

Consolidation Thesis, MSc in Digital and Interaction Design

**OnTheGo:  
Designing A Trustworthy  
and Inclusive Digital  
Platform for Strangers to  
Travel Together**

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Consolidation Thesis, MSc in Digital and Interaction Design

**OnTheGo: Designing A Trustworthy and Inclusive  
Digital Platform for Strangers to Travel Together**

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# INDEX

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Acknowledgement	2
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## ABSTRACT

Abstract	6
Abstract (ITA)	7

# 1

## INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background	10
1.2 Methodology	12

# 2

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

2.1 Travel Mindset in the Post-COVID-19 Era	16
2.2 Different Travel Modes	20
2.2.1 Solo Travel	21
2.2.2 Traveling with Companions	22
2.3 Traveling with Strangers	23
2.3.1 Opportunities and Challenges	24
2.3.2 Trust among Strangers	25
2.4 Travel Communities on Social Media	26

# 3

## CASE STUDIES

3.1 Generic Platforms	30
3.2 Dedicated Platforms	35
3.3 Service Analysis	39

# 4

## DESIGN PROJECT

4.1 Design Approach	44
4.1.1 Questionnaire	45
4.1.2 Further Research: Credit Assessment on Social Media	61
4.1.3 Personas	64
4.1.4 Brainstorming	66
4.2 Design Concept	68
4.2.1 The Idea	69
4.2.2 Credit Assessment System Design	70
4.3 UX and UI Design	72
4.3.1 Information Architecture	74
4.3.2 Brand and Visual Identity	76
4.3.3 User Flow and Main Pages	78

4.4 Other Features	84
4.4.1 Square	85
4.4.2 Map View and Filter Function	86
4.4.3 Profile with Footprint	87
4.5 Prototype Testing	88
4.5.1 Testing Protocol and Expected Outcomes	89
4.5.2 Testing Results	90
4.5.3 Conclusion and Future Development	92

# 5

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Limitation and Reflection	96
5.2 Conclusion	98

## REFERENCES

References	100
List of Figures	105

## Abstract

Among tourists around the world, there is a group of people who, for various objective or subjective reasons, need to embark on a journey alone, which does not mean that they refuse to socialize; on the contrary, they are glad to make new friends, but it may be that itineraries, travel budgets, and individual cultural and living habits make it difficult to find suitable travel companions nearby. That is why people on many different social media look for strangers to travel in groups with tags on their destinations and of course, some others complain about the unreliability of the people they found online.

Meanwhile, the mainstream travel platforms have either not tapped into this market or have just created a portal on their platforms without running a good community.

OnTheGo, the project in this thesis, was born out of the above background and an aspiration to create a trustworthy and inclusive community. It is an app for all groups with a specific female zone. This digital platform is designed with a credit assessment system to help users find trustworthy travel companions and also provides the feature to share travel experiences and a Q&A square, so that users can have a better traveling experience and subsequently generate a collaborative and supportive community.

### *[Keywords]*

*Traveling with strangers, Travel companions, Trustworthy and inclusive community, Credit assessment*

## Abstract (ITA)

Tra i turisti in tutto il mondo, c'è un gruppo di persone che, per varie ragioni obiettive o soggettive, ha bisogno di intraprendere un viaggio da solo. Ciò non significa che rifiutino di socializzare; al contrario, sono felici di fare nuovi amici. Ma itinerari, budget di viaggio e abitudini culturali e abitudini personali possono rendere difficile trovare compagni di viaggio adatti nelle vicinanze. Ecco perché molte persone su diversi social media cercano estranei con cui viaggiare in gruppi con tag sulle loro destinazioni e, naturalmente, alcune si lamentano dell'affidabilità delle persone che hanno trovato online.

Nel frattempo, le piattaforme di viaggio mainstream o non hanno sfruttato questo mercato o hanno creato un semplice portale sulle proprie piattaforme, senza gestire la comunità.

OnTheGo, il progetto di questa tesi, è nato da questo contesto e dalla volontà di creare una comunità affidabile e inclusiva. Si tratta di un'app per tutti i gruppi con uno spazio specifico dedicato alle donne. Questa piattaforma digitale è progettata con un sistema di valutazione del credito per aiutare gli utenti a trovare compagni di viaggio affidabili e fornisce la funzione di condivisione delle esperienze di viaggio e una sezione FAQ, in modo che gli utenti possano avere una migliore esperienza di viaggio e successivamente creare una comunità collaborativa e solidale.

### *[Parole chiave]*

*Viaggiare con sconosciuti, Compagni di viaggio, Comunità affidabile e inclusiva, Valutazione del credito*



# 1

## INTRODUCTION

Fig 1.1 Cosmetics Cosmos

## 1.1 Background

This thesis delves into the contemporary challenges faced by travelers, with a focus on the shifts in people's attitudes towards travel in the post-epidemic era. Centered around the perspective of "people" as its primary subject, the author identifies the theme of "traveling with strangers" within various modes of travel, subsequently embarking on a research and design journey.

Throughout the research process, a pivotal insight emerged: people have a heightened concern regarding trust when interacting with strangers. This discovery served as the impetus for the creation of a credit assessment system within the project. With a fundamental commitment to verifying user authenticity, the project introduces an app featuring specialized posting, search filtering, experience-sharing, and post-companion assessment functionalities. These features are aimed at providing users with assistance prior to, during, and after their travels, fostering a sense of trustworthiness and inclusivity within the community.

It is noteworthy that the project refrains from discussing the business model, citing a limitation in expertise in that area.

## 1.2 Methodology

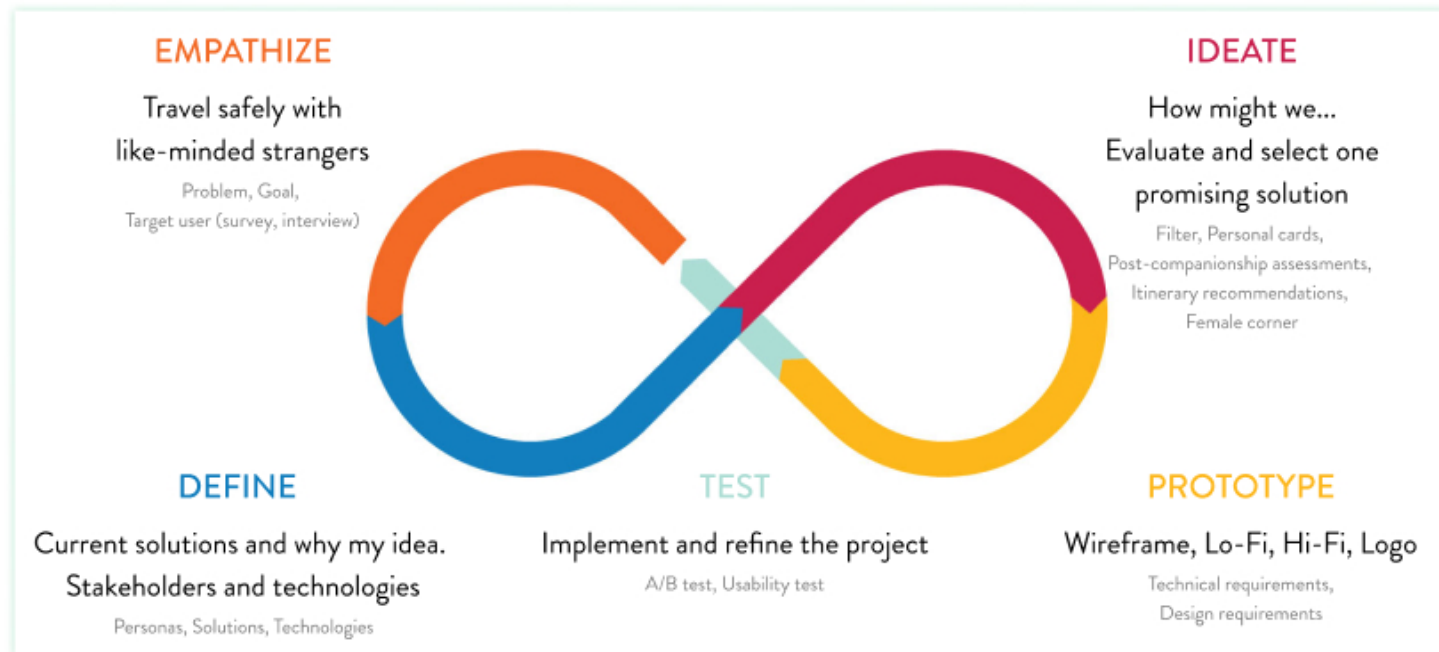


Fig 1.2 Design thinking process

The design thinking methodology serves as the backbone of this thesis, guiding the author through a comprehensive design process encompassing five key stages: empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test.

Commencing with the empathize stage, the author plans to undertake in-depth desk research and engage in informal conversations with the target users. Additionally, a questionnaire will be employed to delve into the intricate details of the users' pain points and requirements. This initial exploration aims to yield valuable insights that will aid in the creation of user personas and an understanding of the shortcomings of existing solutions in the current landscape. Furthermore, this stage will involve an investigation into the technological tools and advancements that can support and enhance the proposed idea.

The "How might we..." approach will be utilized during the ideation phase, allowing for the generation of a multitude of potential solutions. Through thorough evaluation and analysis, the most promising solution will emerge from the array of possibilities.

Subsequently, the prototype stage will come into play, wherein wireframes, a low-fidelity prototype, and a logo along with a slogan, will be meticulously crafted.

Throughout the entire process, continuous testing and feedback will be integral to refining and improving the solution.

Lastly, the author will culminate the project with the development of a high-fidelity prototype, accompanied by a comprehensive analysis outlining why it represents the optimal solution to address the identified challenge and objective.





# 2

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Fig 2.1 Triumphal Arch

## 2.1 Travel Mindset in the Post-COVID-19 Era

### *[Research Goal]*

*To explore ways of traveling in the post-epidemic era*

The 3-year-long COVID-19 pandemic has generated an unprecedented level of public fear and created a devastating impact on the travel and tourism industry worldwide. Imposed systematic travel restrictions adopted at the height of the epidemic discourage people from traveling even though they would like to (Bratić et al., 2021). When tourism reopens as the post-epidemic era approaches, Ellen Eun Kyoo Kim, Kwanglim Seo and Youngjoon Choi (2022) find that the term “revenge travel” has been actively mentioned to reflect consumers' willingness and demand for compensatory travel.

Meanwhile, the public travel mindset has evolved significantly due to the pandemic's lasting impact on the way people perceive and approach travel, which is reflected as follows:

- 1. Health and Safety:** The foremost concern for travelers in the post-COVID-19 era is health and safety. People are more conscious of hygiene, sanitation, and health protocols. They look for destinations and accommodations that prioritize health measures such as regular cleaning, social distancing, and mask-wearing.
- 2. Flexibility and Planning:** Travelers have become more flexible and cautious in their travel planning. Many opt for last-minute bookings or travel insurance that allows for cancellations or changes due to unforeseen circumstances like new variants or travel restrictions.
- 3. Local and Outdoor Experiences:** The pandemic has driven an increased interest in exploring local destinations and outdoor experiences. Travelers are more inclined to explore their own region or country, which often involves road trips, camping, hiking, and outdoor activities that naturally allow for social distancing.
- 4. Sustainability:** The post-COVID-19 travel mindset has a stronger emphasis on sustainability. Travelers are more conscious of their environmental impact and are

seeking eco-friendly accommodations and transportation options. There is also a preference for supporting local businesses and communities to aid in their recovery.

**5. Digitalization:** The pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital tools in travel, such as contactless check-ins, mobile payment options, and virtual tours. Travelers have come to expect these conveniences and value them in their travel experiences.

**6. Emotional Well-being:** Many people now view travel as a way to improve their emotional well-being after the stress and isolation of the pandemic. They seek destinations that offer relaxation, mindfulness, and opportunities for mental rejuvenation.

**7. Budget and Value:** Economic uncertainty during the pandemic has led to a shift in the travel mindset towards seeking value for money. Travelers are more budget-conscious and look for deals, discounts, and package offers.

In summary, the travel mindset in the post-COVID-19 era is characterized by a focus on health and safety, flexibility, sustainability, digitalization, and a renewed appreciation for the emotional and cultural aspects of travel. Travelers are more cautious, informed, and mindful of the impact of their choices, both on their well-being and on the destinations they visit.

The impact of the epidemic also has increased people's desire to be free and in control. Many also look forward to meeting more people and gaining new friendships as they spend a long time with their family or roommates during the lockdown.

Data from Booking.com shows that pre-pandemic, only 14% of travelers were going solo, but by mid-2021 that number had almost doubled to 23% (Leisure Travel Market - Industry Analysis and Forecast (2021-2027), n.d.), while Google trend

data showed that solo travel had risen by a massive 761.15% (Team, 2021). However, half of the solo travelers are worried about getting lonely and say safety is their top concern, especially when there are more than 80% of solo travelers are female (Alldashi, 2022).

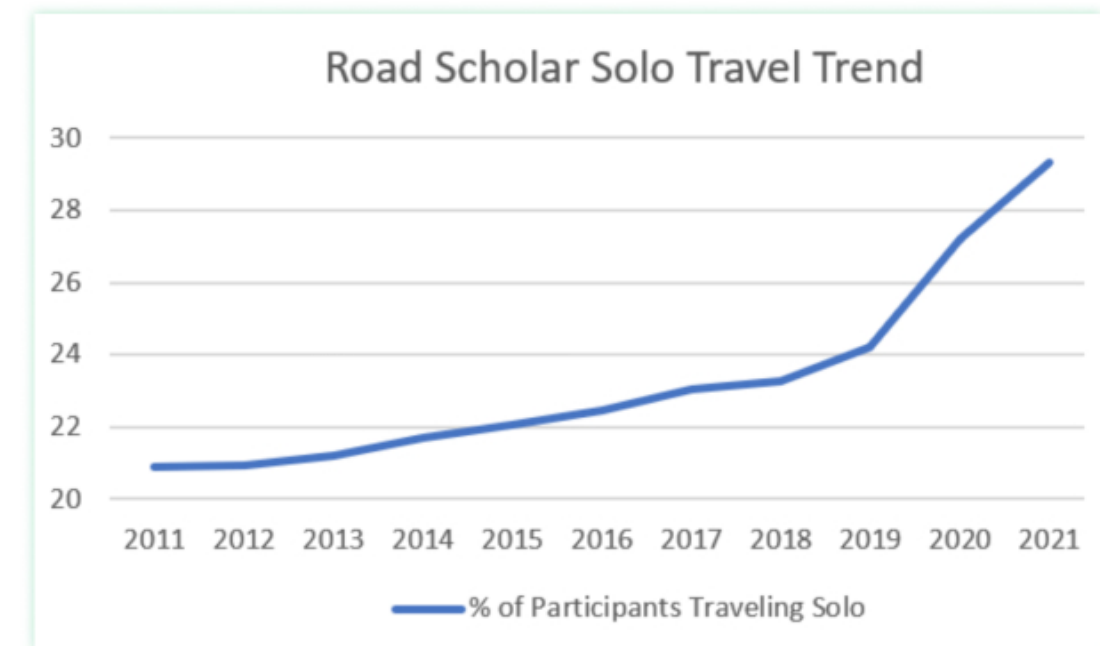


Fig 2.2 Solo travel trend

However, half of the solo travelers are worried about getting lonely and say safety is their top concern, especially when there are more than 80% of solo travelers are female (Alldashi, 2022). The above theoretical background leads us to explore changes in travel modes in the next chapter.

## 2.2 Different Travel Modes

### 2.2.1 Solo Travel

There is no consensus to establish a definition of solo travel; however, there is an agreement that two types of solo travelers exist: those traveling alone “by default” and those who do it “by choice”. There are people who travel alone for the first time “by default” because they do not have travel companions, but after the first experience, they become solo travelers “by choice” (Terziyska, 2021).

Solo travelers are a heterogeneous group, and they have very different travel motivations. They seek freedom; meet people and new cultures; do new and authentic things; experience adventures; expand their visions of the world; and increase their knowledge (Otegui-Carles et al., 2022). Male solo travelers are even more adventurous than females (Osman et al., 2020).

However, diseases and injuries are more common for solo travelers compared to those who travel with companions (Kaplan et al., 2022). People who travel alone will also have a greater sense of insecurity and risk perception (Yang et al., 2022). Without anyone to accompany them on the journey who can provide them assistance, they are more exposed to diseases, crime, language barriers, and natural disasters, and even more likely to get lost. They may also be affected, at some point, by a sense of loneliness and even boredom (Yang, 2021). Among these disadvantages, women are particularly affected by the risks of traveling alone; they are, therefore, more concerned with safety issues than men (Nikjoo et al., 2021) (Karagöz et al., 2021).

## 2.2.2 Traveling with Companions

Traveling with companions refers to the act of going on a journey or trip with one or more individuals, such as friends, family members, or acquaintances, rather than traveling alone. This can involve various types of travel, including vacations, business trips, backpacking adventures, road trips, and more.

Traveling in a group not only improves the possibility of resisting the risks encountered when traveling alone, but the presence of companions can also impact people's emotions (Su et al., 2020). In a restaurant context, for instance, customers who experience failures report having greater intentions to complain and are more dissatisfied when they dine with others than when unaccompanied (Huang et al., 2014). When shopping, emotions are enhanced when a companion is present (Wenzel & Benkenstein, 2018), and the experience produced is more hedonically oriented.

During travel, support from companions can be emotional, instrumental, and/or informational (Schwarzer & Knoll, 2007) (Wang et al., 2019). Different types of activities undertaken by tourists will be related to the level of companion support desired or needed (Carnicelli-Filho et al., 2010). People are more likely to reduce the stress of unfamiliar situations or deal with a difficult travel environment with the help of travel companions (White & White, 2008).

## 2.3 Traveling with Strangers

### 2.3.1 Opportunities and Challenges

In the context of this thesis, strangers mean that people have no intimate relationship with each other. People who come from the same school, live in the same area, or join the same tour, without having had the appropriate contact and acquaintance before they decide to travel together, are strangers.

There are several advantages of traveling with strangers:

- **Meet new, amazing people:** When traveling with strangers, people all create a bond. Some friendships will last a few days while others will last a lifetime.
- **Get a unique experience:** No longer limited by the schedules or budgets of family or friends who used to travel together.
- **Know ourselves better:** Reflect and explore the spiritual side. To be much braver and stronger and discover new passions.

Nevertheless, the disadvantages of traveling with strangers cannot be ignored:

- **Compatibility matters:** It is not easy to arrange a trip with strangers or join their group along the way. Plan b should always be prepared.
- **Economic matters:** It costs more when going out for big meals and lots of drinks with new friends and also not sharing a room with a stranger.
- **Feel unsafe:** Being left behind, getting mugged by “new friends” and more.

The above advantages and disadvantages indicate that a platform with a good reputation is worth designing.

### 2.3.2 Trust among Strangers

Trust among strangers is a fundamental aspect of building positive social interactions, whether in everyday life or in various contexts such as business, travel, or online communities. Increasing trust among strangers can lead to more cooperative and harmonious relationships.

The trust in strangers is dependent on their resemblance to others that was previously known, according to a new study by a team of psychology researchers. Its results show that strangers resembling past individuals known to be trustworthy are trusted more; by contrast, those similar to others known to be untrustworthy are trusted less (Communications, n.d.). Therefore, it is better for people to act in ways that are consistent with being trustworthy. By showing competence and expertise in relevant areas, trying to understand the perspective and emotions of others, and finding common ground or shared interests with strangers, people can increase trust among them.

Meanwhile, it is important to verify the authenticity of individuals or organizations before sharing sensitive information in online interactions; look for trust signals like reviews, ratings, and so on.

## 2.4 Travel Communities on Social Media

The Internet has fundamentally reshaped the way tourism-related information is distributed and the way people plan for and consume travel (Buhalis & Law, 2008). Social media, representing various forms of user-generated content (UGC) such as blogs, virtual communities, wikis, social networks, collaborative tagging, and media files shared on sites like YouTube and Flickr, have gained substantial popularity in online travelers' use of the Internet (Gretzel et al., 2006). Many of these assist consumers in posting and sharing their travel-related comments, opinions, and personal experiences, which then serve as information for others.

Before the trip, travelers search for information and recommendations on hotels, restaurants, activities, attractions, events, and nightlife, making their decisions much more accurate based on the reviews available on social media networks such as Facebook and TripAdvisor (Jądzewska & Jagnuszewska, 2017). According to a study conducted by Munar and Jacobsen (2014), altruistic and community-related motivations are the most important for information sharing. When people join an online travel community, they will develop a sense of belonging (Kavoura & Stavrianea, 2015); this promotes people's desire to share and the idea of mutual benefit.



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# 3

## CASE STUDIES

Fig 3.1 Smart Baggage Claim



## 3.1 Generic Platforms

The development and popularity of technology have enabled people to find travel companions on various social media. Based on their target user groups, these social media can be classified into two main categories, **generic platforms**, which offer a wide range of travel features, and **dedicated platforms**, which are geared towards specific travel activities. Analyzing the functionality of “traveling with companions” provided by these platforms and the corresponding user experience helps to better understand how digital platforms are helpful and impactful for travelers.



### Solo Travel Forum

Plan the perfect trip

City

[Shop hotels](#)

Solo Travel forums [Search](#)

Browse forums [All](#)

**9,086 topics from our community** [Ask a question](#)

1-20 of 9,086 topics [«](#) [1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#) [5](#) [6](#) [7](#) [8](#) [9](#) [...](#) [455](#) [»](#)

Topic	Replies	Last post
<a href="#">Is there a safe way to find a Travel Buddy? - Info Thread</a> by EssexWanderer	330	Jul 08, 2021 by Wotsit
<a href="#">Please Read— How to Use This Forum</a> by TripAdvisor_Forum_Support	0	Dec 15, 2008 by TripAdvisor...
<a href="#">City break ideas for late November (maybe Prague?)</a> by Hannah RM	14	12:22 pm by nzentena
<a href="#">Advice Needed: Reclaiming My Life, Seeking Affordable Travel</a> by Vico R	16	12:01 pm by suze2you
<a href="#">Shortest break abroad you have taken solo?</a> by hrryhill	32	11:07 am by comicman

#### Top questions about Solo Travel

- [Links to a Travel Buddy Thread & Couchsurfing Thread - Informational/Warnings/etc.](#)
- [Information Item: Top 100 Tips for Planning A Solo Trip](#)
- [Collection of travel blogs and websites \(non-commercial\) for new solo travelers](#)
- [Inspirational Traveler Experiences \(posts\) and Articles on the Power of Solo Travel](#)
- [My First Solo Trip](#)
- [Trip Reports - Going Solo](#)
- [Trip Reports 2 - Going Solo](#)
- [Trip Reports 3 - Going Solo](#)
- [First solo senior travel adventure in Italy](#)
- [Is Solo Travel for a Woman Safe?](#)
- [How to eat alone while traveling](#)
- [Solo Volunteer Opportunities or Reports](#)
- [Ideas for No Single Supplement](#)
- [Safe + Inexpensive in Caribbean - Suggestions?](#)
- [World Cup - Solo Travel](#)

[Show less](#)

#### Solo Travel Destination Experts

- [bk\\_t1](#)  
22,441 forum posts
- [Leagle](#)  
16,462 forum posts
- [mcpinder](#)  
18,283 forum posts

Fig 3.2 Solo Travel Forum on TripAdvisor

Operating in 40 countries and 20 languages, with approximately 1 billion reviews and opinions (“Tripadvisor,” 2023), TripAdvisor could almost be considered the largest travel platform in the world. However, under topics related to traveling with companions, TripAdvisor has only set up a forum named “Solo Travel” out of hundreds of forums. Although the top post mentions “Travel Buddy”, it talks more about the risks of traveling with strangers. By explicitly stating that it does not provide a buddy service and by sharing links to other sites offering related services unorganized, TripAdvisor is avoiding its responsibility as a large platform. Also, the content from 9 years ago represents their lack of maintenance for this community, which happens to need official regulation and order.

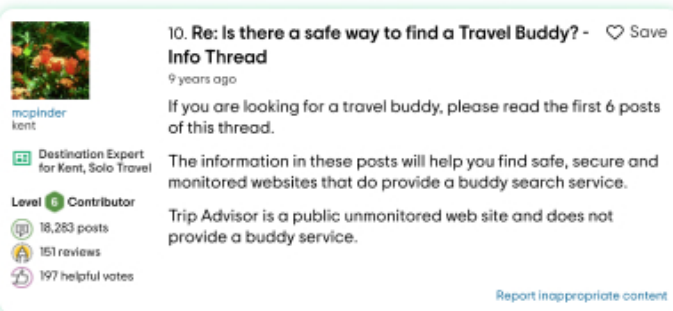


Fig 3.3 TripAdvisor does not provide a buddy service

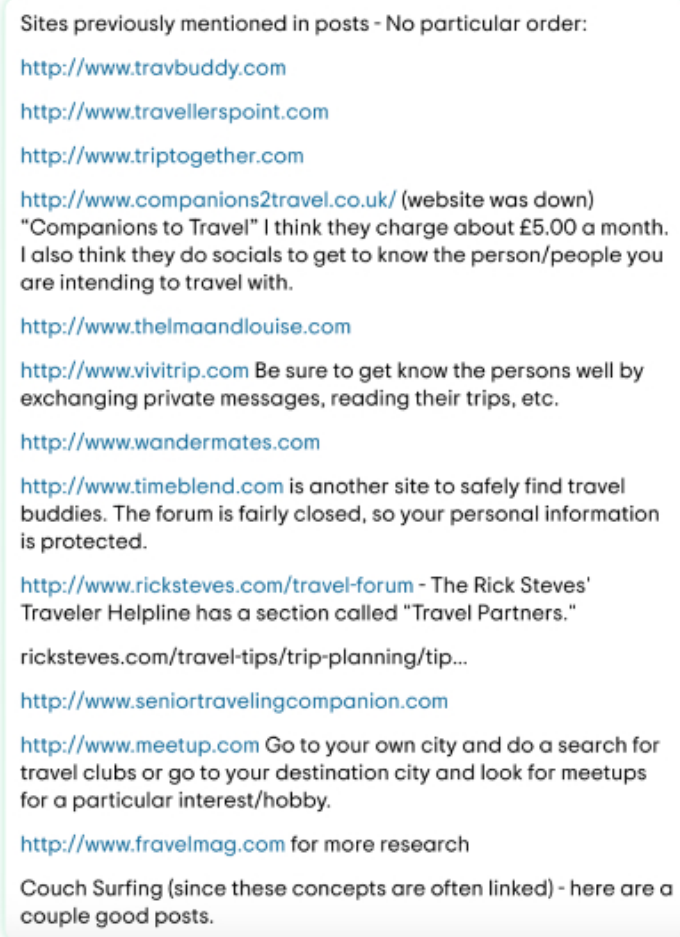


Fig 3.4 TripAdvisor shares links to other related sites



As a global social platform with 2.06 billion daily active users (Facebook, n.d.), Facebook has many groups created by its users to travel together, such as “Looking for a Travel Buddy!”, “Travel Buddies - Travel Companions - Travel Partners”. However, because the groups are user-created, a few of them are private and joining requires an application. Over time, when individual admins do not have the energy to maintain the group, the group becomes less active, leading to additional time costs for future users who want to find travel companions.



Fig 3.5 Groups on Facebook



Although it started as a film review forum, just like Facebook, Douban allows users to create their own groups, which has led to a number of groups looking for travel companions on this Chinese platform. Since the user groups on Douban are much more heterogeneous, users usually need to find a group for a specific destination, and then post to ask if there is someone available to travel with them at a relevant time, which increases the cost of communication quite a bit.



Qyer is a Chinese travel platform that, as its Chinese meaning “travel on a budget” suggests, was originally aimed at students with low incomes who needed to backpack, travel by bus, and stay in hostels. As the community grows, its target user is no longer limited to low-income groups. The platform then launched a travel companion portal called “Biu!”, which allows users to look for travel companions by searching for a destination and selecting a date. At the same time, the platform requires users posting on Biu! to have shared travel tips and accumulated 100 likes, which increases the sharing activity in the community but also raises the bar for new users to find travel companions.



Fig 3.6 Posting restrictions on Qyer

## 3.2 Dedicated Platforms



Backpackr shares the same idea as this thesis to help travelers discover travel buddies and connect with other like-minded ones across the globe. Besides, the website shows that it also provides business features such as exclusive travel offers including pub crawls, local tours, cheap food, drink specials, hostel deals, and free events. However, because of the forum-style design and lack of users, it resulted in people just speaking casually without specifying the relevant destinations, time and activities, further contributing to a situation where no one replied to posts.

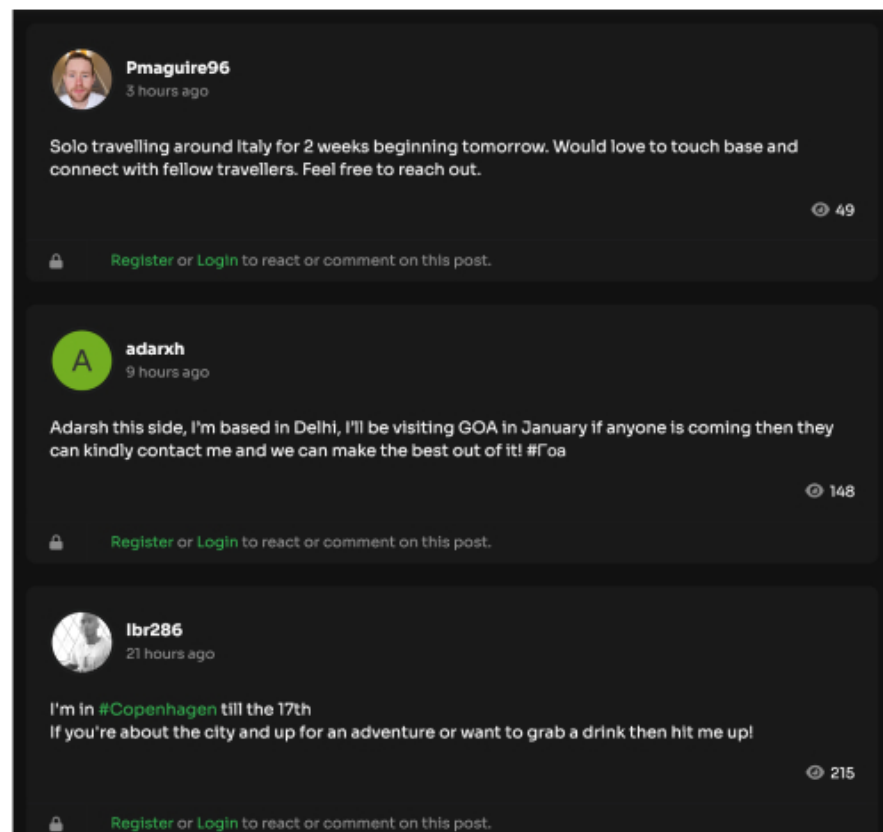


Fig 3.7 Homepage on Backpackr



Turlina advertises itself as the first female-only travel buddy platform, where women can find interesting and entertaining female travel companions within a secure and trusted network. However, while you can still find it in the App Store, it is no longer being updated from 2020. Plus, it adopts artificial authentication for gender identity, and some new users have commented that they cannot sign up. In addition, it is designed to be more like a dating app in terms of user matching, where users can continuously switch between other users' images to make a selection, which defeats the purpose of finding a travel companion.

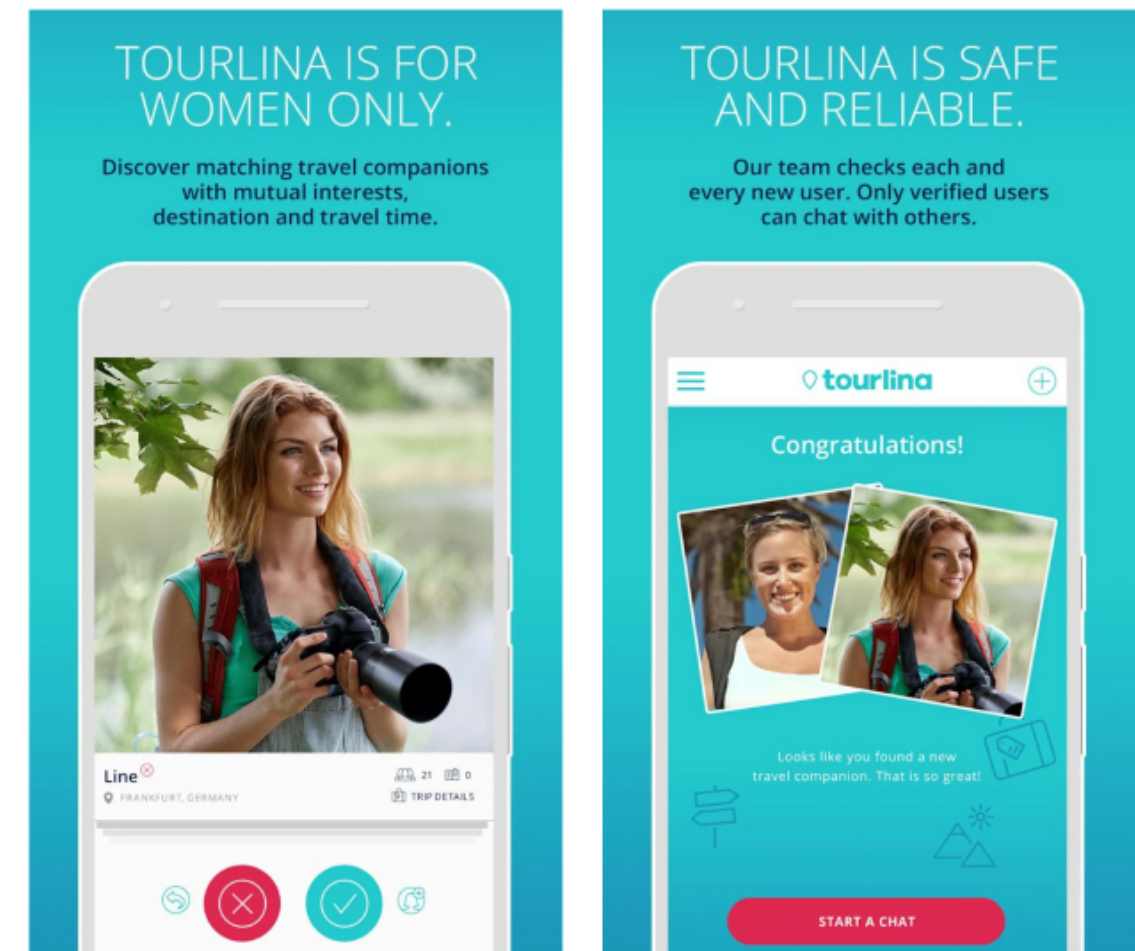


Fig 3.8 Feature pages on Turlina



TripTogether, now named YourTravelMates, is a trip-planning platform for travelers to talk about trips, share advice from locals, recommendations, and more. The service is more focused on meeting and connecting with locals than helping strangers find travel companions, and it requires matching by entering the user's and target user's gender and age on its website.

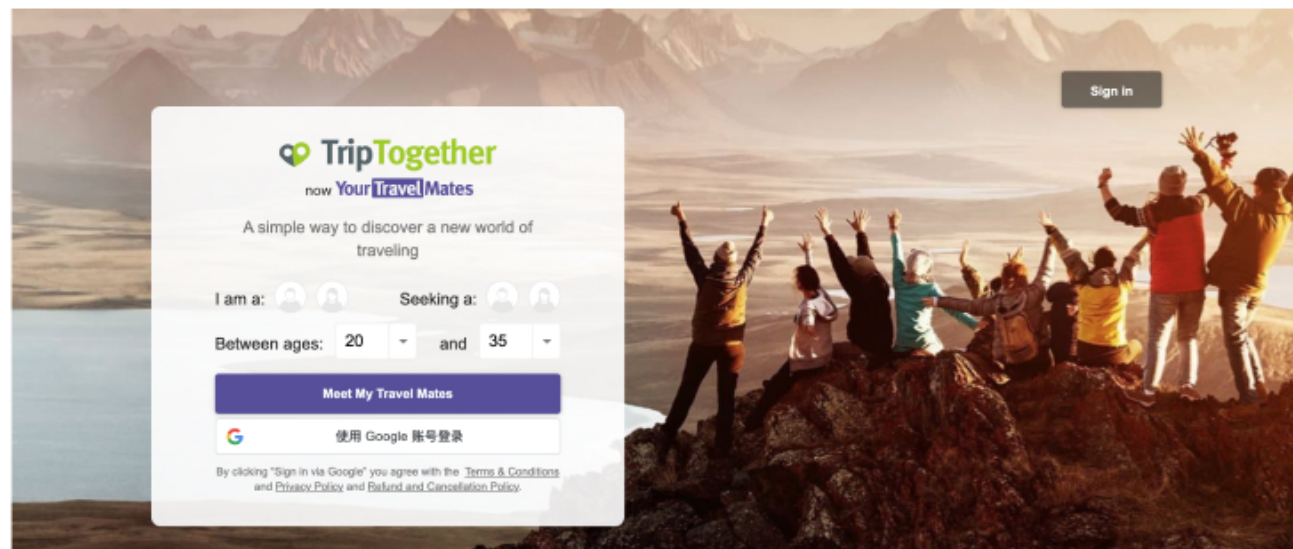


Fig 3.9 Login page on TripTogether



Meetup is an event-based social platform where users search for events they are interested in and register to meet new like-minded people. While it is not a travel platform, the design has implications for finding like-minded friends in an unfamiliar traveling city.

## 3.3 Service Analysis

Compared to generic platforms, the biggest pain point of dedicated platforms is the lack of users, which prevents them from forming well-utilized communities despite providing relevant services. Meanwhile, without a more detailed filter function, posting format, official regulation and community maintenance, these platforms have led to the inability to realize the needs of users and exacerbated the loss of them. Backpackr and Turlina have even tended to turn into dating apps.

The failure of these platforms reveals that the entire user process should be designed properly to address the users' pain points, and only user-centered design will attract more users.

It is also interesting to note that most of these platforms lean towards blue-green in their choice of color scheme, reflecting the idea of being environmentally friendly, sustainable, and trustworthy.

Platform	Media	Service	Community
TripAdvisor	Website & App	No travel companion service	No related community
Facebook	Website & App	Travel companion service exists but not official	Related community exists
Douban	Website & App	Travel companion service exists but not official	Related community exists
Qyer	Website & App	Official travel companion service	Related community exists
Backpackr	Website & App	Official travel companion service	Not yet (too few users)
Turlina	App	Official travel companion service but female only	Not yet (too few users)
TripTogether	Website & App	Official travel companion service but more with locals	Not yet (too few users)
Meetup	Website & App	No travel companion service	No related community

Fig 3.10 Comparison



# 4

## DESIGN PROJECT

Fig 4.1 Balloon

## 4.1 Design Approach

### [Design Challenge]

*To design a trustworthy and inclusive digital platform for strangers to travel together*

### 4.1.1 Questionnaire

An online questionnaire was conducted at this stage in order to better understand the traveling habits of a wider group of people, and their experiences or perceptions of the thesis topic: **Traveling with strangers**.

Based on the previous research, this questionnaire was designed into three main parts. The first part is to collect the basic information of the respondents. The answers regarding age are based on the generations, where we know from the chapter 2.1 that different age groups have different consumption abilities, and at the same time, understanding their exposure to the Internet can help in subsequent design.

Generations	Born	Current Ages
Gen Z	1997 - 2012	11 - 26
Millennials	1981 - 1996	27 - 42
Gen X	1965 - 1980	43 - 58
Boomers II	1955 - 1964	59 - 68
Boomers I	1946 - 1954	69 - 77
Post War	1928 - 1945	78 - 95
WWII	1922 - 1927	96 - 101

Fig 4.2 Generations

By asking users if they have ever tried to travel with strangers, they are diverted to two different question sections, both ending with an open-ended question. For those who have experienced traveling with strangers, questions like “What problems have you encountered when traveling with strangers?” and “What factors do you



take into account when choosing strangers to travel with?” help me put myself in their shoes. And for those with no relevant experience, asking about their willingness is a good way to understand their motivations and concerns.

Since everyone can be a tourist, which means a potential user, the questionnaire was disseminated on various social media on the Internet, including Facebook, WhatsApp groups, WeChat groups, Xiaohongshu, and some other travel platforms like Qyer. Over 200 responses were received in one week (March 7-13, 2023), of which 159 were considered valid based on the completion time.

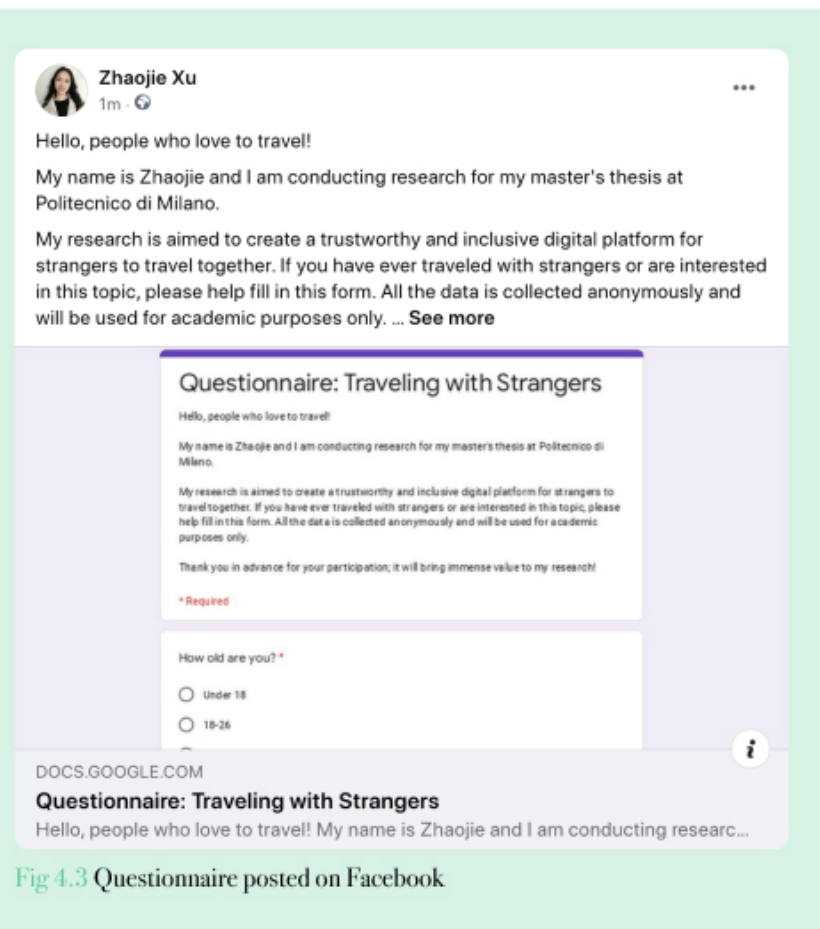


Fig 4.3 Questionnaire posted on Facebook

## Results

### 1. How old are you?

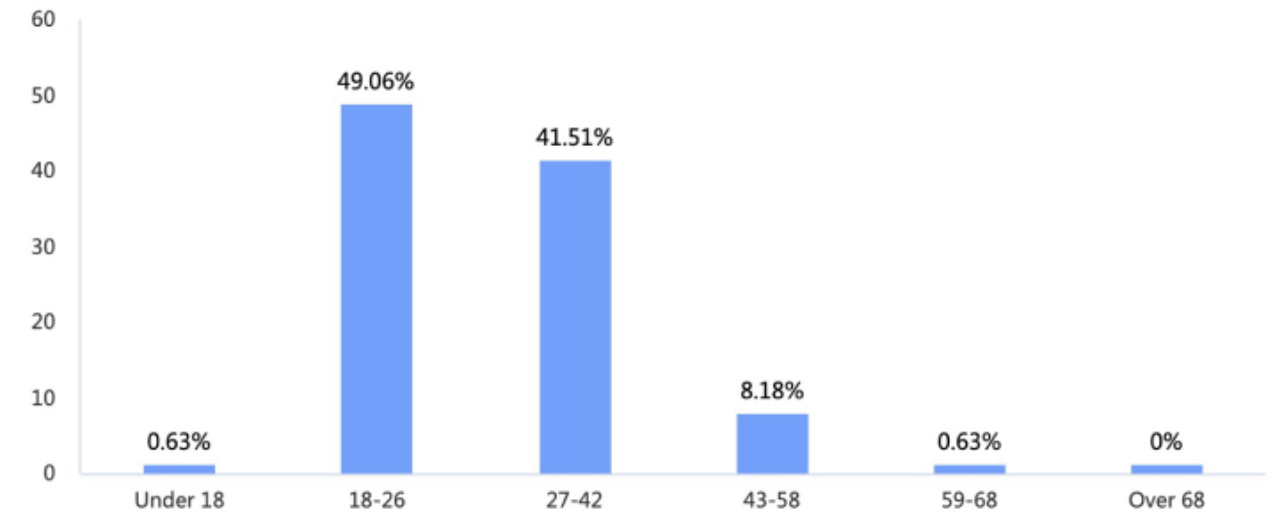


Fig 4.4 Data visualization of the answer to Q1

Unfortunately, the questionnaire did not collect a sample of users over the age of 68, with most of the sample focusing on Generation Z (49.06%) and Millennials (41.51%), as well as some Gen Xers (8.18%).

### 2. What is your gender?

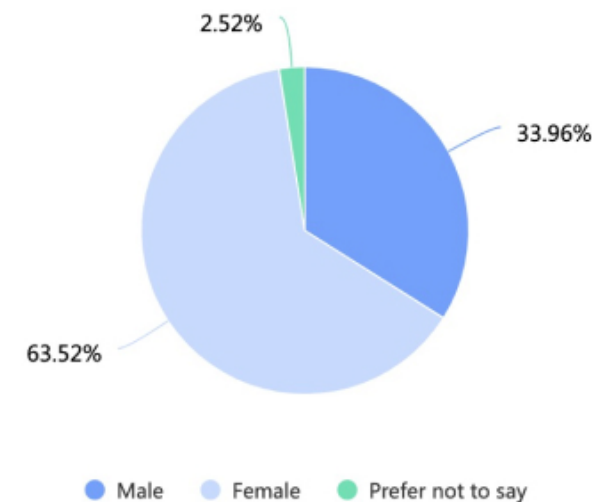


Fig 4.5 Data visualization of the answer to Q2

Just as in the previous study about more females traveling alone (chapter 2.1), females are also more engaged than males in the topic of “Traveling with strangers”.

3. On average, how often do you travel in a year?

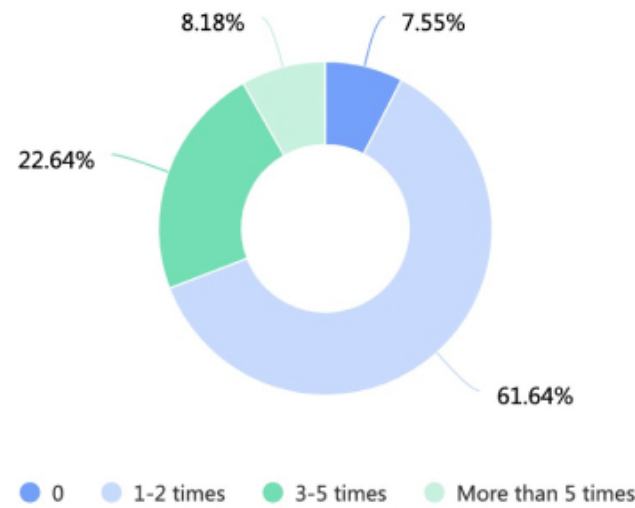


Fig 4.6 Data visualization of the answer to Q3

4. How do you usually travel? (Multiple choice)

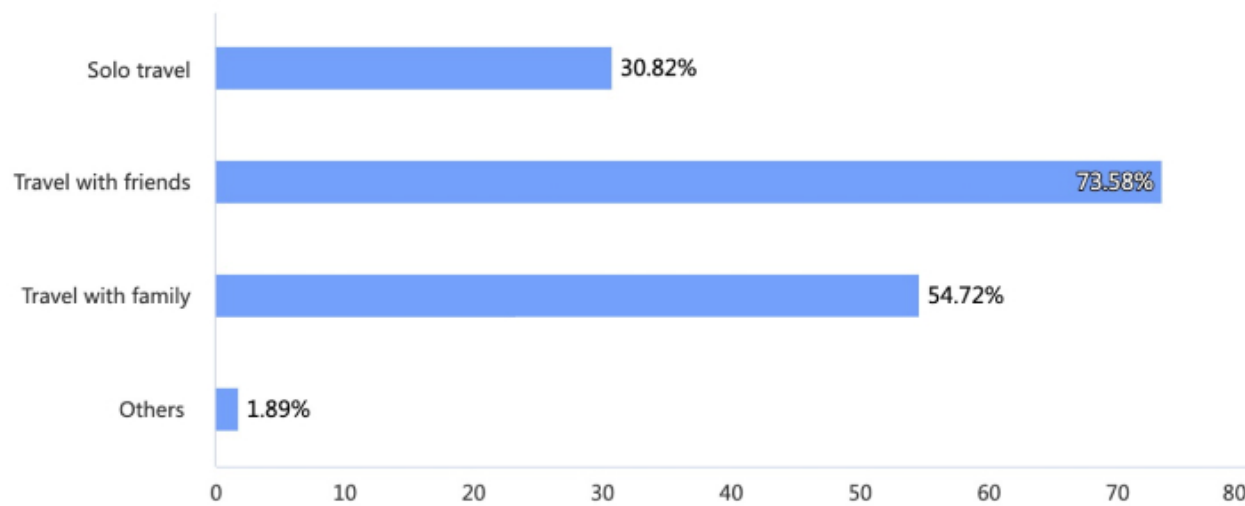


Fig 4.7 Data visualization of the answer to Q4

Obviously, most people choose to travel with their friends or family. Among the other options, a respondent mentioned that he was traveling on a business trip, and although his purpose was not to travel, his behavior should be classified as “Solo travel”.

5. Have you ever tried to travel with strangers?



Fig 4.8 Data visualization of the answer to Q5

*For people who have experienced traveling with strangers*

6. How many times have you ever traveled with strangers?

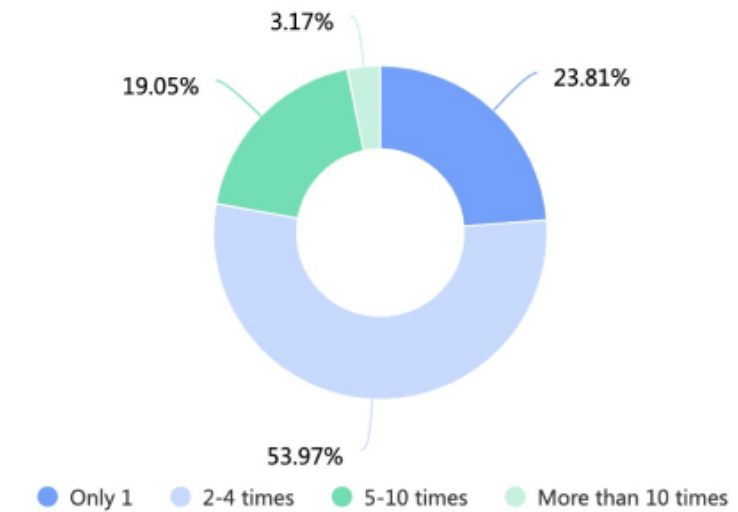


Fig 4.9 Data visualization of the answer to Q6

Of those respondents who have experienced traveling with strangers, more than half have traveled with strangers more than once, while the number of users who have traveled more than five times (22.22%) versus only once (23.81%) is almost the same.

7. How long have you ever traveled with strangers during a trip? (Multiple choice)

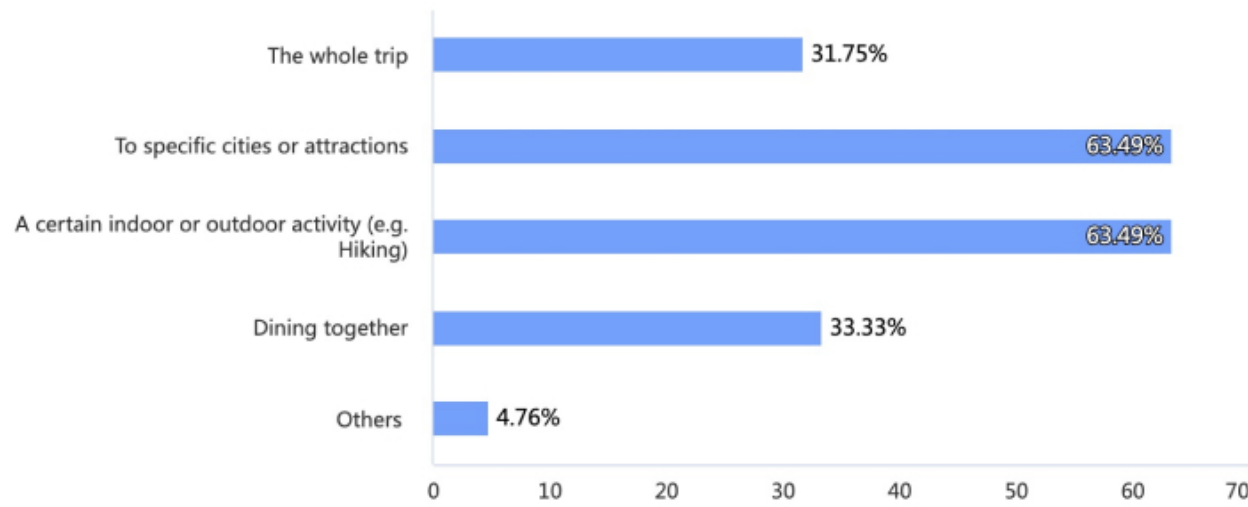


Fig 4.10 Data visualization of the answer to Q7

Among the other options, several respondents mentioned that they had met strangers traveling to the same destination while on transport.

8. Which platform have you ever used to find strangers to travel with? (Multiple choice)

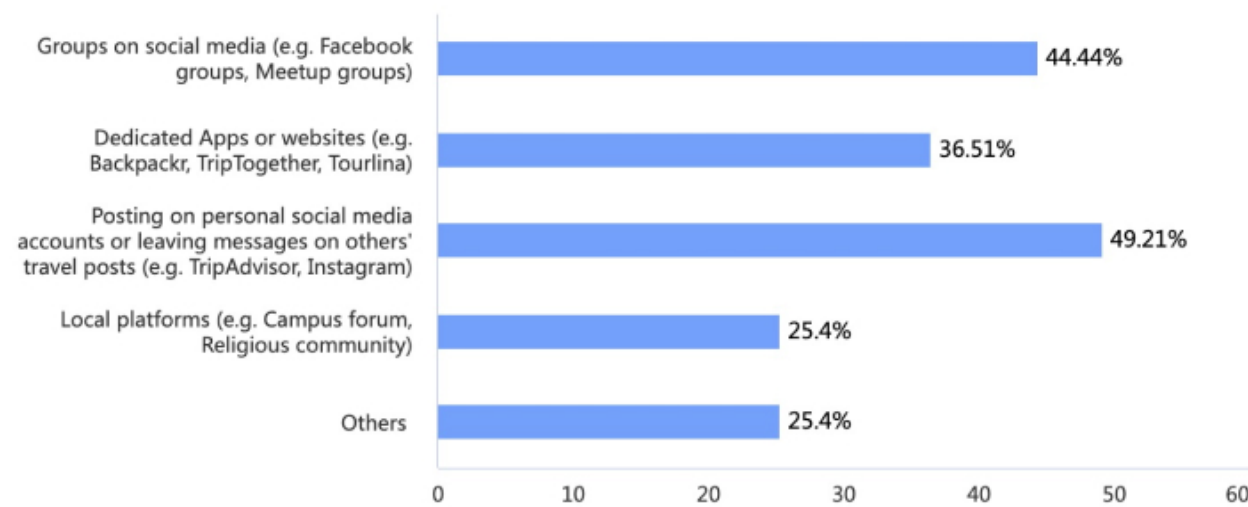


Fig 4.11 Data visualization of the answer to Q8

The response options for this question were mainly based on digital platforms, but a quarter of respondents mentioned offline ways, especially “friends of friends”. Others met and traveled together because they had signed up for the same tour or stayed at the same hostel.

9. What drives you to travel with strangers? (Multiple choice)

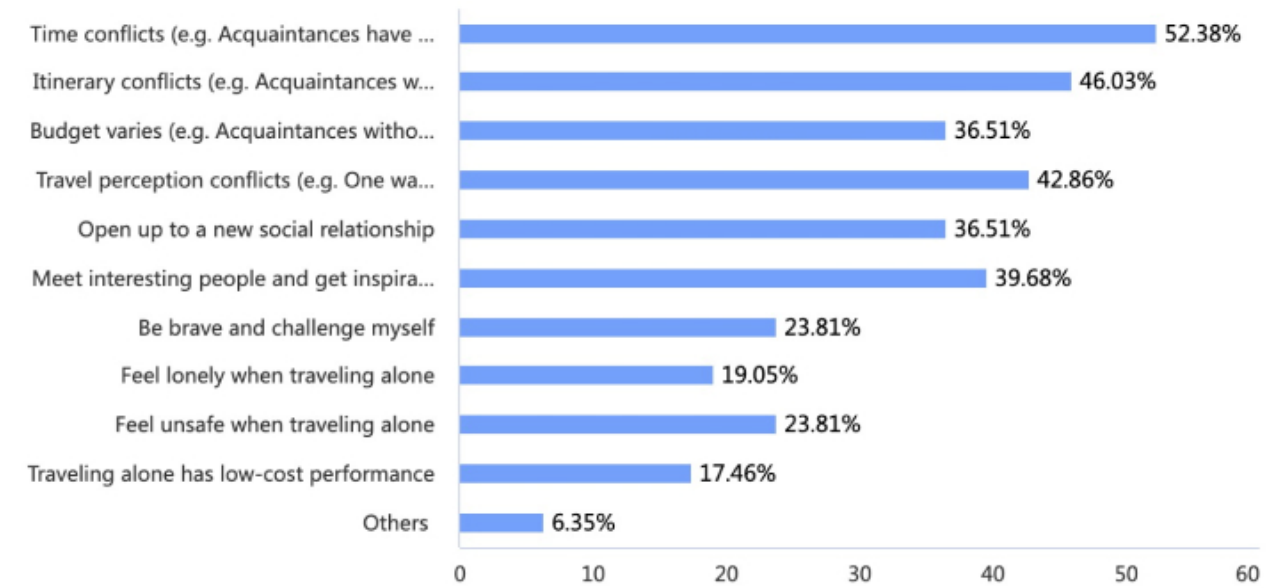


Fig 4.12 Data visualization of the answer to Q9

The word cloud shows that for those who have experienced traveling with strangers, feeling lonely and unsafe when traveling alone is not the main reason why they choose to travel with strangers. A large number of responses focus on “Conflicting schedules, conflicting itineraries, and conflicting travel perception with acquaintances”. People choose to travel with strangers who share the same goals, even if they do not know each other well. More than a third of respondents also think it is great to meet interesting people who can inspire them and even develop new social relationships.



Fig 4.13 Word cloud of the answer to Q9

## 10. What problems have you encountered when traveling with strangers? (Multiple)

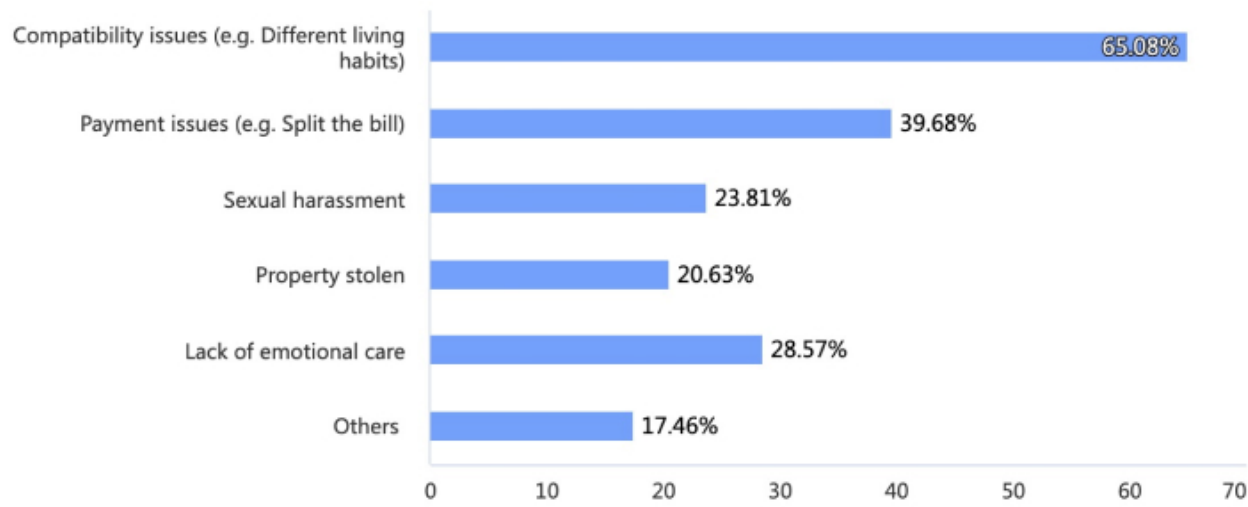


Fig 4.14 Data visualization of the answer to Q10

Among the respondents who have experienced traveling with strangers, nearly one-fifth of them had not faced any problems as they thought it was “so far so good”. However, more people encountered a variety of problems, of which more than 65% were compatibility problems caused by cultural differences, consumption concepts, and living habits. Also because users are traveling with strangers, which means people do not know each other well enough, things like poor bill splitting and lack of emotional care can often happen. In addition, sexual harassment and loss of property that can have serious consequences if they occur are also not insignificant.

## 11. What factors do you take into account when choosing strangers to travel with?

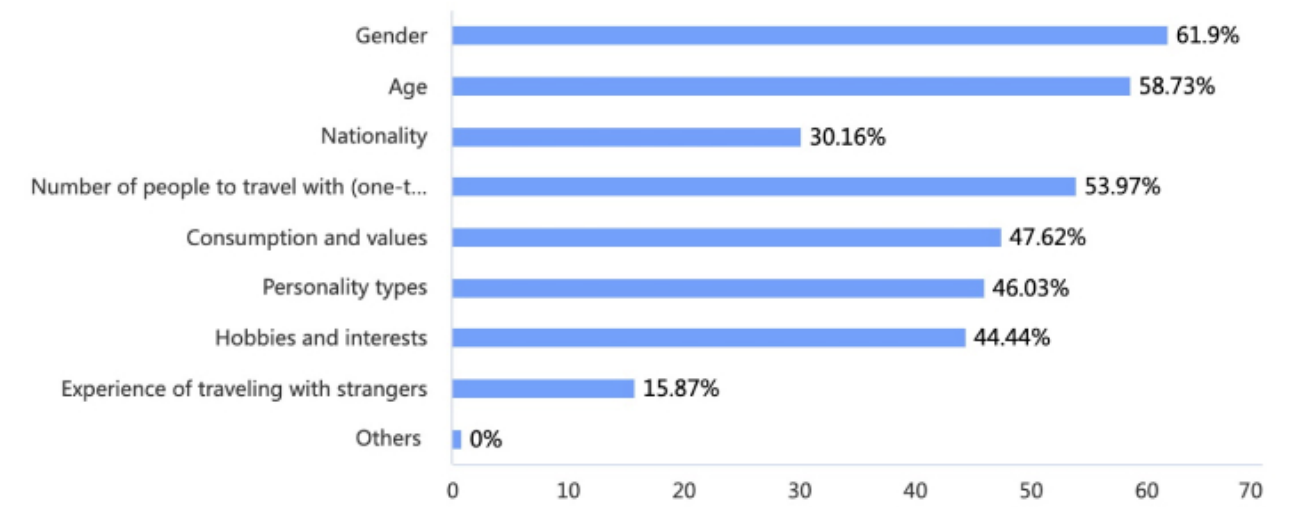


Fig 4.15 Data visualization of the answer to Q11

This question is designed for the filter bar in the subsequent design. Nationality and relevant traveling experience are not of paramount importance to potential target users. The simplest and most intuitive information, such as gender, age, and number of travelers, is the priority; on this basis, consumption and values, personality, and interests are considered.

## 12. Please evaluate your experience of traveling with strangers:

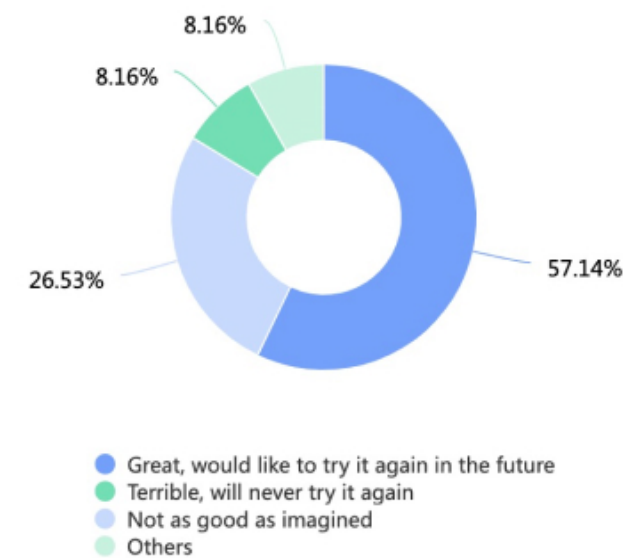


Fig 4.16 Data visualization of the answer to Q12

Under 10% of respondents who had experienced traveling with strangers thought their experience was terrible. The vast majority would be willing to continue trying to travel with strangers. Meanwhile, someone mentioned that reducing the expectation of traveling with an unfamiliar person is less likely to lead to disappointment.

13. If you have any special experiences you would like to share, or any expectations and suggestions for the platform for strangers to travel together, please write them here.

*“Better to check personal information clearly.” [Service]*

*“The platform should provide some regulatory systems like real-name authentication, risk assessment, and so on.” [Service]*

*“It would be nice and more reliable if users could be certified through an occupation social platform.” [Service]*

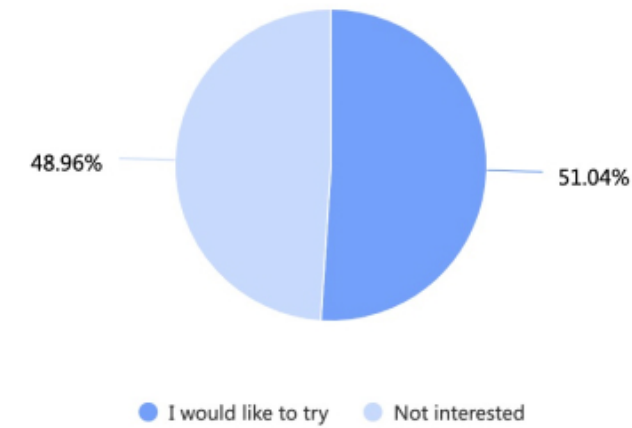
*“I hope to find someone sharing compatible interests.” [Motivation]*

*“For strangers, I would prefer to find someone with a similar cultural or educational background so that we might be able to talk more. It is also best if there is an intermediary or platform that can endorse the trust between us.” [Motivation, Service]*

*“How to avoid it from becoming a dating app?” [Concerns -> Service]*

*For people who have not experienced traveling with strangers*

14. Would you like to try traveling with strangers?



Of those who have not experienced traveling with strangers, half of them have not even thought of trying it.

Fig 4.17 Data visualization of the answer to Q14

*For people who have not experienced traveling with strangers and would like to try*

15. What will attract you to travel with strangers?

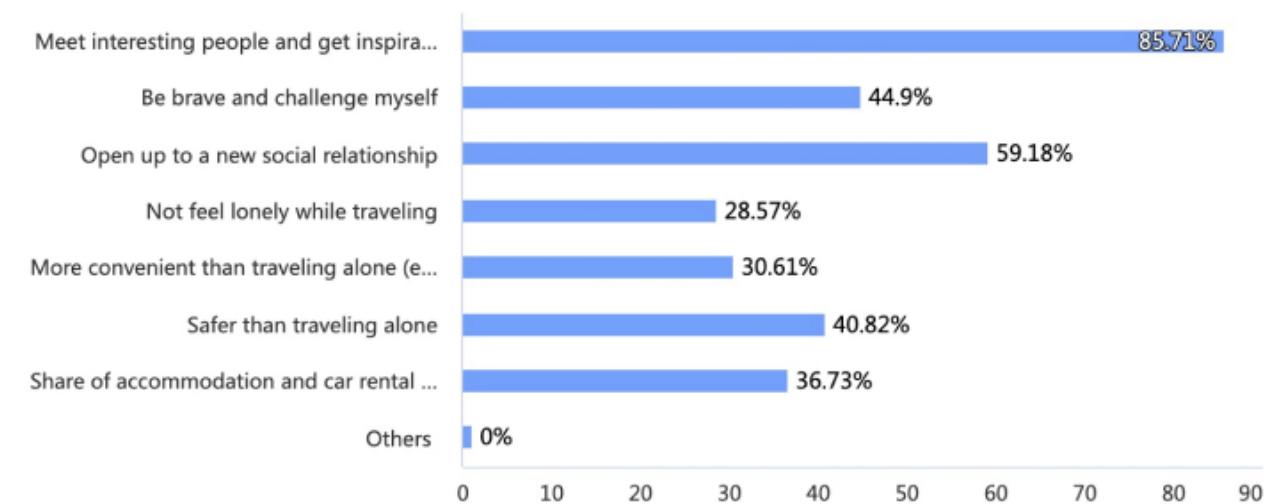


Fig 4.18 Data visualization of the answer to Q15

Those who are willing to give it a try are more interested in meeting new people and expressing themselves. They are not as concerned about the problems that can arise while traveling alone.

16. If you have any expectations and suggestions for the platform for strangers to travel together, please write them here.

*“How can the platform discipline strangers through the check of information, for example, knowing whether a user has a criminal past can avoid potential dangers.”*

*[Service]*

*“How to determine the authenticity of other users?”* *[Concerns -> Service]*

*“The platform should strengthen its regulation of users, especially those unsuspecting males.”* *[Concerns -> Service]*

*“The platform should not only authenticate identities but also track the journeys.”*

*[Service]*

*“For me it should be difficult trusting people I do not know, I would like a “buddy” I can trustahaha.”* *[Motivation]*

*“I feel that people of the same gender and similar age are more likely to play together.”*

*[Motivation]*

*“Mutual respect is the starting point for everything.”* *[Motivation, Equity design]*

*“What can I get out of attending activities on the platform?”* *[Motivation]*

*For people who have not experienced traveling with strangers but not interested*

17. What influences you not to travel with strangers?

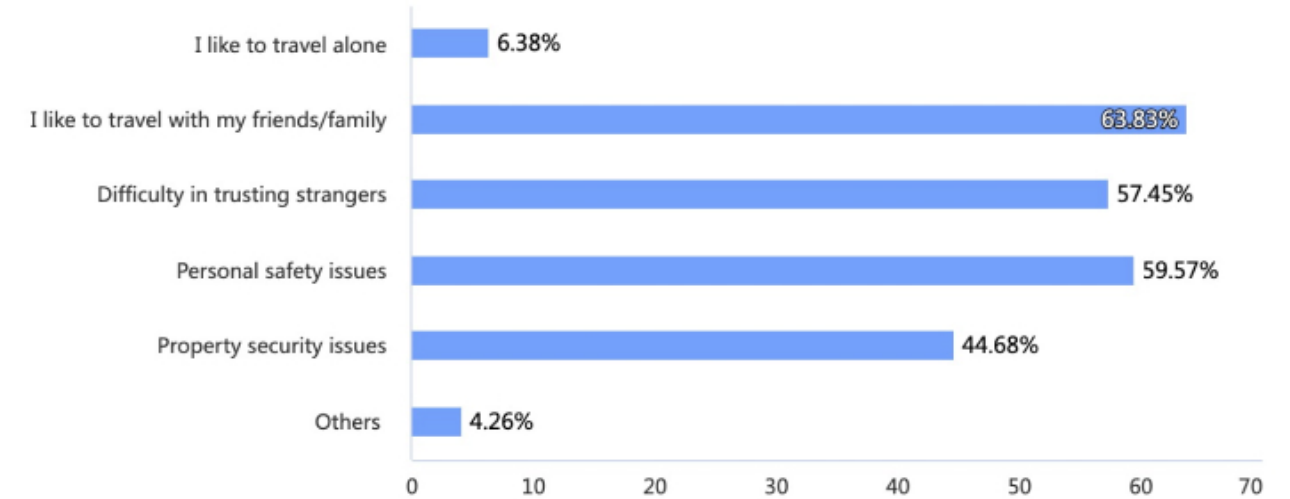


Fig 4.19 Data visualization of the answer to Q17

The data from the responses to this question reveal that the percentage of solo travelers is still a minority compared to those traveling together. More than half of the respondents indicated that they have difficulty trusting strangers and are concerned about traveling safely, which has led them to choose to travel with a more knowledgeable and trustworthy family member or friend.

18. If you have any other concerns about the platform for strangers to travel together, please write them here.

*“Real-name authentication and improved evaluation system.” [Service]*

*“Perhaps there will be a route recording feature to ensure personal safety.” [Service]*

*“I think traveling with strangers is inconvenient in terms of eating, clothing, housing, and some awkward situations that can arise.” [Concerns, Lack of motivation -> Service]*

*“I am afraid they are frauds.” [Concerns -> Service]*

*“As a girl, I am worried about the wrongdoers.” [Pain points, Service]*

*“I am the kind of person who cannot easily hang out with strangers, and I am concerned that I could not get along with them.” [Concerns -> Service, Inclusive design]*

*“I am lazy and for traveling I do not want to make efforts to plan myself.” [Lack of motivation]*

*“Will there be a proper guide?” [Service, Accessibility]*

## Analysis

In a nutshell, the questionnaire reveals that the topic of “Traveling with strangers” is not new to people nowadays and is positively received, with 40% of them even doing it. Respondents who have tried traveling with strangers stated relevant pain points through their own experiences and expressed a strong desire to find new like-minded friends. Those who have not tried it, on the other hand, expressed concerns about trust issues between strangers.

### User Analysis

The Gen X to Gen Z demographic will be the main user group, with women comprising nearly 2/3 of them. On top of the **accessibility** issues in the app, there is a specific user base for this platform to have a dedicated **Female Zone**.

### Pain Points Analysis

The issue of **trust** between strangers will be at the forefront, which means that this platform should have appropriate authentication as well as regulatory mechanisms. Secondly, people are looking forward to finding new **like-minded** friends, and it would be nice for them to have a place to chat and share ideas.

### Motivation Analysis

There is one user who asked what she could gain from this platform, involving the question of motivation. While building this platform, it is also creating a trustworthy and inclusive **community** so that more people come here when they want to travel with strangers and then have a precious experience. Perhaps based on their credits on this platform, users can redeem virtual or real souvenirs.

### Service Analysis

According to user feedback from the questionnaire, they want logins to be real-name, and they want the platform to have some mechanisms to ensure that the people they meet are real and can be trusted. On this foundation, the platform offers to help users find groups of people with common travel goals and similar interests.

### 4.1.2

#### Further Research: Credit Assessment on Social Media

Credit assessment on social media is actually related to a user's reputation. Jan H. Kietzmann, Kristopher Hermkens, Ian P. McCarthy and Bruno S. Silvestre mentioned in their article that reputation is a matter of trust in most cases (2011). For instance, Jeremiah Owyang's 70,000 and Guy Kawasaki's 292,000 followers on Twitter attest to their reputations as a social media maven and an emerging technology expert, respectively. Reputation refers not only to people but also to their content, which is often evaluated using content voting systems. On YouTube, the reputation of videos might be based on "view counts" or "ratings", while on Facebook this could be "likes", and so forth.

This kind of reputation system design is usually found in two types of platforms, one between the merchant and the consumer, such as shopping apps, food apps, and accommodation apps. Designers will try to make the assessment system as detailed as possible, so that the user understands every aspect of the purchased service. Also, the feature itself can enhance the credibility of the platform.

Another kind of platform provides functions for users to communicate with each other. The assessment system here will not be too complicated, because it could be difficult for designers to predict users' behavior, and they hope that users will enjoy the service provided by the platform rather than an issue that may arise between users.



## Dianping

Dianping is a Chinese app similar to Yelp. There are a lot of merchants, especially restaurants on this platform, selling their own products and services, and users evaluate them after consumption. When reviewing, users can add pictures and select recommended meals from the restaurants. At the same time, after the users comment, they will receive rewards from the platform, which can be used to purchase the products and services provided by the platform itself.



Fig 4.20 Dianping review process

## Airbnb

Built on a sharing economy, Airbnb is an online platform that allows property owners to list their place as holiday accommodation and allows travelers to find a place to stay while they are away from home. After a trip, the guest and host both have 14 days to leave a star-based review. The guest reviews the property based on location, value, accuracy, communication, cleanliness and the check-in process. Then the host will leave a review based on cleanliness, observance of house rules and communication (How Do Airbnb Reviews Work?, 2018).

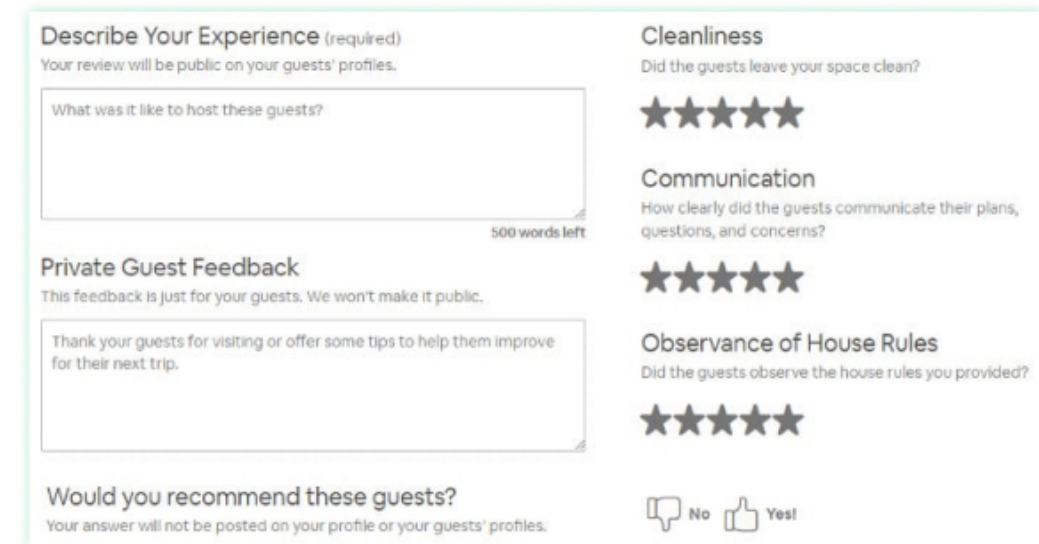


Fig 4.21 Airbnb review process

## Xianyu


Xianyu is a second-hand trading platform where any user can trade any supplies. During the entire transaction process, users communicate point-to-point, and the platform is not as strict in supervising users as it is in its parent company's product, Taobao, to treat merchants. The credit stars and mutual reviews of users help them trust each other better.



Fig 4.22 Xianyu review process

## 4.1.3 Personas

Based on the analysis of the results of the questionnaire, two main personas are created to better understand potential users' pain points and needs and then to find design opportunities.



**Annie**

Gender	Female
Age	24
Occupation	Junior accountant
Interests	Playing guitar and writing music

After a busy working season, Annie finally has a hard-earned holiday next week. She had planned to go to Sicily with her female friend for a holiday a few months ago, and had already planned the itinerary, bought the flight tickets, and booked the hotel. However, her friend is unable to make the trip, and Annie finds out that there is no way to get a refund if she cancels the flight or accommodation now, which makes her feel bad about the money wasting on the one hand, and angry at her friend on the other hand. In her heart of hearts, she still hopes that the trip can go ahead, "If only I can find someone who also wants to go to Sicily..." She posts the information about the trip on her Instagram but only gets comfort from her other friends while no one happens to have the time to be able to go to Sicily with her.

**Goals**

- Find someone (female) who also wants to go to Sicily next week, sharing a double room at the hotel
- Do not waste money on flight tickets and hotel accommodations, even if reselling them to someone else

**Frustrations**

- A fellow traveler's temporary cancellation interrupts the plan
- Friends around do not have time to go traveling together
- Potentially wasting time on pre-planning the trip and the money on flight tickets and hotel accommodations

**Quote**

"If only I can find someone who also wants to go to Sicily..."

**Frequently used apps**

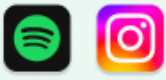



Fig 4.23 Persona one



**Raymond**

Gender	Male
Age	30
Occupation	Fitness trainer
Interests	Go hiking

As a fitness trainer, Raymond enjoys working out and meeting new people. He often finds friends to go hiking or even camping in the nearby areas on weekends or holidays. He also shares videos of himself working out and hiking on social media such as TikTok. But the Internet is cluttered with different kinds of people, and it takes him some time and effort to find people who share the same passion. He wants a pure platform that can help him quickly find interest groups with corresponding hiking plans. Meanwhile, he is willing to share his hiking experiences on that platform.

**Goals**

- Find a weekend hiking group and join, preferably someone with a car
- Share his own hiking experiences

**Frustrations**

- It is not easy to find people who share the same passion on the Internet

**Quote**

"I like hiking with friends, and I prefer to ride in their cars all the way there haha."

**Frequently used apps**




Fig 4.24 Persona two

### 4.1.4 Brainstorming

The answers to the open-ended questions in the questionnaire and the user needs embodying in the personas inspire many design opportunities, which can be broadly categorized into three types: to **find**, to **share**, and to **trade**.

1. Find travel companions by **searching** for specific destinations and approximate travel dates
2. Find specific trips through the **filter function** (e.g. an exhibition in the city, a mountain climbing, a scuba diving, or even a local dinner)
3. Switch to **map view** to find information about a specific destination
4. Find a travel companion of the same sex in the **Female Zone** who can share the accommodation
5. Find a ride as a hitchhiker
6. A **square** to share personal travel experiences or trip tips
7. A **square** to browse popular destinations and related trip tips
8. A **square** to ask or answer travel-related questions
9. Follow the **footprints** of other travelers
10. A **market** for reselling booked hotels or event tickets
11. Help to **personalize** travel itineraries
12. Provide local tours or car rental services as a **travel agent**

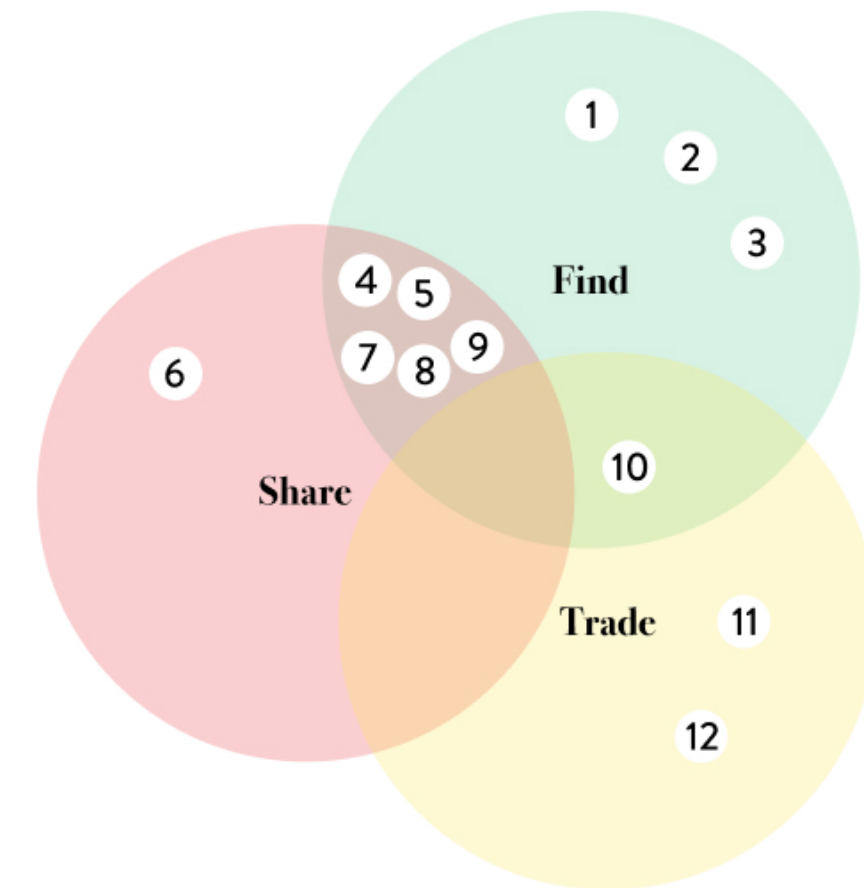


Fig 4.25 Design opportunities

Partitioning all the brainstormed design opportunities reveals that the core of the design lies in the sharing and exchange of information, and the search and matching of companion travelers. Therefore, it is better to provide both finding and sharing functional modules on this digital platform.

## 4.2 Design Concept

### 4.2.1 The Idea

This product is aimed at people who love to travel, especially those who are missing travel companions because of conflicting schedules with people they know around them, or those who feel unsafe and lonely when traveling alone. The concept is not only to design a digital platform where users can find people to travel with based on specific destinations and times, complemented by types of activities, spending expectations, etc. but also to build a trustworthy and inclusive community where users are able to find like-minded people and share their experiences with each other. This product is going to be a mobile app for travelers on the go.

#### Useful

The app helps address the needs of users who want to find companions to travel with or do an activity together through posting and filtering search features.

#### Inclusive

All sincere users are welcome to the platform; meanwhile, a special female zone is designed to better protect women's rights and enhance their sense of trust.

#### Trustworthy

The real-name login and credit assessment system allow users to be aware of their manners, and people are able to trust each other as a result.

#### Enjoyable

A square where users can say what they want to say, allowing them to create, share and Q&A, and enjoy the atmosphere of this friendly and supportive community.

## 4.2.2 Credit Assessment System Design

Based on further research, it can be found that many apps with a business model will use a credit assessment system, which helps users to better assess the services provided before they undertake the experience. Although there is no business model in this project at the moment, mutual companionship with strangers is a kind of service, and it makes sense to rate each other's experience at the end of the trip, as well as to increase users' trust before contact and reduce the cost of consideration.

Considering the user scenario, where traveling with a stranger could be a complete long-distance trip or a city viewing, this evaluation system should not be designed to be overly complex, resulting in compromising the primary and secondary features provided by the platform. Therefore, a simple star rating system was devised, and if the user is willing to, they can leave a couple of comments at the same time, which will be displayed on each user's profile page to be seen by all users.

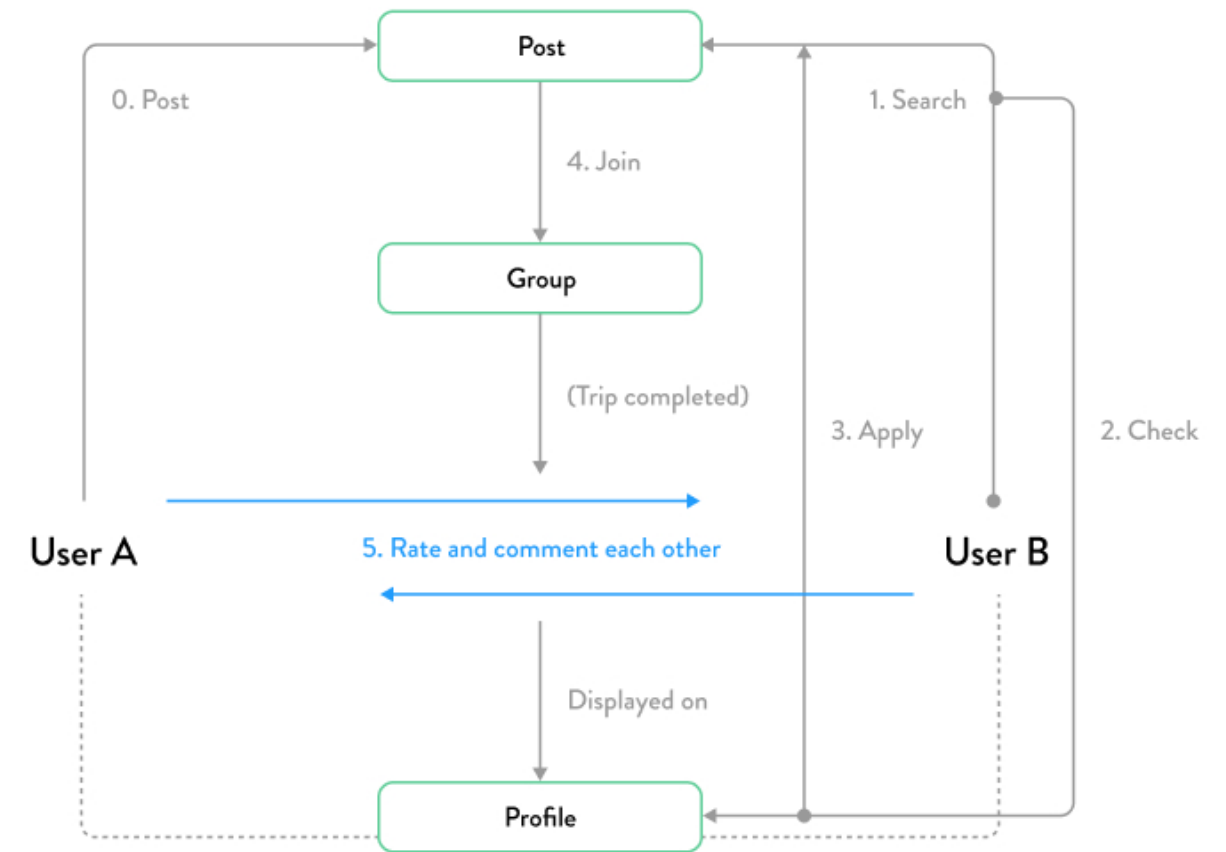
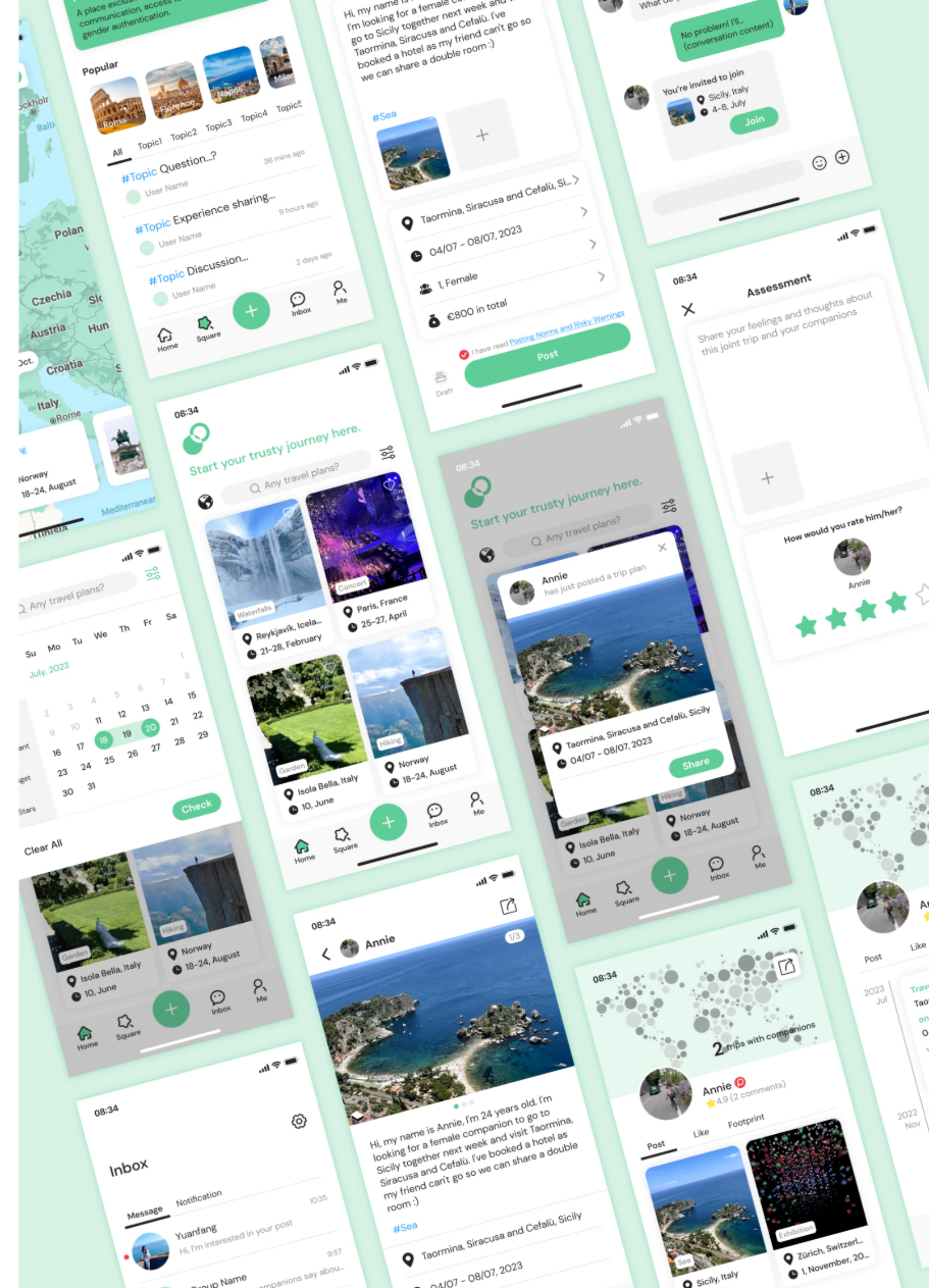


Fig 4.26 Post-companion assessment system

# 4.3 UX and UI Design



Scan for interactive prototype

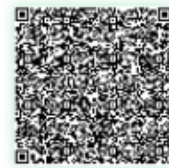


Fig 4.27 OnTheGo mockups

### 4.3.1 Information Architecture

The app is divided via the navigation bar into a homepage, a square discussion page, an inbox page including messages and notifications, and a profile page. In the middle of the navigation bar on each page is a button that enables quick posting.

LEGEND

- Page Page
- 1st Priority 1st Priority
- Page Page
- 2nd Priority 2nd Priority
- Contents Contents
- Button Button
- Module Module

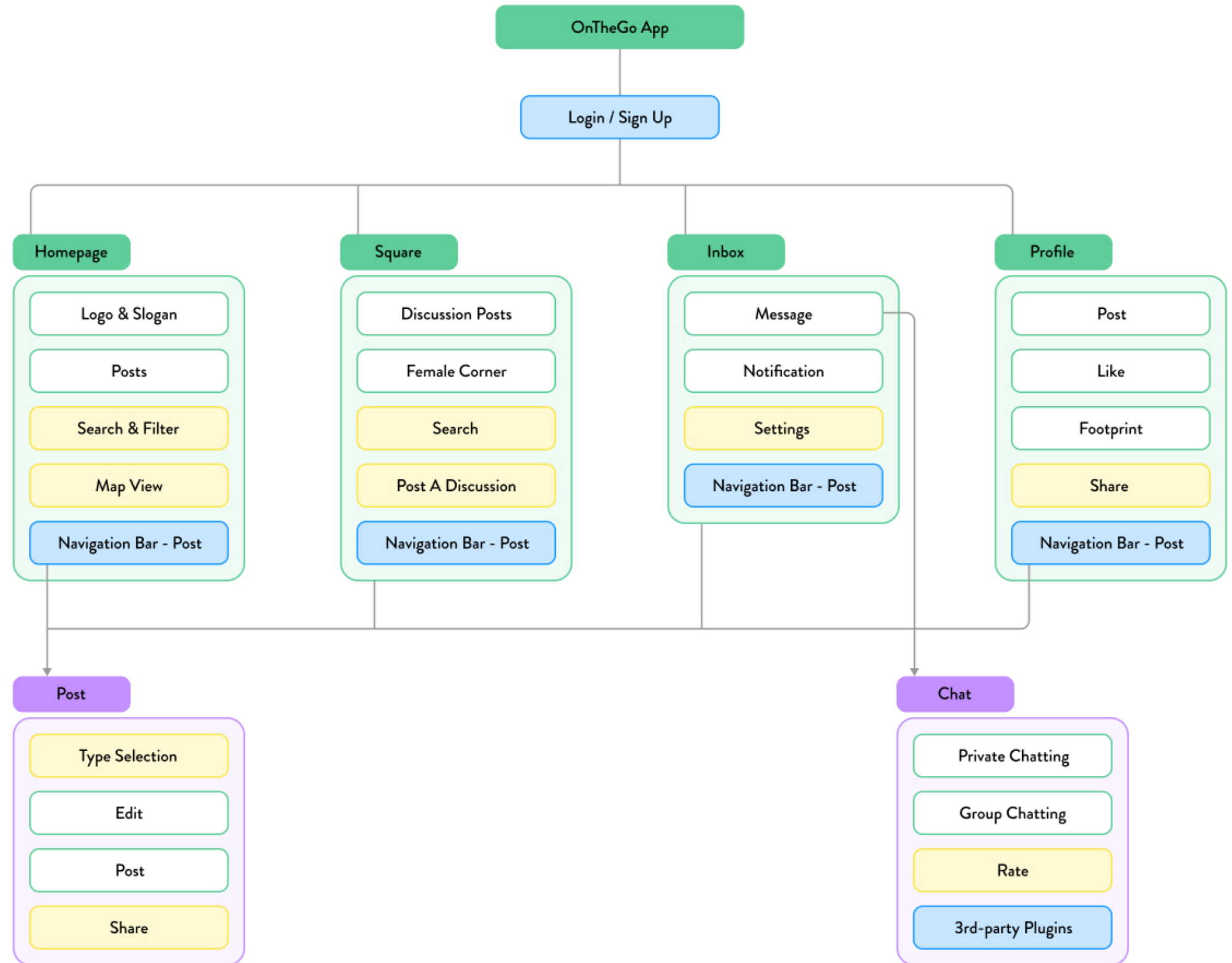


Fig 4.28 OnTheGo information architecture

### 4.3.2 Brand and Visual Identity

Based on the user scenarios and accessible design concept, the app is named **OnTheGo**. Using two circles shaped like “o”s and connecting them to form infinity represents people’s connection, and infinite possibilities and inclusivity. The color blue-green represents the concept of sustainability and environmental protection; meanwhile, this color provides the user with a sense of inner peace and creates a harmonious atmosphere. The alternative color for the logo could be colorful.

#### Colors

HEX: #5FCD98  
RGB: 95, 205, 152

HEX: #222222  
RGB: 34, 34, 34

#### Typography

**DM Sans**  
DM Sans  
DM Sans

#### Logo



#### Logo Alternative



#### Slogan

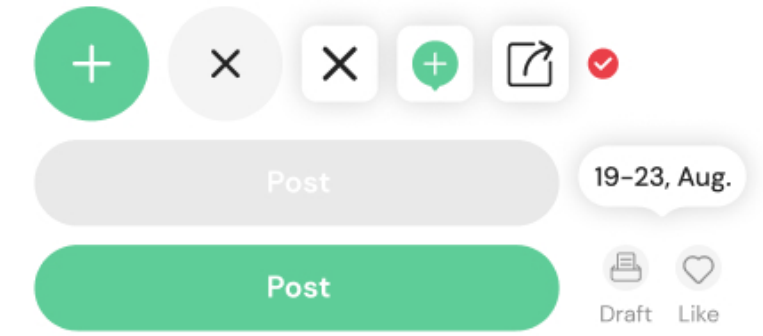
Start your trusty journey here.

Fig 4.29 OnTheGo logo and visual identity

#### Icons



#### Buttons



#### Navigation Bar



#### Cards

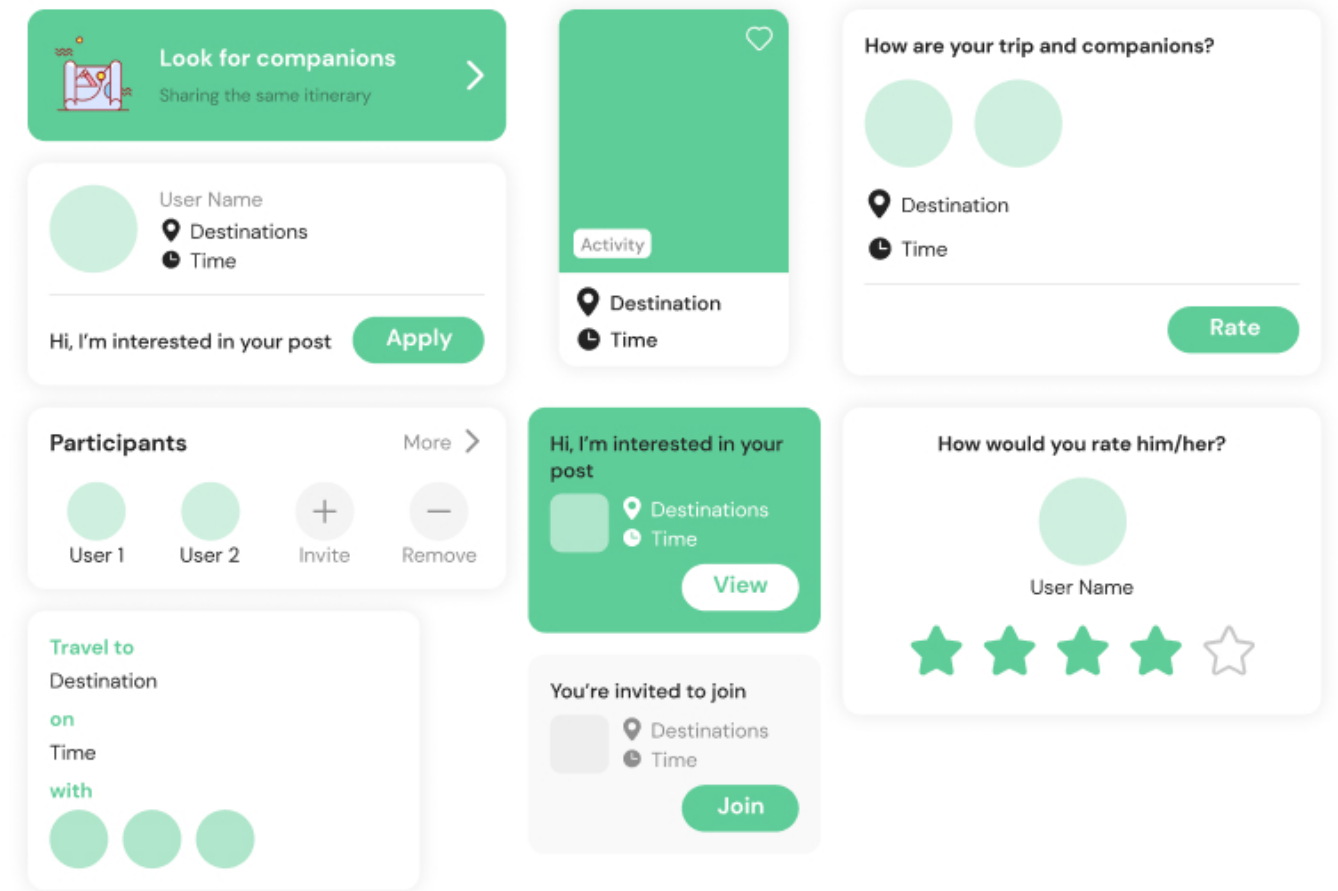


Fig 4.30 OnTheGo UI kit



### 4.3.3 User Flow and Main Pages

#### Flow 1: User A Makes a Post

The following high-fidelity prototype screenshots demonstrate the process of a user opening the app, tapping the post button to make a post, and viewing the posting history on the profile page.

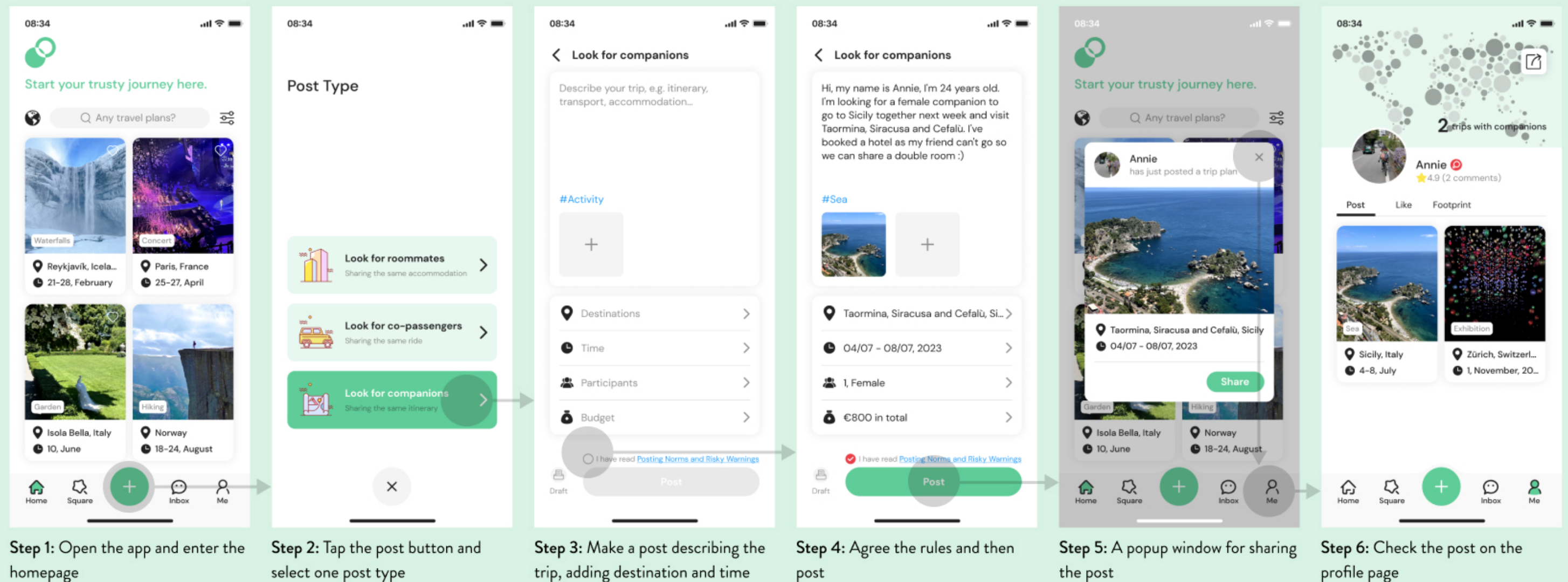


Fig 4.31 User flow 1

## Flow 2: User B Finds and Applies for an Interested Trip

The following high-fidelity prototype screenshots demonstrate the process of another user opening the app, browsing the posts, and then finding and applying for an interested one.

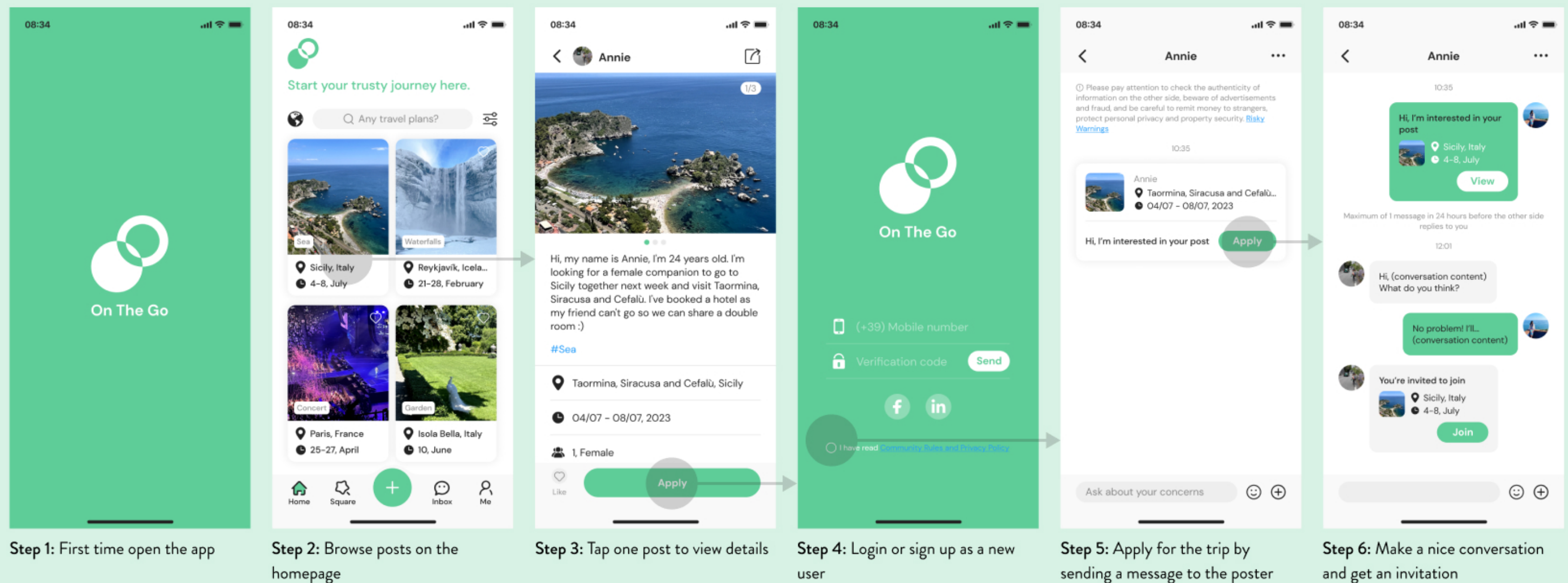


Fig 4.32 User flow 2

### Flow 3: User A and B Chat in a Group and Rate Each Other after the Trip

The following high-fidelity prototype screenshots demonstrate the process of User A and B chatting in private and then in the trip group. There are 3rd-party plugins such as Splitwise for a better trip experience. And when the preset travel time is over, the assessment system will inform them to rate each other.

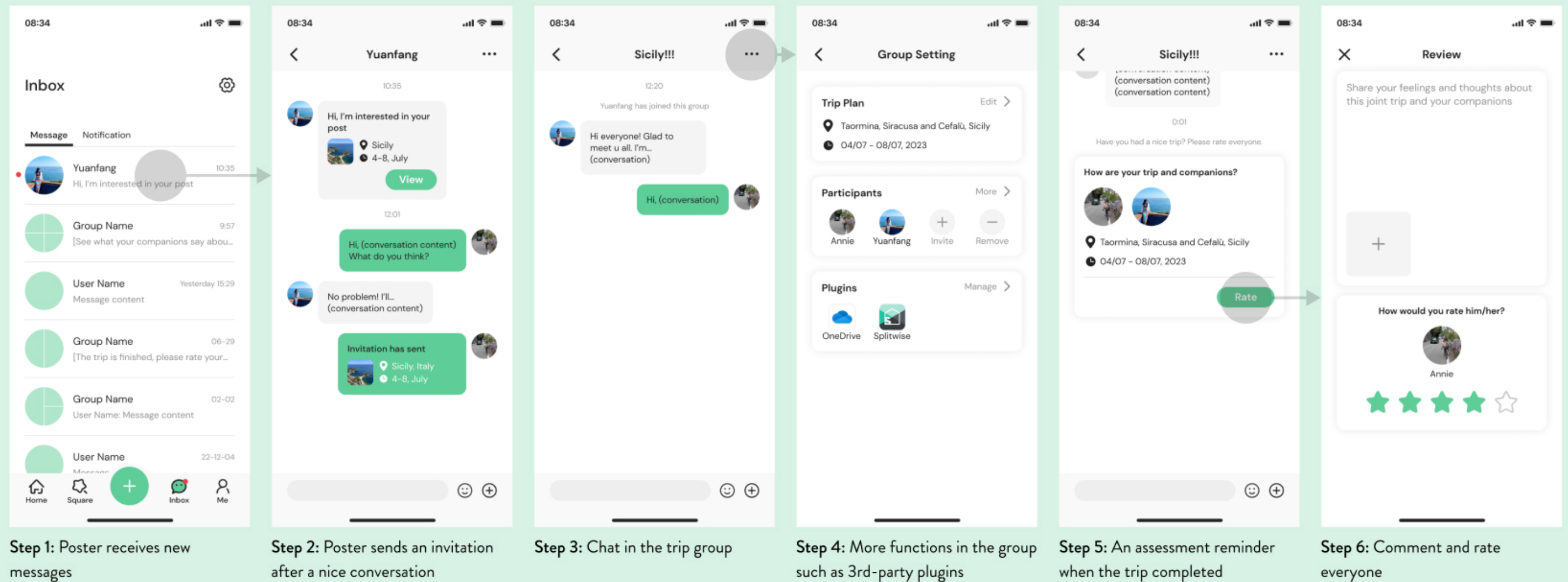


Fig 4.33 User flow 3

## 4.4 Other Features

### 4.4.1 Square

A dedicated square page is designed along with a female zone that requires gender authentication. In this square, all users can share their traveling experiences and have a Q&A about specific destinations and activities. Popular destinations are also specially marked.

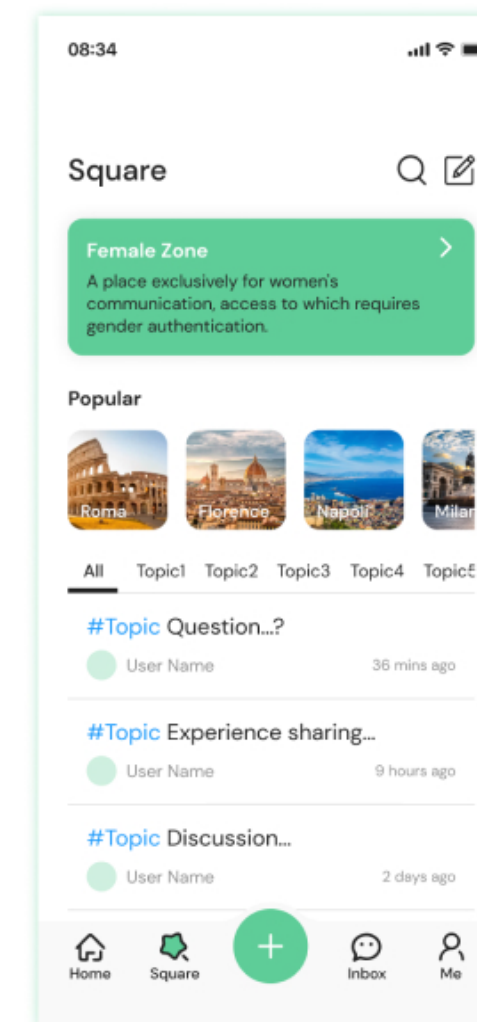


Fig 4.34 Feature: Square

## 4.4.2 Map View and Filter Function

Users can also tap the map and filter buttons on the homepage for a more in-depth search. On the map page, users can zoom in and out of the map to view posts for their destinations, and can also post directly by tapping the post button in the upper right corner of the page. On the filter page, users can filter more detailedly on the destination, time, activity, number of participants, budget and user credit stars.



Fig 4.35 Feature: Map

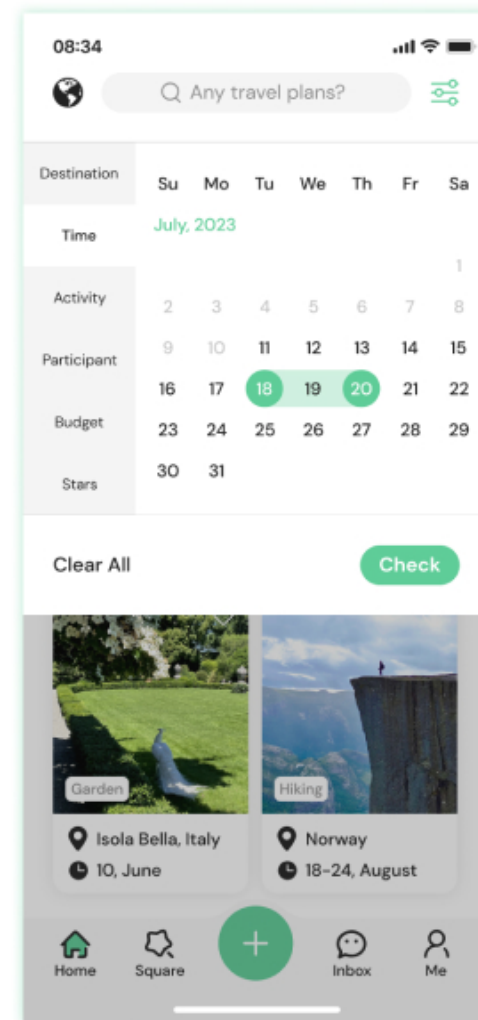


Fig 4.36 Feature: Filter

## 4.4.3 Profile with Footprint

On the profile page, users can view their own published posts and liked posts of others. There is also a footprint portal that enables users to recall historical trips. The credit star of every user is public and visible to other users.

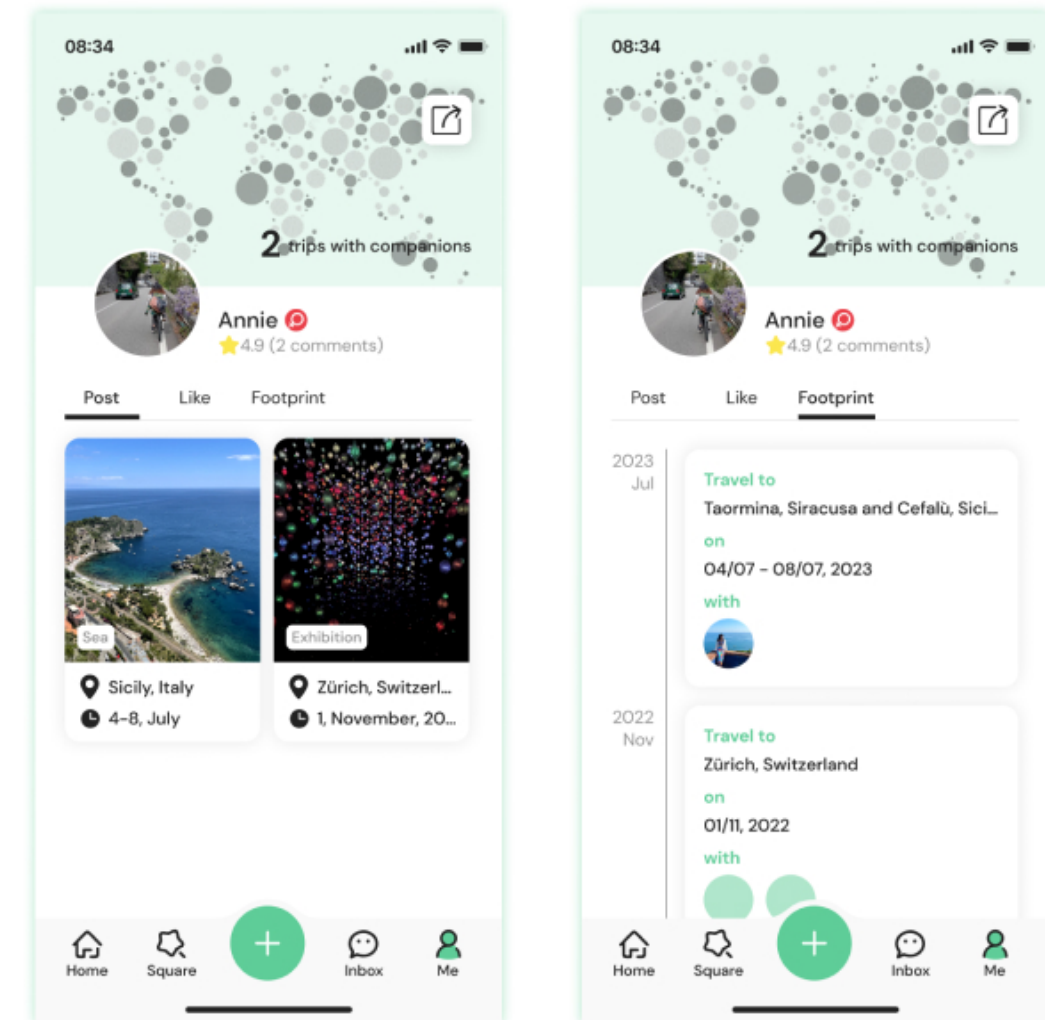


Fig 4.37 Feature: Profile

## 4.5 Prototype Testing

### 4.5.1 Testing Protocol and Expected Outcomes

The preparation phase of the testing included the recruitment of respondents and the preparation of materials. Since the topic was aimed at all people who love traveling, the audience was not limited to age and gender, but was simply divided into expert and non-expert groups.

The materials tested were an interactive prototype. Before the testing, the background of the project will be introduced, then the respondents will be guided to realize the 3 user flows on the prototype, during which the organizer will observe if there are any contradictions in the design, and finally, the respondents will be interviewed to find out their views and expectations about the project and the prototype.

The test expects the user to be able to independently and autonomously complete the 3 user flows to reach the usability goal. At the same time, the overall design and the functionality provided allowed users to feel that the design was indeed working towards building a trustworthy and inclusive community.

## 4.5.2 Testing Results

The online testing was conducted on Discord so that respondents could share their screens and it is better for the organizer to observe their actions. The two respondents are named Ruwen Zheng and Yifei Wang.

### User Flow 1

Among the two respondents, Ruwen uses social media more often than Yifei, and he has a more sensitive feel for the interface. He pointed out that the post-type selection page can be turned into a half-screen page, and the current interface is somewhat misleading; for the rules and warnings that users need to check before posting, it is best to have a pop-up window to ensure that users can read in depth. He mentioned, “If you want to be a company to produce the project, you need to do more on this to make you more reliable.” Both Ruwen and Yifei completed flow one. Yifei also hoped there would be a red dot on the profile icon after posting to remind him that the content has been updated.

### User Flow 2

Regarding the sequence of flow two, two respondents hold completely different views. Ruwen pointed out that this should be a serious platform, and users may be going to a totally new destination, and they are not familiar with each other as well as the environment, which is different from some social media and should not be

aimed at exposure. Therefore, he believes that users should register before browsing the content in this app. On the contrary, Yifei was very satisfied with the current process, because he felt that asking users to register at the beginning is too forced on them.

### User Flow 3

As for flow three, Yifei raised the consideration of multi-person conversations, which is, how to ensure that user a trusts user b, while user b trusts user c, and user a can trust user c at the same time. This was not reflected in the prototype.

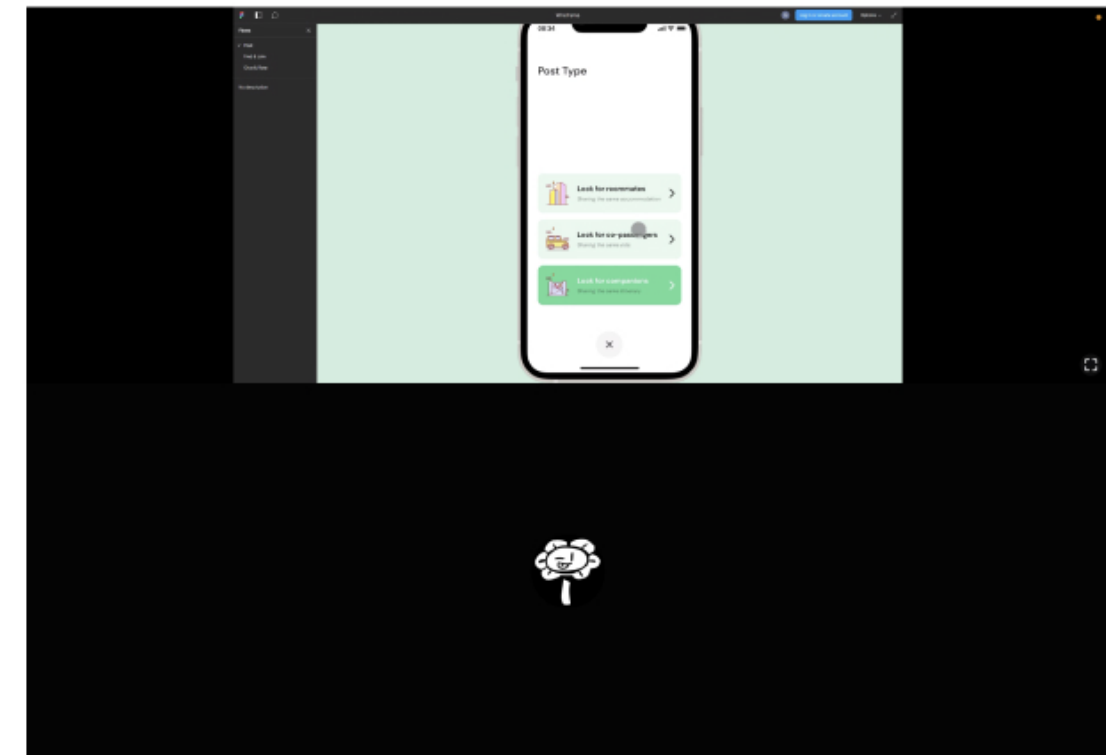


Fig 4.38 User testing

### 4.5.3 Conclusion and Future Development

Overall, respondents have a positive perception of the prototype, considering the interface clean and the process clear, allowing them to successfully complete tasks and attain their objectives. However, concerns have emerged regarding potential challenges post-project launch. These concerns encompass doubts about the platform's reliability, its capacity to assist users in mitigating risks, strategies for profit generation, and the need for more detailed design work on features, particularly the “female zone”. Therefore, the project can continue to develop in the following aspects.

#### Female Zone

The female zone has been mentioned all the time, but its entrance is designed on the square page. Users can choose the number of participants and their gender when posting, but this does not mean that they can only browse posts posted by women. How to authenticate the users' gender and enhance their experience will be an urgent need to be solved in the future.

#### Business Model

Although the business model was not designed, it is an issue that will definitely be considered when it comes to the implementation of the project. How to make this platform profitable and sustainable without turning it into a platform full of advertising and false information is a key issue that requires in-depth thinking. It would be a good choice to seek help from relevant economic and management experts in this regard.

#### Browse First or Register First?

The respondents disagreed greatly on this question, and both sides seemed to have merit. It seems that a somewhat larger-scale a/b testing can be conducted to see which one is preferred by potential users. Absolutely, this question may ultimately need to be tested by the market to get a more ideal answer.





# 5

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Fig 5.1 Sweet Suite Room

## 5.1 Limitation and Reflection

The research and design process of this thesis has certain limitations. Due to the author's limited professional knowledge of economics and management, the project does not address business models, which are precisely what should be discussed. An online community like this, which requires regulation and order maintenance, needs to be profitable in order to have enough manpower and energy to maintain a healthy environment.

Moreover, while traveling with strangers is a potential starting point for development, the platform needs to attract a sufficient user base to function effectively. Otherwise, it may end up like Backpackr and Turlina, unable to meet user needs due to a lack of users.

For such a substantial platform, users should receive enhanced protection, in other words, the oversight mechanisms should be strengthened. Besides guiding users to read community rules and risk warnings, are there other gentle yet effective ways to build trust between users and the platform? However, many of these ideas may remain speculative until the project is launched. Despite the project's goal is to create a trustworthy and inclusive community, its implementation may raise questions.

## 5.2 Conclusion

This thesis is based on the shift in people's travel mindset in the post-pandemic era and attempts to design an approach centered on "traveling with strangers". A digital platform has been developed to provide features such as specialized posting, search filtering, experience sharing, and evaluating travel companions.

This marks the author's initial endeavor in designing a complete platform system. Despite certain deficiencies during the research and design phases, the author has diligently worked towards the objective of establishing a trustworthy and inclusive community.

The author aspires that this project can serve as a reference for future designers, fostering collaborative efforts in crafting a user-friendly platform for travel enthusiasts.

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## List of Figures

Fig 1.1	Cosmetics Cosmos <i>Adapted from: <a href="https://miniature-calendar.com/210927/">https://miniature-calendar.com/210927/</a></i>	8
Fig 1.2	Design thinking process <i>Image by the author</i>	12
Fig 2.1	Triumphal Arch <i>Adapted from: <a href="https://miniature-calendar.com/211027/">https://miniature-calendar.com/211027/</a></i>	14
Fig 2.2	Solo travel trend <i>Adapted from: <a href="https://newsdirect.com/news/senior-solo-travel-sees-a-boost-in-2021-546127160">https://newsdirect.com/news/senior-solo-travel-sees-a-boost-in-2021-546127160</a></i>	19
Fig 3.1	Smart Baggage Claim <i>Adapted from: <a href="https://miniature-calendar.com/191109/">https://miniature-calendar.com/191109/</a></i>	28
Fig 3.2	Solo Travel Forum on TripAdvisor <i>Screenshot from: <a href="https://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/ShowForum-g1-i12357-Solo_Travel.html">https://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/ShowForum-g1-i12357-Solo_Travel.html</a></i>	31
Fig 3.3	TripAdvisor does not provide a buddy service <i>Screenshot from: <a href="https://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowTopic-g1-i12357-k7346346-Is_there_a_safe_way_to_find_a_Travel_Buddy_Info_Thread-Solo_Travel.html">https://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowTopic-g1-i12357-k7346346-Is_there_a_safe_way_to_find_a_Travel_Buddy_Info_Thread-Solo_Travel.html</a></i>	32
Fig 3.4	TripAdvisor shares links to other related sites <i>Screenshot from: <a href="https://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowTopic-g1-i12357-k7346346-Is_there_a_safe_way_to_find_a_Travel_Buddy_Info_Thread-Solo_Travel.html">https://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowTopic-g1-i12357-k7346346-Is_there_a_safe_way_to_find_a_Travel_Buddy_Info_Thread-Solo_Travel.html</a></i>	32
Fig 3.5	Groups on Facebook <i>Screenshot from: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/search/top?q=travel%20buddy">https://www.facebook.com/search/top?q=travel%20buddy</a></i>	33

Fig 3.6	Posting restrictions on Qyer <i>Screenshot from: Qyer app</i>	34
Fig 3.7	Homepage on Backpackr <i>Screenshot from: <a href="https://app.backpackr.org/">https://app.backpackr.org/</a></i>	36
Fig 3.8	Feature pages on Turlina <i>Adapted from: <a href="https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=de.tourlina.Tourlina&amp;pcampaignid=web_share">https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=de.tourlina.Tourlina&amp;pcampaignid=web_share</a></i>	37
Fig 3.9	Login page on TripTogether <i>Screenshot from: <a href="https://www.triptogether.com/">https://www.triptogether.com/</a></i>	38
Fig 3.10	Comparison <i>Image by the author</i>	40
Fig 4.1	Balloon <i>Adapted from: <a href="https://miniature-calendar.com/121219/">https://miniature-calendar.com/121219/</a></i>	42
Fig 4.2	Generations <i>Image by the author</i>	45
Fig 4.3	Questionnaire posted on Facebook <i>Image by the author</i>	46
Fig 4.4	Data visualization of the answer to Q1 <i>Image by the author</i>	47
Fig 4.5	Data visualization of the answer to Q2 <i>Image by the author</i>	47
Fig 4.6	Data visualization of the answer to Q3 <i>Image by the author</i>	48
Fig 4.7	Data visualization of the answer to Q4 <i>Image by the author</i>	48
Fig 4.8	Data visualization of the answer to Q5 <i>Image by the author</i>	49

Fig 4.9	Data visualization of the answer to Q6 <i>Image by the author</i>	49
Fig 4.10	Data visualization of the answer to Q7 <i>Image by the author</i>	50
Fig 4.11	Data visualization of the answer to Q8 <i>Image by the author</i>	50
Fig 4.12	Data visualization of the answer to Q9 <i>Image by the author</i>	51
Fig 4.13	Word cloud of the answer to Q9 <i>Image by the author</i>	51
Fig 4.14	Data visualization of the answer to Q10 <i>Image by the author</i>	52
Fig 4.15	Data visualization of the answer to Q11 <i>Image by the author</i>	53
Fig 4.16	Data visualization of the answer to Q12 <i>Image by the author</i>	53
Fig 4.17	Data visualization of the answer to Q14 <i>Image by the author</i>	55
Fig 4.18	Data visualization of the answer to Q15 <i>Image by the author</i>	55
Fig 4.19	Data visualization of the answer to Q17 <i>Image by the author</i>	57
Fig 4.20	Dianping review process <i>Screenshot from: Dianping app</i>	62
Fig 4.21	Airbnb review process <i>Adapted from: <a href="https://bnbduck.com/how-do-airbnb-reviews-work/">https://bnbduck.com/how-do-airbnb-reviews-work/</a></i>	63
Fig 4.22	Xianyu review process <i>Screenshot from: Xianyu app</i>	63

Fig 4.23	Persona one <i>Image by the author</i>	64
Fig 4.24	Persona two <i>Image by the author</i>	65
Fig 4.25	Design opportunities <i>Image by the author</i>	67
Fig 4.26	Post-companion assessment system <i>Image by the author</i>	71
Fig 4.27	OnTheGo mockups <i>Image by the author</i>	73
Fig 4.28	OnTheGo information architecture <i>Image by the author</i>	74
Fig 4.29	OnTheGo logo and visual identity <i>Image by the author</i>	76
Fig 4.30	OnTheGo UI kit <i>Image by the author</i>	77
Fig 4.31	User flow 1 <i>Image by the author</i>	78
Fig 4.32	User flow 2 <i>Image by the author</i>	80
Fig 4.33	User flow 3 <i>Image by the author</i>	82
Fig 4.34	Feature: Square <i>Image by the author</i>	85
Fig 4.35	Feature: Map <i>Image by the author</i>	86
Fig 4.36	Feature: Filter <i>Image by the author</i>	86

Fig 4.37	Feature: Profile <i>Image by the author</i>	87
Fig 4.38	User testing <i>Screenshot from: Discord app</i>	91
Fig 5.1	Sweet Suite Room <i>Adapted from: <a href="https://miniature-calendar.com/230228/">https://miniature-calendar.com/230228/</a></i>	94



