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**The Social Seat. An Urban Installation in  
the Age of the Internet of Things**

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# The Social Seat, an Urban Installation in the Age of the Internet of Things

Lucas Agudiez Roitman; Michael Mondry; Tomoki Eto and Banny Banerjee



## Abstract

People share spaces such as cafes, airports, libraries, and classrooms for hours everyday. Often times, these people sitting right next to each other never even think to interact. They almost always have shared interests, some common ground on which they could interact. The Social Seat helps people converse and connect in a easy, interactive, and playful way using a physical chair that indicates one's' willingness to talk, and common topics. This paper will discuss how the concept came to fruition and how we researched the market to find consumer preferences and needs.

## Research Method

Before designing the Social Seat, an in-depth survey was conducted face-to-face with 12 students to assess how they interacted with each other. University students were chosen for this study as they represent a demographic that involves social interactions on a daily basis. In addition, it would be more accessible for researchers to conduct testing of the first prototype with people in the vicinity (i.e the university campus). Students were given the following prompts addressing their use of social networking, meeting new people and creating meaning relationships:

- How much do you rely on social media to make friends?
- Do you use social media often to meet strangers?
- Do these interactions eventually become meaningful relationships?
- Is it possible to create meaningful relationships through social media?
- How do you usually find people who share the same interests as you?



- Do you need to meet the person face to face in order to have a friendship?
- What conditions need to exist for you to be comfortable to meet new people?

The following quotes are snippets from the ethnographic research we conducted:

*“How do you network people and things without being too invasive?”*

-Akshaoy, Bioengineer Grad Student

*“Take a look at the people who rented out each library book before you, they share your interests”*

-Daniel, Art History Graduate Student

*“I prefer to meet the person face to face. Somehow it seems impersonal chatting with the person online for me to have a relationship.”*

-Sean, History Graduate Student

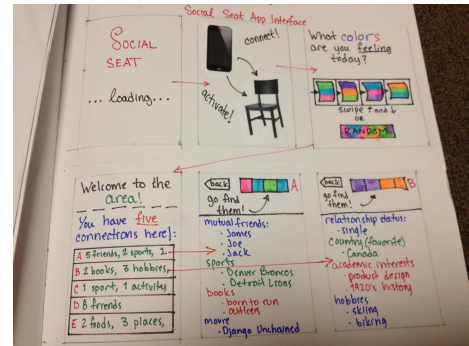
Based on these interviews, we found several underlying sociological themes (insights) that were used to design the Social Seat:

- Humans prefer natural interactions over forced social gatherings.
- People like to connect and interact with people, especially of the same interests.
- People like open interactive spaces.

Using these themes, we pinpointed an issue which the product will address: People need a natural and noninvasive way to meet and talk with new people with shared interests.

## Social Seating and its current applications

The concept of choosing who to interact with based on physical location has been used in various fields. In Education, the seating arrangement in the classroom has been studied, since it can affect a child's cognitive and social development.<sup>1</sup> In town planning, the placement of public places aids in the social wellbeing of the elderly, as well as in encouraging socialization.<sup>2</sup> Social seating is a social-networking service in which users have the option of choosing seats based on their social network or personal preferences. It is currently being used in several airlines such as KLM and Malaysia Airlines in which customers are given the option to book a seat through social networking sites such as Facebook.<sup>3</sup> Customers can select a seat based on various personal preferences such as shared interests. Due to the increased demand of social seating, some airlines have even extended its services for bookings of rooms and tickets for other types of transportation. How effective social seating is remains unclear, with regards to meeting new people, as the technology is quite recent and no published research is available. In fact, companies in the field have had mixed success: "Planely no longer exists; it ran out of funding after three years in business. Another example, SeatID, has become BookingDirection.com and now deals with hotel bookings. Satisfly was bought by online travel agency Travelstart".<sup>4</sup>



## Concept Description

The Social Seat is an interactive chair and social networking system. Upon sitting on a Social Seat, the user "bumps" his/her smartphone, activating a unique color sequence on the back of the chair that identifies the person, and connecting the user to other Social Seat users in that location. He/She then uses the Social Seat app to locate other users with common interests, mutual friends, jobs, etc. Users find each other by their unique color sequences, eliminating the need for names and pictures and therefore maintaining privacy.



## Implications and Considerations

There are several implications to the Social Seat. Business security is extremely important when it comes to social networks. Once social networks become popular, these platforms need to

<sup>1</sup> Evertson, C., Poole, I., & the IRIS Center. Effective room arrangement. 2002.

<sup>2</sup> "Design Guide 001." (n.d.): n. pag. Inclusive Design for Getting Outdoors.

<sup>3</sup> Mostvitch, Katia. "BBC - Future - Now You Can Pick the Perfect Plane Seatmate." BBC News. BBC, 29 Jan. 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Mostvitch, Katia. 2016.



create a barrier to entry to the market so they cannot be easily beaten by competitors, and this means they need to strengthen connections between users, and gather as much information from them as possible. Another issue is privacy risks. Some of the risks of these behaviours by Facebook are that whoever accesses this information can gain knowledge of users' weaknesses such as strong family or friends connections, sexual preferences, immoral or moral situations that might not be accepted by society, all of which can easily be exploited against an individual. With the Social Seat, a discussion needs to happen as to what type of information is collected, where it is to be stored and whether it is susceptible for exposure.

Portability is also another issue. Once the information is collected, it becomes difficult for users to switch platforms, because they would need to move their data to a different platform, and expect most other users to do so as well. This is how a company becomes a monopoly and dominates the market, and once it happens, it can start imposing a wide number of conditions onto its users. These conditions include, for example on facebook, the fact that users cannot hide their profile picture, cover picture or the existence of their online profile, they cannot encrypt their data, and they cannot even delete their profile. With regards to the Social Seat, the current prototype is only limited to the app and the information collected cannot be transferred to other platforms easily.

The practicality of the Social Seat is also questionable. The closing of Planely shows that not all are open to the idea of selecting who to sit with on a plane. In other words, not everyone wants to meet new people in all situations. The Social Seat does address this issue by making it optional for users to utilize the app.

Another concern is whether the Social Seat has the ability to create meaningful relationships. Although the Social Seat has fulfilled the main criteria of creating a natural and noninvasive way for people to meet and talk to each other, it is pertinent to look beyond this scope and into less superficial connections. This may require further research, but if the early stages looks promising, then the Social Seat could become an intrinsic way to create meaningful relationships. For this to be done, perhaps an exit survey can be conducted to followup from users' initial contact with each other.

## Conclusions

Although the Social Seat has its drawbacks, it nonetheless has the potential to create strong new relationships and improve the efficiency of the market for acquaintances, friends, dates, and jobs. With more research and fine tuning, the Social Seat could revolutionize the way we interact with each other.

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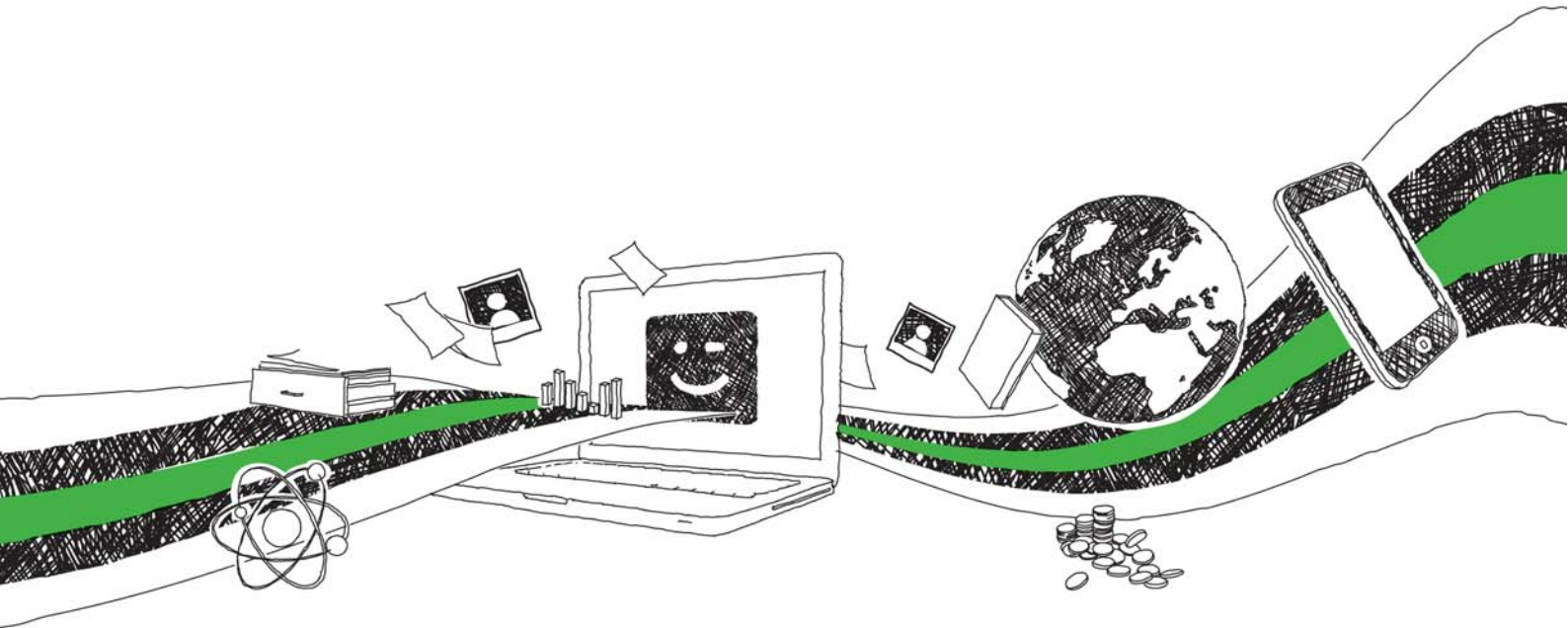
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