the functional side, the map is an important feature that helps local communities to reduce waste as it facilitates sharing of excess vegetables and fruits.

5.3.4 Online platform

The online platform of Eat Me! features online shop (where people order grow packs), digital map of sharable vegetables and fruits, search function for sharing events, forum for sharing experience, and online grower communities. The digital platform can be accessed through the web or as a mobile app. This virtual gathering space is convenient for participants to make digital connections. It facilitates them to move on to connect in real life.

5.3.5 Sharing events

Part of the service includes real-life sharing events that take place in local communities. These events are organised for people to meet up, share fruits and vegetables, and share their growing experiences. Experienced growers can offer practical advice or workshops to beginners and teach them new skills. These sharing events will help growers develop local community networks that harmonise relationships in the neighbourhood.

5.3.6 Brand identity

For effective promotion, the Eat Me! project team made an effort to design a clear brand identity. Because Eat Me! welcomes the participation of people of all ages, the visual imageries are designed to be fun, upbeat and friendly. To strengthen this element of visual communication, the Eat Me! team will design visual themes based on local identities of the particular neighbourhoods.

5.4 Further development as a social enterprise

After the success at Service Design Jam, the Eat Me! team submitted their project to Think BIG Awards organised by the Enterprise Office of Loughborough University. They were awarded a prize with financial assistance to launch their project as a social enterprise [21-22]. They also received very positive public responses. Through the award's associated events, they were offered another amount of funding by Unlimited, which supports new social enterprise initiatives. The team is now collaborating with a market research company to further refine their service and products. As the project involves a range of outcomes, the team is planning to further collaborate with suitable partners to fully develop their service and widen the reach to broader local communities.

6 Using the framework of hybrid touchpoints to analyse the Eat Me! case

The Eat Me! project has made relational values an important part of the service design. The team set out to create communities by bringing people together to share a hobby and the fruits of their labour. The service system is designed to create chances for people to interact and foster social cohesion in local communities. The key strategy is to help people start connecting online, and then move on to real-life interactions. Figure 6 shows an analysis of Eat Me! using the framework of hybrid touchpoints for relational service.
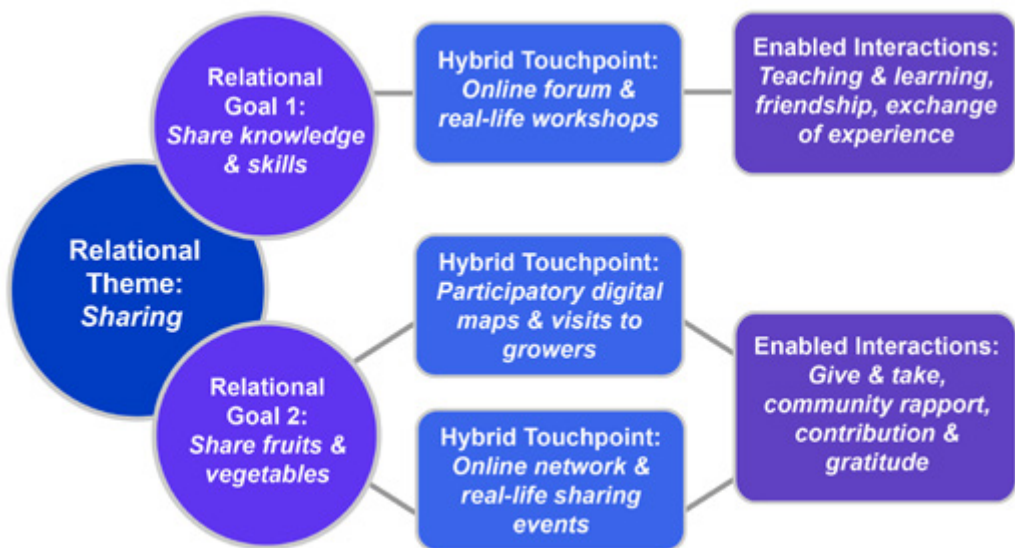
Figure 6 Analysis of Eat Me! using the framework of hybrid touchpoints for relational service
(Source: Original work by Kathy Pui Ying Lo)

The relational theme of Eat Me! is sharing. This theme is supported by two main relational goals that define sharing activities in intangible and tangible ways respectively. The first relational goal is to share knowledge and skills (intangible); the second goal is to share fruits and vegetables (tangibles). The first relational goal is achieved through the hybrid touchpoint of online forum and real-life workshops. What started as online discussion can be extended by face-to-face interactions in workshops that teach gardening skills. The interactions enabled by this hybrid touchpoint include teaching & learning, friendship, and exchange of experience.

The second relational goal (sharing fruits and vegetables) is achieved through two pairs of hybrid touchpoints. The first pair is participatory digital maps and visits to growers. Geotagging of sharable fruits on participatory digital maps encourages real-life visits to other people's gardens and allotments. The second pair of hybrid touchpoint is online network and real-life sharing events for swapping or giveaways. The online community can trigger face-to-face exchange of tangible outcomes (fruits and vegetables). These hybrid touchpoints enable interactions involving give and take, community rapport, contribution and gratitude.

7   Conclusion and future work

This paper has introduced the framework of hybrid touchpoints for relational service in social innovation. The case study of Eat Me! is offered and the framework is applied to analyse the project's hybrid touchpoints. The framework contributes a relational dimension to studying and designing service touchpoints. The framework can be applied as a tool of analysis in research to understand the relationships between relational theme, relational goals, hybrid touchpoints and the enabled interactions. It can also be used by designers in the design process as a guidance for clarifying elements of relational service that involve a combination of online and offline touchpoints. The discussion about the framework, the case study and the analysis presented in this paper are starting points to explore hybrid touchpoints in relational service. More future research will be carried out through analysing other cases and applying the framework to the actual design practice of relational service.

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