Chapter 14
"Checking Into" Outdoor Lifestyle?
Mobile Location–Based Games as a Site of Productive Play in Marketing Campaigns

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ABSTRACT

The increasing adoption of mobile media in place-making and space-constructing practices as well as participatory culture open up new opportunities in marketing. This chapter approaches mobile location-based games as sites of brand experience, productive play, and value co-creation. It examines a mobile location-based game launched by The North Face (TNF) in China to increase its consumer base by shaping people's lifestyle aspirations. It offers insights into the use of mobile to engage more participants in the emerging market; the role of mobile as the central tool, platform, and the interface of hybrid spaces (de Souza e Silva, 2006) in the integrated campaign; and the value co-creation process by consumers for the brand. It also points to unintended consequences of the campaign, evidenced in consumers' deconstruction and reconstruction of the marketer-designed game process and their distortion of space. More generally, it reveals the importance of understanding the opportunities and challenges in addressing creative consumers in utilising mobile location-based game for marketing purposes.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of mobile and Internet technologies means that many people now live increasingly hybrid lives where the physical and the digital, the real and the virtual, interact. While earlier studies suggest that mobile phones withdraw users from physical space (Gergen, 2002; Puro, 2002), the need to transcend the online-offline dichotomy has become widely acknowledged now. For example, de Souza e Silva (2006) argues that a hybrid space arises when mobile technologies are used as social devices, resulting in the merging of borders between physical and digital spaces. According to de Souza e Silva, mobile phones strengthen users' connections to physical space by enfolding remote contexts inside the present context, and promoting sociability and

communication in urban spaces. Moreover, a new mobility is arising from the mixing of physical and virtual mobility and breeds new forms of places as a result of the relationship between informational and other territories that constitute them (Lemos, 2010). In discussing what they call 'net locality', Gordon and de Souza e Silva (2011) point out that location awareness as a social agent creates a geographical context to networked data and facilitates interactions among physical and virtual communities.

Mobile location-based services such as Foursquare, launched in March 2009 in the U.S. are one example of bridging online and offline spaces. As users share their locations with friends by 'checking in' at various physical venues via a smart phone application or by text message, they are awarded points and can collect virtual badges as cultural capital. For example, users who check in most times at a certain venue will be crowned 'Mayor' until someone supersedes them. A variety of virtual badges are awarded to people who check in at places more frequently, with more friends, or at a particular type of place. The rapid growth of Foursquare has led Facebook to enter the market with its own service, dubbed 'Places', which allows users signal where they are to their friends on the network. Location sharing has thus become embedded in major social networks. In addition to the increasing adoption of virtual items as a gaming element in location-based services, there are a growing number of location-based mobile games and hybrid reality games. As de Souza e Silva and Hjorth (2009) argue, these games erode the notion of a magic circle or dedicated game-space. They open up new possibilities of identity building in place-making and space-constructing process. However, privacy and security remain contentious issues in these contexts (Dourish& Anderson, 2006; Wilken& Sinclair, 2009).

The culture of 'checking-in' and location-sharing via mobile phones has also become increasingly popular in China, the world's biggest mobile market. According to statistics from China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) (2013), mobile internet users reached 464 million, accounting for approximately 78.5% of all internet users by the end of June 2013. Local service providers have followed the Foursquare model and launched similar services since 2009, such as Jiepang, Kaikai and Qieke among others. These sites also use virtual badges to encourage users to use the services more. Users' enthusiasms toward virtual items are evident in China, where transactions of virtual items including avatars, garments, accessories, and gaming equipment have created a 'mini-economy' with its own culture (Castronova, 2005; Kshetri, 2009; Nystedt, 2005). With the increasing penetration of mobile internet, the real economy around virtual items in China is now extending to mobile platforms. According to statistics released by Analysys International (2011), by the end of June, 2011, the number of accumulate accounts of China location-based services has reached 105 million. The post-80s generation is the main user group of mobile locative media games, where they create new forms of ambient, emplaced, social visualities while maintaining older social ties (Hjorth & Arnold, 2013).

Given the rapid adoption of mobile and locative media, brands have also begun to tap into mobile marketing with a geographic turn. Brands such as Startbucks, PepsiCo and Mcdonald's have used the check-in service with a reward mechanism to lure customers to check in at the bricks-and-mortar stores more often and participate in events. Compared to earlier location-based marketing propositions based on monitoring, encouraging people to check in via mobile is a fundamentally different approach. A typical example of the earlier propositions is sending promotional offers via Bluetooth to people within a certain radius or proximity (Leek & Christodoulides, 2009). This kind of proximity marketing adopts a broadcasting approach in the hope of driving foot traffic to stores and realizing impulse purchases. However, that caused marketers' concerns over privacy

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