

WEBSITE DESIGN FOR SEXUAL FLUIDITY IN LGBT BY USING USER EXPERIENCE A CASE STUDY OF BlazingLove.com

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ABSTRACT

Sexual fluidity has been used in the context that gender identity or sexuality of people could be changed fluidly according to their context of living. There are social issues and arguments regarding sexual fluidity, gender identity, and equality. One of them is that they do not want to express their gender identity publicly, while it is an important personal factor to segment customers for marketing purposes. Doing business with this group of people needs to manage this sensitive issue properly. Hence, this research aims to first coin the term sexual fluidity and empathize the desires and the pain points of the users with sexual fluidity, and then using the findings to design an updated version of BlazingLove that will solve the issue using the user experience (UX) concept. BlazingLove.com was selected to be a case study for this research as their users are likely to have sexual fluidity due to the nature of the business. Mix methodology research was designed and developed by employing quantitative questionnaire survey and qualitative in-depth interview with experts. The result shown that sexual fluidity could be defined as personal sexual orientation that may or may not be expressed physically, which can be changed according to personal preferences does not concern their genders and it can be changed anytime according to the person living contexts. Further, this group of people preferred to be segmented by their lifestyle, interest, and preferences, rather than their gender identity. The updated version of BlazingLove was therefore designed by using the new segmentation to identify their target users and develop personas.

Keywords: User experience, Website design, Sexual fluidity, Equality

Introduction

Nagoshi, Louis, Nagoshi, and Lothamer (2019) found that assigned sex at birth as male or female could create prejudices. Once people grown up their sexual orientation may change, and the prejudices may create social pressures and issues. There are various terms for gender identities and the most common terms are LGBTQ, which stands for lesbian,

gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (College, 2019; Milton, 2002). There are also other gender identity classifications depending on their purposes (College, 2019; Milton, 2002; Savin-Williams, 2017). However, it is more complicated than just identifying one gender as the gender is somewhat fluid and could be changed from times to times, this is where the term “sexual fluidity” arrived i.e., human has

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no definite gender, it fluids like water depending on their context of living (Savin-Williams, 2017). Although, the term has been used for quite some time, there is no exact definition for sexual fluidity as this term has been used in a number of meanings and these may cause certain negative attitude toward ones with sexual fluidity (Katz-Wise, 2015; Nagoshi et al., 2019) especially for Thais, as the Thai word for sexual fluidity could be interpreted to “keep changing their mind” or giving the sense of uncertainty. Therefore, people who have different genders from their assigned sex at birth are most likely to have uncomfortable to express themselves or perceived that they were prejudiced. In developing digital products for people with sexual fluidity, these issues need to be concerned.

However, market segmentation usually use gender as a personal factor to segment customers (Diamond, 2008). This research would like to tackle this issue by studying desires and pain points of these groups when using digital products. However, there is a limit research on the sexual fluidity in Thailand, but these group of people have significant purchasing powers toward their desired products. BlazingLove.com was chosen as a case study for this research because of the nature of their business and the users are mostly LGBT.

BlazingLove.com is a friend finder community for users who have various gender identities. It founded and launched in 1995 (BlazingLove, 2019 a) as a bootstrapping startup. The number of users visiting BlazingLove on average of 500 users in 2019 and increase to average of 1,000 users in 2020, it shown that there is a potential to expand and access to wider range of users. However, according to the statistics from Google Analytic, it shown that 97.89% and 97.69% were new users for the year 2019

and 2020, respectively (BlazingLove, 2019 b, 2020). These figures shown that the website has relatively low repeat users, which is not so good for business if it would like to be a community platform as well as making money due to the fact the cost of acquiring new users are at least eight times higher than retain the existing ones (Chakravarty & Sarma, 2021).

User Experience or UX refers to “all digital interactions between a user and a company or a brand”. It is a significant factor for acquiring and retaining users on the digital platforms (Susiva & Vadhanapanich, 2020). The term user experience has been brought into wider discussion in 1990s by Norman (1988), which was shifted from the term “user centered system design.” The UX focuses not only the system design and the aesthetics of the user interfaces, but also emphasizes on the needs of the users (Norman, 1988; Norman, 2013).

Similarly, for BlazingLove, desires, and pain points of the users shall be empathized prior to design an updated version to deliver the best user experience. One main problem the researcher found from the users’ complaints is they are uncomfortable with identifying their sexual orientations as it may be changed depending on their living context, or do not want to publicly identify themselves.

Objectives of the Study

1. To coin the term of “sexual fluidity” that generates from LGBT people
2. To study the desire and the pain points of the users regarding how to segment people with sexual fluidity.
3. To design an updated version of BlazingLove that solving the issue of sexual fluidity using user experience concept.

Literature Reviews

There are three main sections of literature reviews starting with concepts Sex, Sexual Orientation and Sexual Fluidity, Brief information on matching service websites, and then finishing with main elements of user experience that user experience designers could use for designing websites or digital platforms.

Sex, sexual orientation and sexual fluidity
Savin-Williams (2017) proposed a new concept that breaks the old thought regarding sex, and sexual orientation. He authored a book name “Mostly Straight: Sexual Fluidity Among Men” that said there is no man or woman that express a hundred percent masculinity or femininity. He also mentioned that sex is somewhat fluid like water, it can be changed according to the person’s living context (Savin-Williams, 2017).

Sex refers to physical at birth or by chromosomes, while gender or gender identity are roles and behaviors that social expected from persons who hold the gender identity (Nagoshi et al., 2019). The other dimension to consider, somethings that related to emotion, love, and attractions that is sexuality or sexual orientations. By these definitions, there are a few sexes: male, female and perhaps intersexual, yet a few genders and sexual orientations, namely gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queers, asexual and pansexual and a few others (Diamond, 2008; Katz-Wise, 2015; Savin-Williams, 2017). There are some terms that could be considered as bullying or sexual harassment. So, terminology should be considered in referring to gender equality.

Brief information on matching service websites

Matching services are not a new business. However, when we have the internet in 1990s, it is another arm for this business to

access to their target customers wider, faster as well as easier. The first online dating website is match.com (Stylyght, 2019) that serving men and women who seeks to build serious relationship.

Nowadays, matching services are not limited to men and women, it extended to cover all kind of matching, not just lovers, but also friends, services, and animals. The matching business value around 4,000 million USD worldwide, 2,000 million USD in Asia, and in Thailand it values at 1,000-2,000 million Baht (mynd, 2018).

CNet has published top dating applications in 2021 as follows: Bumble is the best website for confident woman, Tinder is the best at speed, OKCupid is the best free dating website, Hinge is the best for serious relationship seekers, Coffee Meets Bagel is the greatest for initiate conversation, Her is the best for lesbians, bisexuals, and queers. These shown that there are a few online dating websites and applications existing globally, each have their own uniqueness to attract their target users.

BlazingLove is a Thai online matching website that seeks to provide matching services and build a community for users of all genders. Since it was found, BlazingLove is slowly picking up in their business and has constantly growth for acquiring new users but has difficulty in retaining the existing ones. Currently, BlazingLove have asked the users to identify themselves by their sexual orientations, there are 11 genders to choose, which may not cover every feasible option and cause some awkward for ones who do not want to identify themselves by their sexual orientations as well as the ones who do not yet know their gender identity or having more than one identity (BlazingLove, 2019 b, 2020).

BlazingLove currently offers only three

simple features, which are “creating posts”, “searching”, and “sorting”. There are four tags to represent purposes of using BlazingLove, which are lonely room, working room, party lovers’ room, and friend seekers room. These four rooms represent the heart as it has four rooms. BlazingLove did not allow users to perform illegal activities, especially prostitution of any genders (BlazingLove, 2019 a).

User experience and its honeycomb

The term “user experience” or so called “UX” was firstly coined by Don Norman in 1993 for his group at Apple Computer. User experience encompasses all aspects of the end-user’s interaction with the company, its service, and its products. Don Norman is the world first UX architect appointed by Apple in 1995.

Before that once the computer existed, the design started with human-computer interaction or HCI, which is “multidisciplinary fields of study focusing on the design of computer technology and, in particular, the interaction between humans (the users) and computers”. It then developed into user centered design or UCD that was discussed in a book named “The Design of Everyday Things” by Norman (1988). This book become a principle of product and service designs as well as application and website design later (Norman, 1988, 2013). In this book, Norman (1988) first explains the importance of user-centered design. He said that design decisions should be based on the needs and wants of users. Hence, UCD is an iterative design process in which designers focus on the users and their needs in each phase of the design process.

Apart from UCD, designers also focus on usability of the products. There are ten usability principles for interaction design, which are 1) Visibility of system status, 2)

Match between system and the real world, 3) User control and freedom, 4) Consistency and standards, 5) Error prevention, 6) Recognition rather than recall, 7) Flexibility and efficiency of use, 8) Aesthetic and minimalist design, 9) Help users recognize, diagnose, and recover from errors, and 10) Help and documentation (Nielsen, 1994).

However, since we are in the experience economy and digital as usual era, designing digital products focusing only usability alone is not sufficient. Experience the product delivers to the users are incredibly significant. Based on a number of literature search, user experience can be defined as “the digital interactions between a user and a company or a brand” (Susiva & Vadhanapanich, 2020).

According to the definition, user experience is involved with information architect, usability, competitor analysis, content strategy, visual design, sound, interaction, animation, coding, user research, empathy, prototype, interface, and wireframe (Brad Nunnally, 2016).

In order to deliver the best user experience and solving the users’ pain points, Morville (2014) has suggested the UX honeycomb (See Figure 1) that will comprehensively help UX designers to deliver the best experience as well as answering user pain points. The UX honeycomb consists of seven core elements that when combining the surrounding six elements, the design will finally deliver the seventh at its heart.

The seven elements are 1) useful: the design should provide greater benefits to the users, 2) desirable: the design should be desired by the users both functionality and emotionally, 3) accessible: it should be reached and designed to serve everyone who is the target users, 4) credible: it should be able to build trustworthiness, 5) findable: users should be

able to find things they look for at ease when using the websites, 6) usable: the design should contain all usability elements so that target users can effectively use it, and 7)

valuable: the design should deliver its value propositions to the users, or the users should be able to meet their goals by using our products

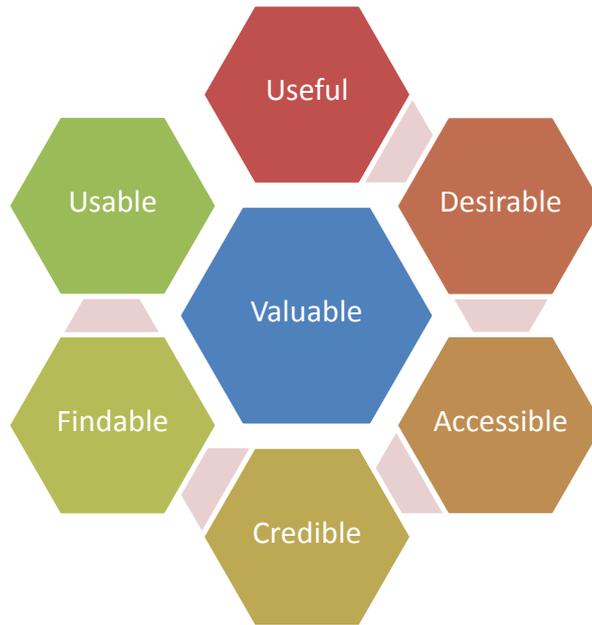


Figure 1 User experience honeycomb (Morville, 2014)

Research Framework

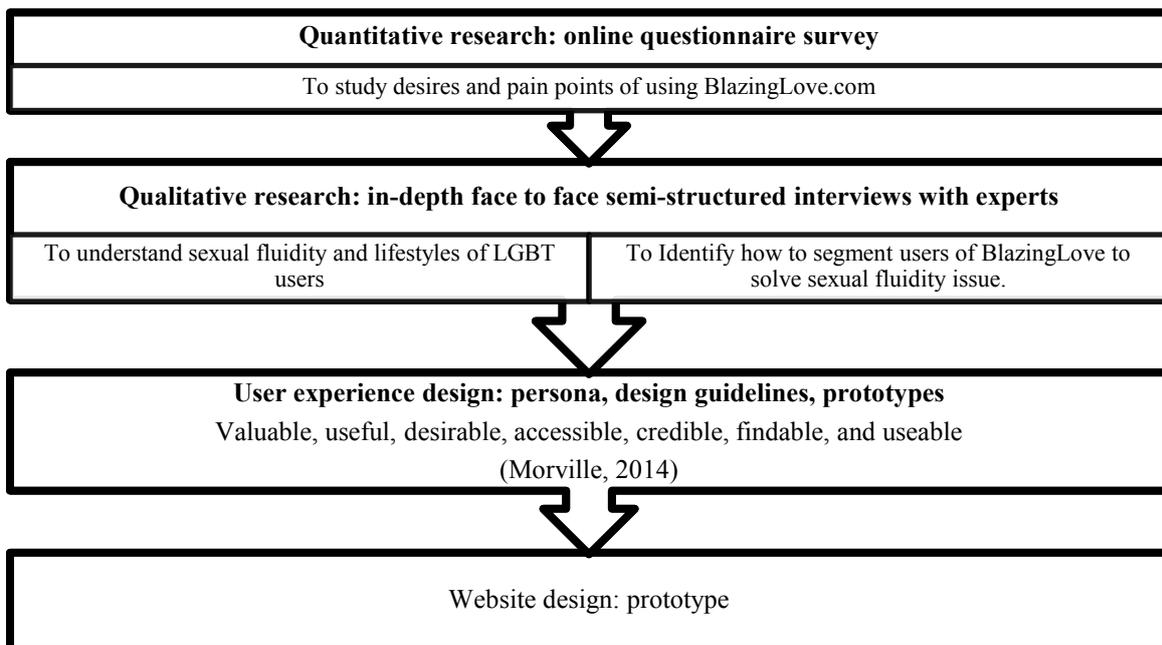


Figure 2 Research framework

Research Methodology

To achieve the research objectives, mixed methodology research was employed by collecting relevant data using both quantitative and qualitative methods (Schindler, 2005). Quantitative questionnaire online survey was used to understand the desires and the pain points of the users of BlazingLove.com. Prior to collect the data, questionnaire and interview guide have gone through the processes of content validity test as well as reliabilities test and obtained average score of 0.7 in every question and the alpha of 0.863. After that the proposal, data collection tools, and pre-test results were submitted to the Research Ethics Committee of Srinakharinwirot University to ensure that the research is ethically conducted. 400 sets of questionnaires were gathered, processed, and analyzed using descriptive statistics and crosstabulation analysis. While qualitative in-depth interview with experts who have experience related to sexual fluidity and sexual orientations to understand and find an appropriate way to segment the users to solve the problems of sexual fluidity. Eight interviews had been mutually conducted, edited, and analyzed using content analysis.

Data gathered from both methods were treated equally and used to define the definition of sexual fluidity, identify the appropriate methods to segment people with sexual fluidity and then identify the target users, develop personas and design guidelines, identify features that answer the users' pain points, their latent needs, as well as solving the sexual fluidity issues, then developing user journeys, user flows and delivering prototypes of the new versions (Brad Nunnally, 2016).

Results

As aforementioned, this research consists of

three parts: quantitative, qualitative, and the synthesis for the new user experience design. The results are as follows.

Quantitative research results

The objective of the survey was mainly to understand desire and pain points of the users in using BlazingLove.com. The findings shown that there are 14 different gender identities with a no identity group. Almost 20% said that they have more than one sexual orientation. These figures shown that BlazingLove users are somewhat fluid with their gender identities. Their gender identities were mostly female (35.02%), tom (19.46%), male (9.73%), gay (7.39%), dee (7%), female bisexual (5.45%), transgender (5.06%). Most users were 40-49 years old (40%), 30-39 years old (37%), and 20-29 years old (20%), worked as employees, freelance or entrepreneurs (75%). There were two major groups of monthly income. One was 15,000-25,000 Baht and the other was over 75,000 Baht, which means that the users have medium to high income range. The users were from every region of Thailand, but mostly live in Bangkok Metropolitan Region. Hence, BlazingLove's target users were those who have various gender identities, age between 20-49 years old, work as employees or freelancers, having a medium to high income, and living around Thailand.

Users visiting BlazingLove were mainly to make new friends and look for business networking, not seek for lovers or committed relationship. They usually visited BlazingLove around 1-4 times a month. About 23.5% are new users. They were looking for friends who have similar lifestyles such as travelling, business networking, and sports.

Favorite activities of the users were watching movies, listening to music, and singing songs, playing sports and outdoor activities. While the most wanted features were chat,

private room, online events, on-site events, membership, notification, which having similar scores. Pain points that the users faced were 1) cannot change profile pictures, 2) met some perverts, 3) do not know where to start, 4) should be easier to find new friends, 5) reduce the atmosphere of in search of lovers as it causes uncomfortable, 6) cannot perform self-deleted the old posts, etc. The users also suggested that it must have chat. The navigation should provide more details. Lastly, the website should not cause any uncomfortable feeling to the users.

According to crosstabulation analysis between gender identity and desires, behaviors, and pain points, it shown that gender identity do not have a significant association to them, i.e., different gender identity does not have different desires, behaviors, or pain points. Therefore, segmenting users based on their gender identity is not significant.

Qualitative research results

There were eight interviews in total with experts who have direct and indirect experiences working related to sexual diversity and sexual fluidity domestically and internationally. The results helped to coin a definition of the sexual fluidity as “personal sexual orientation that may or may not be expressed physically, which can be changed according to personal preferences does not concern their genders and it can be changed anytime according to the person living context.”

With the definition, the sexual fluidity affected to their personal lifestyles, which may come in a form of social and family pressures so that they could not express their gender identity, being talked behind their backs, so on. So, users did not prefer to be segmented by their gender identities, on the other hands, they preferred to define themselves by lifestyles, hobbies/ favorite activities, ages, and origins. While collecting data on their

physical sexes and gender identities may be acceptable and useful in terms of searching and making new friends, however, it should not be publicly expressed.

Pain points for using BlazingLove and other similar matching websites were fraud, harassment, insufficient data, and photos to support decisions and so on. BlazingLove should verify users' data, suggest friends based on their similar lifestyles, set a clear and not complicated membership system, add features to allow users to block unwanted persons, and establish a good privacy system. **Solving the issue of sexual fluidity by using the user experience design**

After obtaining both quantitative and qualitative research results, the researchers have synthesized the data and found that the users desires and pain points can be categorized and matched with the seven elements of the user experience honeycomb (Morville, 2014), which is one of the most acceptable model for user experience design of any digital products.

Prior to design, it is best to choose the right technology. According to the Google Analytic data, more than 90% of the BlazingLove users accessed the website via mobile devices, a few using their tablets and desktops. Hence, ensuring the accessibility of all users, responsive web design has been chosen i.e., the website will support multiple type of devices.

After that the researchers developed assumed eight personas based on demographic data of the respondents that are best representing various target users and use these personas to draw a new design guideline for BlazingLove, which contains logo, primary color pallet, secondary color pallet, font type, font size, tagline, as well as guideline on how to use these elements. User experience strategy was then defined to decrease the atmosphere of

dating website, fostering friendships, and building a community of equally love. BlazingLove was designed to encapsulate all seven elements of the user experience: useful, desirable, accessible, credible, findable, usable, and valuable.

To deliver the best user experience, the updated version of BlazingLove will have more features to answer the user needs and

pain points. The existing version has only three features: Creating Post, Searching, and Sorting. The new version consisted of ten new features, which are Navigation, Log in/ Sign up, Homepage, Events, BlazingLove Match, Notifications, Explore, Profile, Chat and Friend list. With these features, BlazingLove would deliver the following experience to the users (See Figure 3).

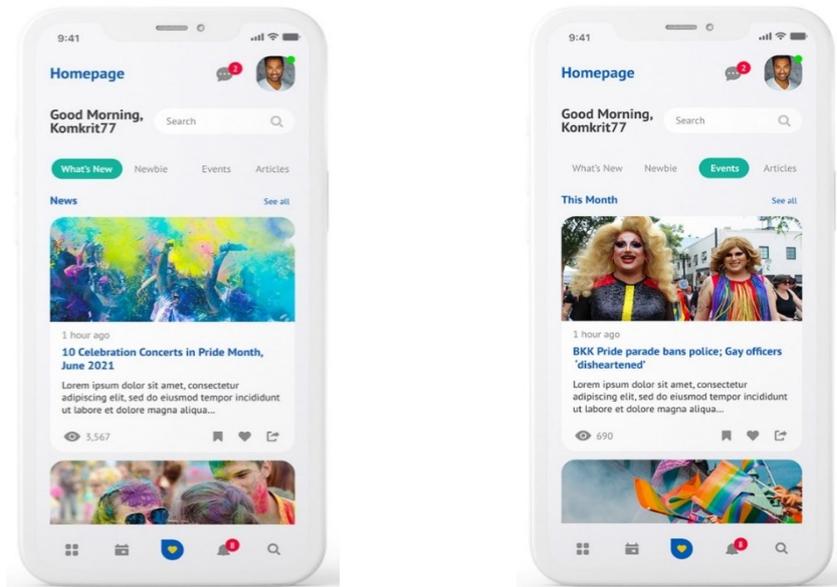


Figure 3 Examples of new design of BlazingLove

1. Useful: it will convey greater benefits to the users by providing and answering the users' needs and solving their pain points especially with the Chat function, better Navigation, membership system, events and other relevant information that may help fostering community.
2. Desirable: the updated version was designed to solve the users' pain points and answering their latent needs and requirements.
3. Accessible: to ensure that all target users are accessible to the updated version, responsive web design was deployed.
4. Credible: with the innovative design guideline and new features especially the membership system that will help verify user

data, Block unwanted users, and so on. These will help reducing fraud, perverts and misused of the website as well as build atmosphere of user friendly and community of equally love.

5. Findable: BlazingLove Match and Explore were new features designed to ensure that every user will find a match to their lifestyles, events, interests and so on. The users also allowed to create and add tags by themselves for the benefits of searching. The navigation was also improved to ensure that the users can find things they are looking for.

6. Useable: the updated version was designed for the ease of searching, adding, making, and following new friends. It was also easier

to browse for friend lists, chat with new and existing friends on the list, search and delete chat conversations, and the most importantly the users can block unwanted friends, and report unwanted behaviors by themselves.

7. Valuable: overall, the ultimate goals of the users were to make new friends, and establish a network for business purposes, the updated version was then designed as aforementioned to ensure that the users are reaching their goals as well as fostering the community of equally love.

Conclusion

The research results helped defining the term sexual fluidity as “personal sexual orientation that may or may not be expressed physically, which can be changed according to personal preferences does not concern their genders and it can be changed anytime according to the person living context”.

The users did not prefer to label themselves to any gender identity, yet it is preferable to be identify by their lifestyles, interests, and preferences. Target users of BlazingLove are the people of all gender identities who are seeking to make new friends and expand their networks, age between 20-49 years old, with medium to high income, and living around Thailand. The updated version of BlazingLove is designed to answer the users pain points and needs. New features were added as listed to ensure that the best user experience is delivered, and it will attract more of the new users to the website as well as retain the existing users and becoming a community of equally love. It will finally generate more revenue for the BlazingLove business and resulting in business sustainability.

Discussion

As suggested by the findings, in dealing with sexual fluidity people, businesses should not

segment their customers with their gender identity, rather shall segment their customers by lifestyle, interests, and preferences because of the gender identity is a significant sensitive issue that the users did not want to express publicly, which is similar to the findings of College (2019), Savin-Williams (2017) and Nagoshi et al. (2019). However, the other personal factors can also be used such as age, income, and hometown. These results consistent with the customer segmentation concept of Armstrong and Kotler (2011); Kotler, Kartajaya, and Setiawan (2021).

Moreover, the research shown that there are more gender identities of the users the existing classifications as well as the data obtained from Google Analytics, this may imply that when collecting user data, especially regarding to sex or gender for marketing purposes, more details of the data may be necessary so the marketers will have sufficient data and information to formulate the most appropriate marketing strategies and marketing activities. Although, the users do not want to identify their gender identities, yet the data remains important for segmentation and marketing purposes. Therefore, it is wiser to consider collecting data related to gender identity and sexual fluidity, for the purposes only, not for publicly expression.

The results also shown that the main purposes of using BlazingLove are to meet new friends and build their business networks, not seeking lovers. This was somewhat surprise, yet understandable. When compared the result with competitors, we found that BlazingLove users have similar purposes to the users of Plenty of Fish. So, the researcher may consider study further by comparing with the platform to ensure that the new design will deliver the best experience to the target users.

The other significant point found in this

research was average monthly income of the users that is divided into two distinct groups i.e., the users who have income around 15,000-25,000 Baht a month, the other is the users who have income more than 75,000 Baht a month. These two groups of people have significantly different purchasing power and will be affected to pricing strategy for membership packages as well as event tickets too. Membership pricing should be designed to best accommodate both groups who may have different willingness to pay. Further, budgeting for events will also be affected by the purchasing power, it is better to design and create activities that have different in pricing for distinct groups of users. We may also use the price to target separate groups of users too.

Since, most favorite activities of the users were traveling, playing sports, and singing songs, this information could be used for designing events and activities to match their lifestyles and preferences to fostering the community of equally love as well as generate sustainable revenue for BlazingLove. It could also use to find the right partners and vendors to create secondary revenue stream like advertisement, lowering cost for hosting activities and events. It could also be utilized to expanding customer base, increase brand awareness on BlazingLove by parting with other brands too.

Recommendations

There are a few recommendations for those who seek to design and develop a successful website or digital products for those with sexual fluidity.

1. Before start developing any website or application, it is better to empathize and understand business context and environment to identify potential target segments and use to develop personas for conduct research for

user experience design (Brad Nunnally, 2016).

2. Once know exactly who the target users are, empathize users pain points and desire of the target users. There are a few techniques to collect relevant data such as qualitative questionnaire survey, in-depth interview, design thinking process, brainstorming and so on. The research could be conducted in an informal manner.

3. After gathered all relevant data, understand the desirable, and pain points of the users, then analyze and synthesize the data to formulate the user experience design by mapping with the user experience honeycomb to ensure that the new design will deliver the better experience.

4. When designing the user experience, it is necessary to obtain the data from all stakeholders, not just the users. It is particularly important to gain input from marketing, business, and technological experts to ensure that the websites are desirable by the users, viable for the business, and technologically feasible.

This research focused only on the user experience, so it is ensuring that the updated version of BlazingLove will be desired by the target users, but remain questions for the latter two, business viable and technology feasible. Hence, after the prototype is designed, business and technology are the other factors to be considered. As the founder of BlazingLove, the updated version shall be developed if it is expecting to generate revenue and reach breakeven point within five years.

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