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YouPower: An Open Source Platform for Community-Oriented Smart Grid User Engagement

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This paper presents YouPower, an open source platform designed to make people more aware of their energy consumption and encourage sustainable consumption with local communities. The platform is designed iteratively in collaboration with users in the Swedish and Italian test sites of the project to improve the design and increase active user participation. The community-oriented design is composed of parts that link energy data to energy actions, provide comparisons at different levels, generate dynamic time-of-use signals, offer energy conservation suggestions, and support social sharing. The goal is to bridge people’s attitude-behavior gap in energy consumption and to facilitate the behavior change process towards sustainable energy consumption that is implementable in people’s daily life. Preliminary results show that community-oriented energy intervention has the potential to improve user engagement significantly.

1 INTRODUCTION

YouPower is an open source platform¹ designed to explore the potential and challenges of supporting social participation, awareness and engagement of smart grid users for energy conservation and load shifting. Combining smart sensing and web technologies among others, YouPower features a social smart grid application (developed as a hybrid mobile app) that can connect users to friends, families and local communities to learn and take energy actions that are relevant to them together. The app encourages an energy-friendly lifestyle and can be linked to users’ energy consumption and production data for quasi real-time and historical prosumption information. The goal of the

¹<http://www.civisproject.eu>, <https://app.civisproject.eu>, <https://github.com/CIVIS-project>. The packages are available for any interested party to be reused, modified, and extended under the Apache v.2 License.

project is to make energy more visible, to promote environmental and social values, to inform users' know-how about sustainable consumption, and to facilitate users to take energy conservation and load shifting actions in their everyday life together with local communities [14–16].

Research topics related to merging the strength of Social Networks (SNs) with that of smart grid applications have caught much attention in recent years following the success of several popular SN platforms [2, 5, 11, 12, 17]. Some conducted surveys to understand user needs for energy services combining SNs [26]. Some studied connecting smart meters (or smart homes) as SNs for energy management and sharing [6, 28]. Simulation models are developed to study demand side management taking into consideration SN aspects [4, 7, 19] and to demonstrate the feasibility of coordination in load balancing [27, 30]. There are also works that visualize smart meter and appliance-level consumption data, and provide comparative feedback among households [9, 20, 29]. Our research interest expands on the related works, and places an emphasis on smart grid user communities and collective actions.

The research is performed within the framework of the EU FP7 CIVIS project. It has test sites in Stockholm (Sweden) and Trento (Italy) with domestic energy consumers. In Sweden, those who buy a home officially own the right to inhabit the estate and must join a corresponding *housing cooperative* that owns and maintains the estates. The members of a cooperative annually elect a board that makes energy related decisions on behalf of the members. In the case of Trento test site, two local *electricity consortia* produce and sell renewable (hydro and solar) energy to consortium members. Household rooftop PV panels are also common in this region. The consortia are highly interested in load management to optimize the use of local renewables and reduce dependency on the national supply. These two types of communities are at the center of YouPower design. The rest of this paper presents the design process of YouPower, gives an overview of the platform, and discusses in more detail its design concept.

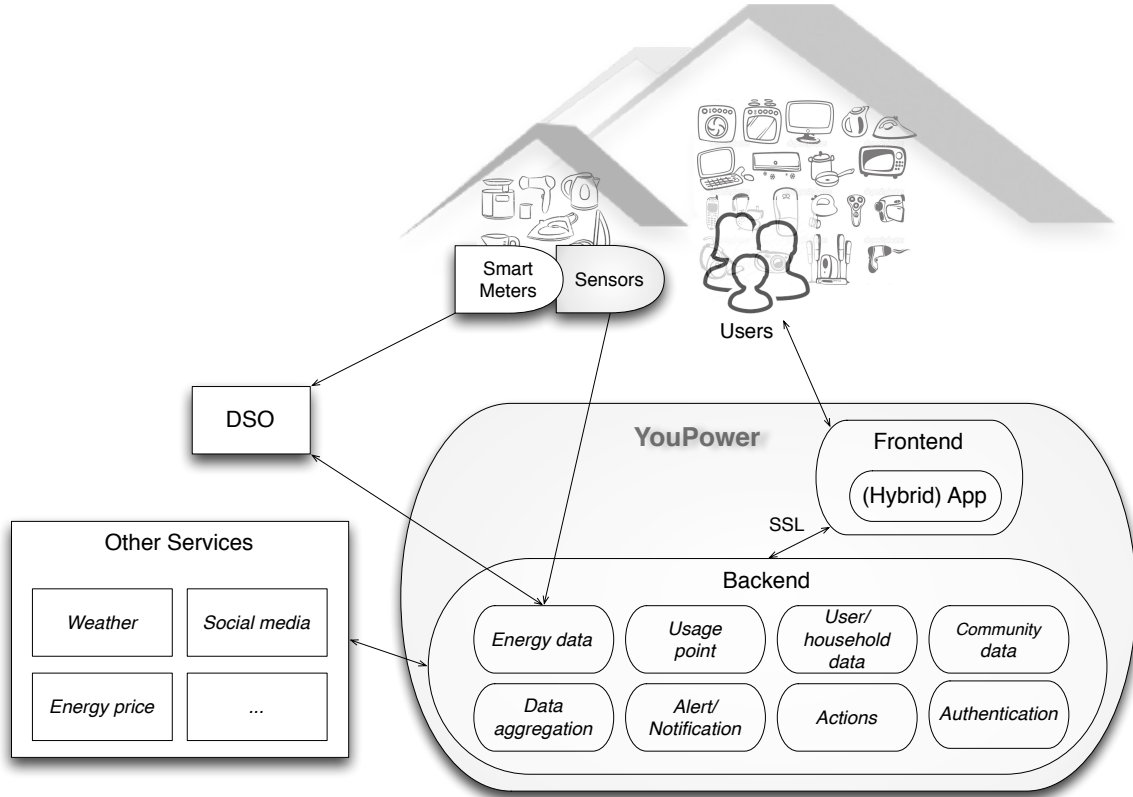
2 DESIGN PROCESS AND PLATFORM OVERVIEW

The design process of YouPower is theory-driven, user-centered and iterative. We first researched literature on intervention strategies and social smart grid applications directed at promoting environmental behavior change. This provided an initial set of design ideas that had been iteratively refined and improved throughout the design process. Applying a user-centered design process can lead to more acceptable, satisfying and effective designs [3]. This increases the potential of the intervention and may help increase user engagement with respect to the sense of relatedness to the application [8, 10, 21, 25]. We organized brainstorming sessions and design workshops with both project partners and stakeholders including users (focus groups) from test sites. A set of features was first prototyped in simple handcrafted mock-ups used as a basis for discussion, and then underwent iterative rapid prototyping which produced wireframes as better visual guides that can be more effectively communicated to users. These wireframe prototypes and later the software prototypes, had been evaluated in iteration by a study with participants during an environmental event in Helsinki [1], by stakeholders at test sites, and by groups of students and colleagues. Literature research with regard to environmental and social psychology as well as energy intervention had been performed in more depth along with the user studies carried out. Based on those and the design experiences of the project team, a set of design guidelines had been developed. After each study, the design was refined, improved and gradually implemented, resulting in the current version of the application.

Figure 1 gives an overview of the CIVIS YouPower platform. It is composed of (I) the *energy sensor level services* mainly dealing with energy data collection; and (II) the *energy data level and social level services* mainly dealing with energy data analytics as well as user, household and community management among others.

(I) *Energy sensor level services*: CIVIS project installed hardware (smart plugs and sensors) and software required for appliance-level energy data collection. The hardware/software choices differ in the two sites due to local circumstances. For example, *Smappee*² for 40 households in

²<http://www.smappee.com>



DSO (Distribution System Operators), SSL (Secure Sockets Layer)

Figure 1: YouPower Platform Overview

Stockholm, and *CurrentCost*³ for 79 households in Trento. Trento also installed Amperometric clamps for PV production measures. Household-level energy data is measured by smart meters and provided by local DSOs (Distribution System Operators).

(II) *Energy data level and social level services*: These services are provided by the YouPower app and its back-end. The design of the YouPower app (and its back-end) consists of three self-contained composable parts: (A) *House Cooperatives* (contextualized and deployed to the Stockholm test site); (B) *Demand-Side Management* (contextualized and deployed to the Trento test site); and (C) *Action Suggestions* (contextualized and deployed to both test sites). They are discussed in Section 3.

3 DESIGN CONCEPT

Given time and resource constraints, the YouPower app can not be developed all-in-one cross-platform (for phones, tablets and computers). We chose to design the front-end as a hybrid mobile phone app, i.e. its UI design has layouts that suit phone screens, since mobile apps can be more easily transformed to web browser versions, while the reverse is more difficult. The back-end of the YouPower platform will remain mostly the same independent of the front-end alternatives.

³<http://currentcost.com>

3.1 Housing Cooperatives

This part of the YouPower app is designed for the community of housing cooperatives (*Bostadsrättsförening* or *Brf* in Swedish) in the Stockholm test site [13]. Similar housing ownership and management models exist in a number of EU and non-EU countries, which allow potential wider application of the design. A housing cooperative annually elects a board which manages cooperative properties and decides on energy contracts, maintains energy systems, and proposes investments in energy efficient technologies. Since board members are volunteers who may have limited knowledge of energy or building management, this part of the app aims to support board members in energy management, in particular energy reduction actions. Cooperative members can also use the app to follow energy decisions and works of the cooperative. Additionally, the app can be of interest by building management companies working with housing cooperatives. The information presented in the app is visible for these user groups and shared between housing cooperatives. This openness of energy data is key to facilitating users in sharing experiences relevant for taking energy reduction actions.

3.1.1 Linking energy data to energy reduction actions

The design links energy data with energy reduction actions taken (Figure 2), both at cooperative levels, making the impact of energy actions visible to users. The energy use is divided into heating & hot water (from district heating), and facilities electricity (in apartment buildings). Users can switch between the views per month or per year to show overall changes. Users with editing rights,

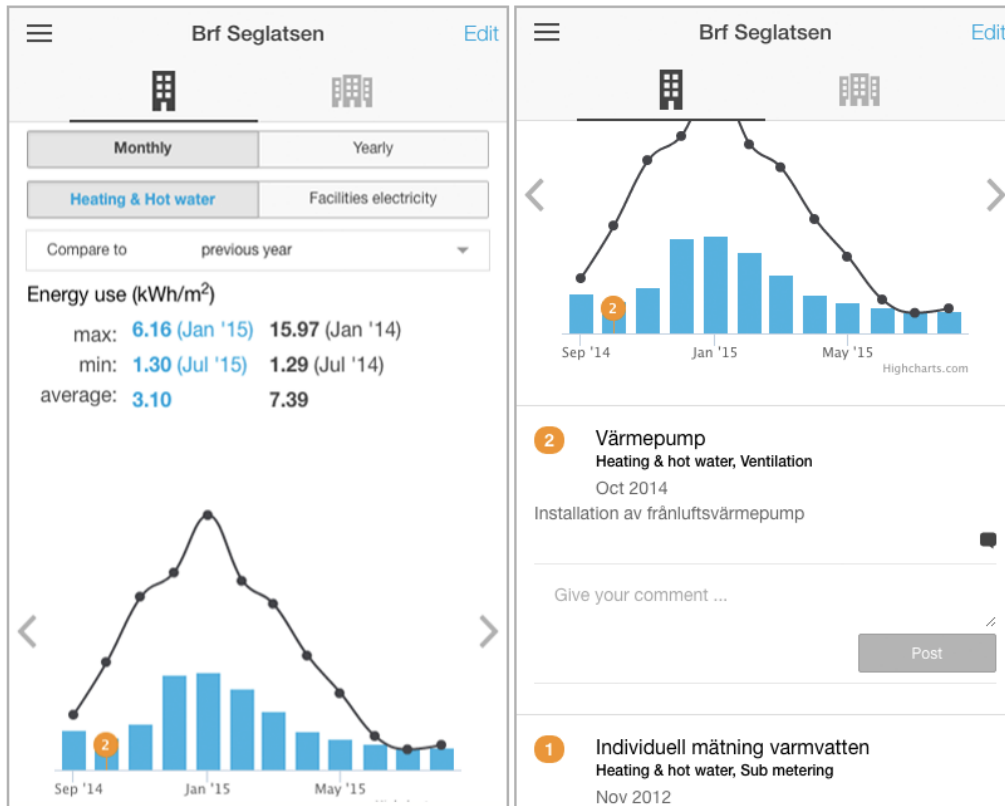


Figure 2: Heating & hot water use graph. Blue bars show the current year's use per month; the black line shows that of previous year. Energy reduction actions taken are mapped to the time of action and listed below.

typically board members, can add energy reduction actions that the cooperative has taken, e.g.,

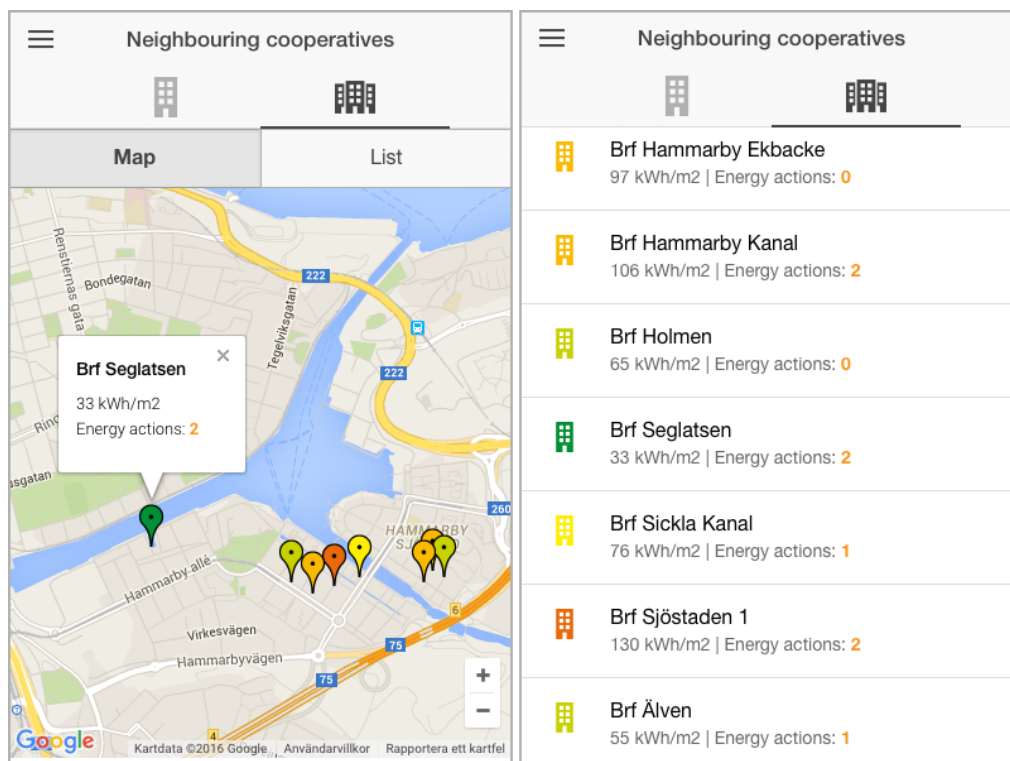


Figure 3: Map and list view of participating housing cooperatives. The energy performance of cooperatives is indicated by colour and in numbers.

improvement of ventilation, lighting or heating systems, and the related cost. Trusted energy or building management companies can also get editing rights to add energy reduction actions they took on behalf of the cooperative. Added actions appear at the month when each action was taken and are listed below the graph. When clicking on an action in the list, the details of the action are shown. To make the impact of actions visible, users can compare the energy use of the viewed months to that of a previous year. This can be used e.g. by a cooperative to explore what energy reduction actions to take in the future by learning actions taken by other cooperatives and what the effects were in relation to costs.

3.1.2 Comparing housing cooperatives

The cooperatives that are registered for the app are displayed in a map or list view (Figure 3). Their icons are color coded (from red to green) based on each cooperative's energy performance, i.e. from high to low energy use per heated area, scaled according to the Swedish energy declaration for buildings⁴. Users can also see the energy performance as a number (in kWh/m²), and the information about energy reduction actions of the cooperatives. During stakeholder studies, energy managers in cooperative boards stressed the importance of knowing the difference between cooperatives in order to understand the difference in their energy performance. Thus, the design also includes information about cooperatives (Figure 4) such as the number of apartments and heated areas in a cooperative, a building's construction year, and types of ventilations (e.g. with or without heat recovery). Users can compare a cooperative's energy use per month or per year to another cooperative or to the neighborhood average. The electricity use is also displayed per area (kWh/m²) to make it comparable.

⁴<http://www.boverket.se/sv/byggande/energideklaration/energideklarationens-innehall-och-sammanfattning/sammanfattningen-med-energiklasser/energiklasser-fran-ag/>

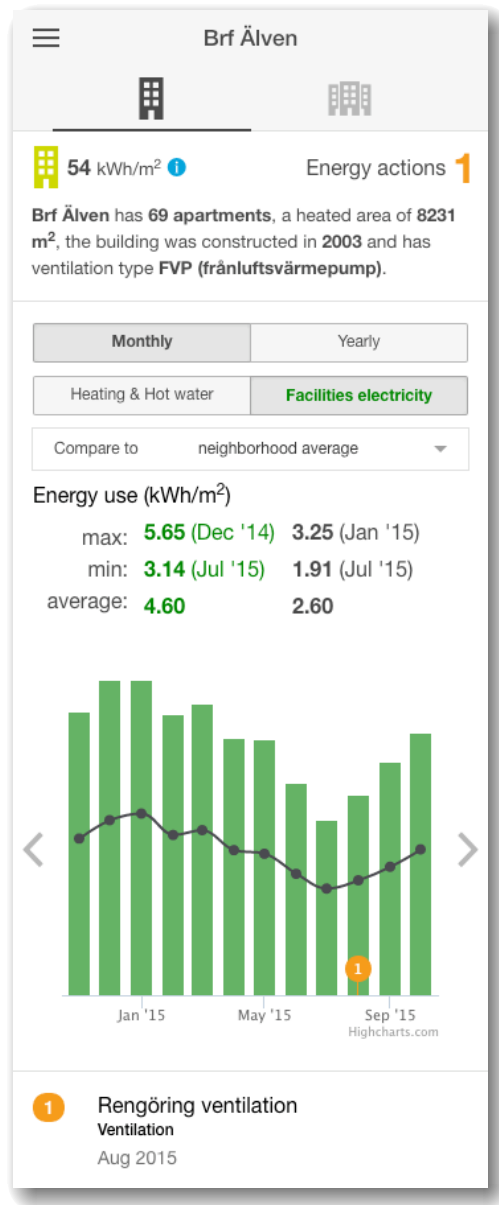


Figure 4: Facilities electricity use graph. Information about housing cooperatives and actions is displayed at the top. Green bars show the housing cooperative's current year's use per month; the black line shows the average use of all housing cooperatives

3.1.3 Sharing experiences

A cooperative interested in taking an action may wish to know more, e.g. which contractor was chosen for an investment and why or how to get buy-in from cooperative members. The design provides commenting functions for each action added, where users can post questions and exchange experiences. The cooperatives can also add email addresses of their contact persons, which are visible on each cooperative’s app page. Sharing experiences certainly also happens outside of the digital world, e.g. during meetings of cooperative boards or with local energy networks. The app aims to support discussions and knowledge exchange also in such situations, where someone can easily demonstrate the impact of an energy investment with smart phones.

3.2 Demand-Side Management

This part of the YouPower app is designed for the Trento test site and can have wider application. It provides users historical and quasi real-time consumption and production information, and facilitates users to leverage load elasticity in order to maximize self-consumption of rooftop PV productions. Energy data is displayed at appliances (if smart plugs are installed), household, and electricity consortia levels. Consumption at the appliance level enables users to gain deeper understanding of their daily actions and the resulting energy use. Historical and current consumption and production at the household level allow users to compare those two and potentially maximize self-consumption. Aggregated and average consumption at the consortia level informs users of neighborhood energy consumption and allows comparisons. In addition, dynamic Time-of-Use (ToU) signals are displayed to assist users in load shifting during their daily actions.

3.2.1 Historical and quasi real-time consumption and production

At the household level, electricity consumption and PV production levels (in W and Wh) are displayed in quasi real-time and updated for the latest six minutes⁵. This information can also be displayed as a bar chart for a chosen period (in the past) to provide an aggregated daily overview of consumption vs. production (Figure 5). When smart plugs are installed, users can view the daily electricity consumption (in Wh) of the corresponding connected appliances of their own household for a chosen period (Figure 6 a). This helps them to gain better insights into the individual appliance’s consumption level and its daily or seasonal patterns. With the aggregated energy data provided by the two local electricity consortia, users can also compare their own households’ hourly consumption profiles over a chosen day to the averages and totals of the consortia to gain a sense of their relative performance compared to their peers (Figure 6 b).

3.2.2 Dynamic ToU signals

Dynamic ToU signals are provided to facilitate users’ self-consumption of local PV productions. They give clear indications to encourage or discourage electricity consumption at a certain moment based on the forecasted local renewable production level calculated with open weather forecast information (in particular solar radiation data) and the local rooftop PV production capacity. The signals are at 3-hour intervals for the forthcoming 30 hours (Figure 7 a), and are updated every 24 hours. A green smiley face signals a time slot suitable for self-consumption where the forecasted local PV production exceeds the current local consumption, while an orange frown face signals otherwise. On a weekly basis, users get a summary of the proportion of their own household consumption that took place under green or orange ToU signals to allow them to reflect on their levels of self-consumption (Figure 7 b). The same information is also provided at the consortia level to enable peer comparison.

⁵For technical reasons such as households’ data transfer connections and processing time, there can be up to 2-min delay between the time of actual power measurement and the data displayed.

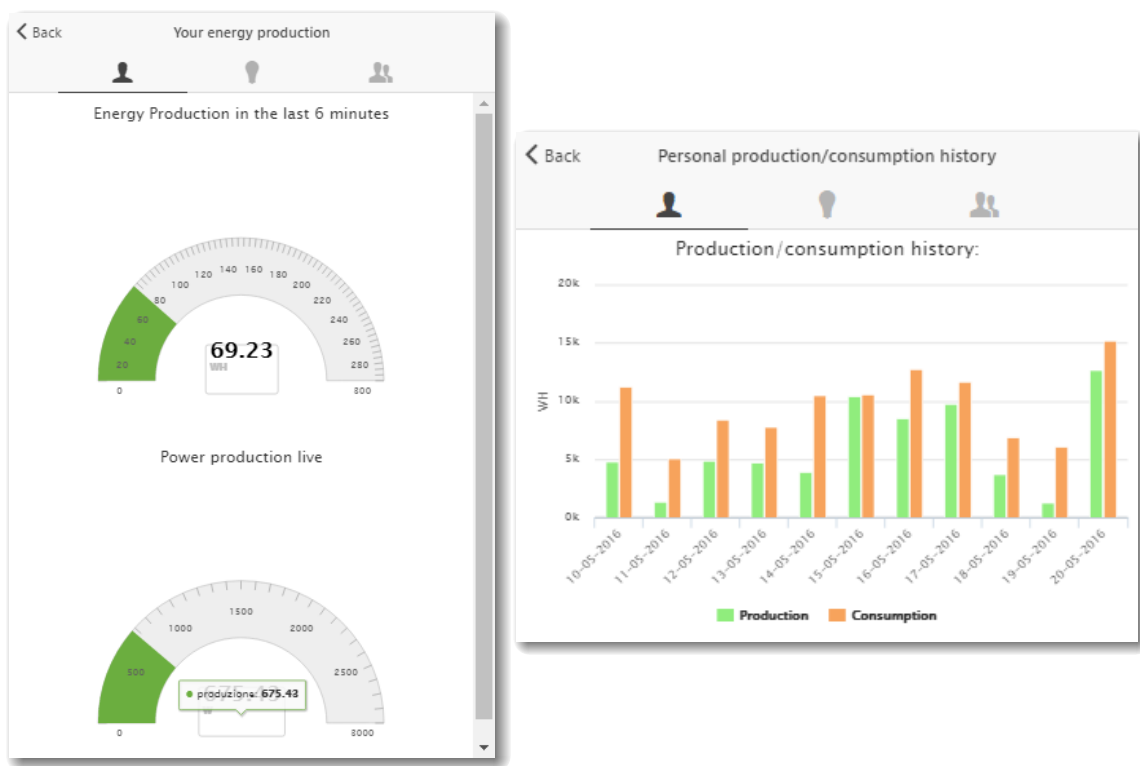


Figure 5: (a) Quasi real-time meters for household PV production; (b) Household consumption vs. production for a chosen period

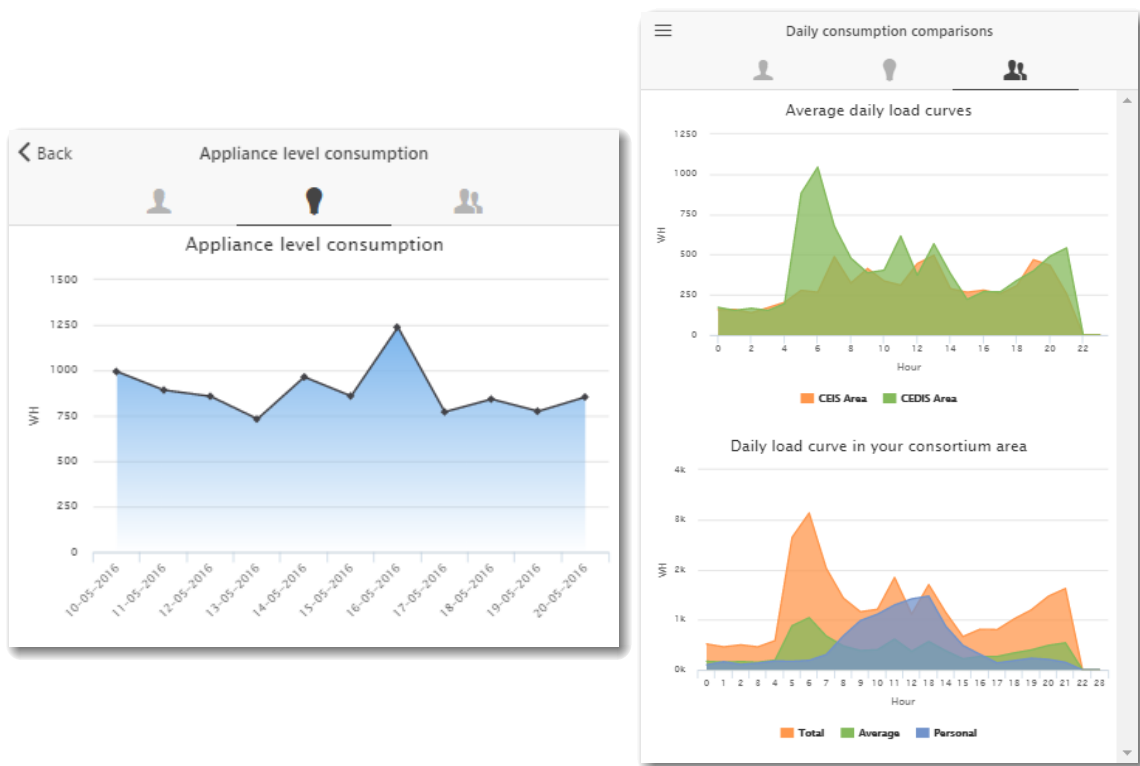


Figure 6: (a) Daily electricity consumption at the appliance level for a chosen period; (b) A household's hourly consumption profile over a chosen day compared to the averages and totals of the consortia

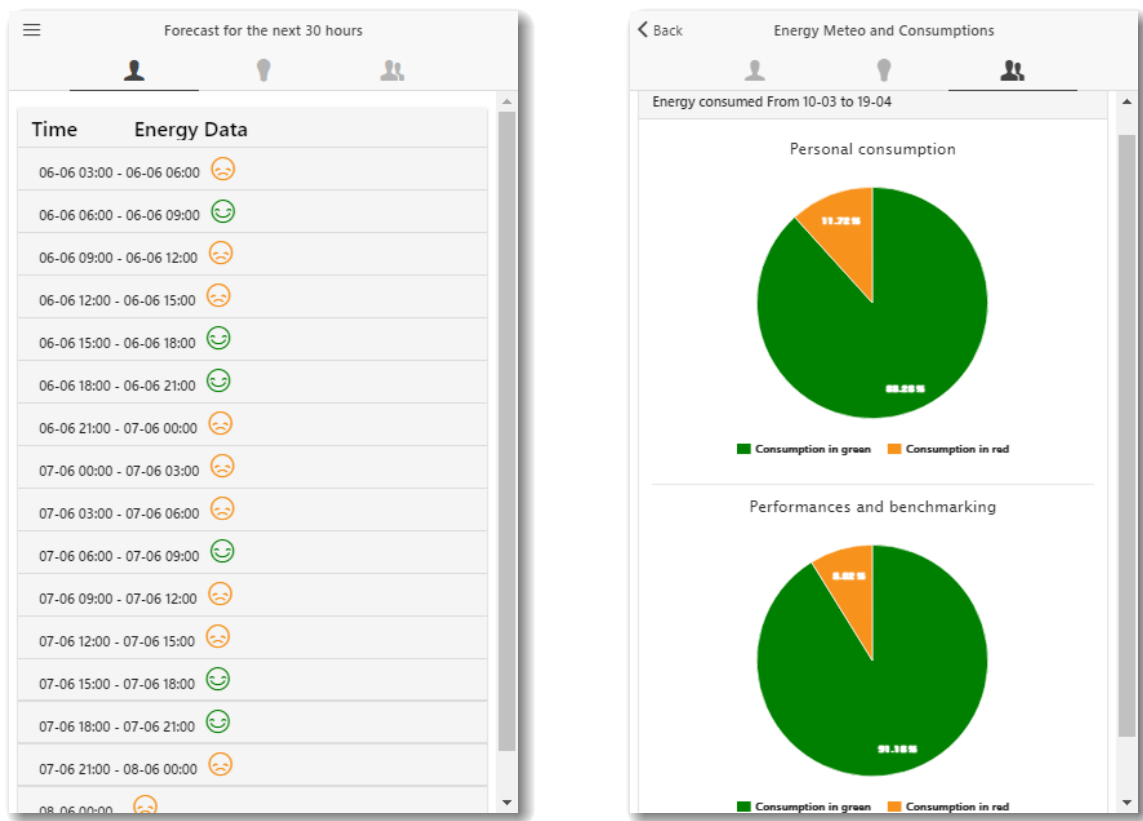


Figure 7: (a) Dynacmie ToU signals at 3-hour intervals for the forthcoming 30 hours; (b) A household's hourly consumption profile over a chosen day compared to the averages and totals of the consortia

3.3 Action Suggestions

This part of the YouPower app aims to facilitate all household members to take part in energy conservation in their busy daily life. About fifty action suggestions are composed to provide users practical and accurate information about energy conservation. They include one-time actions such as “Use energy efficient cooktops”, routine actions such as “Line dry, air dry clothes whenever you can”, as well as in-between actions (reminders) such as “Defrost your fridge regularly (in x days)”. Some suggestions may seem obvious and trivial, but as indicated by literature, people often has an attitude-behavior gap when it comes to environmental issues. The goal is to facilitate the behavior change process to bridge the attitude-behavior gap, making energy conservation new habits integrated in everyday household practices.

3.3.1 Free choice and self-monitoring of energy conservation actions

The actions are not meant as prescriptions for what users should do but to present different ideas of what they can do (and how) in household practices. Users can freely choose whether (and when) to take an action and possibly reschedule and repeat the action according to the needs and interests in their own context (Figure 8). After all, users are experts of their own reality. They also have an overview of their current, pending, and completed actions. A new action is suggested when one is completed. When an action is scheduled, its reminder is triggered by time. Users’ own choices of actions and the action processes facilitate the sense of autonomy which enhances and maintains motivation [22].

3.3.2 Promoting motivation and engagement

The design uses a number of elements to promote users’ motivation and engagement. The suggestions are tailored to the local context by local partners and focus groups. Each action is accompanied by a short explanation, the entailed effort and impact (on a five-point scale) and the number of users taking this action. The design encourages users to take small steps (and not to

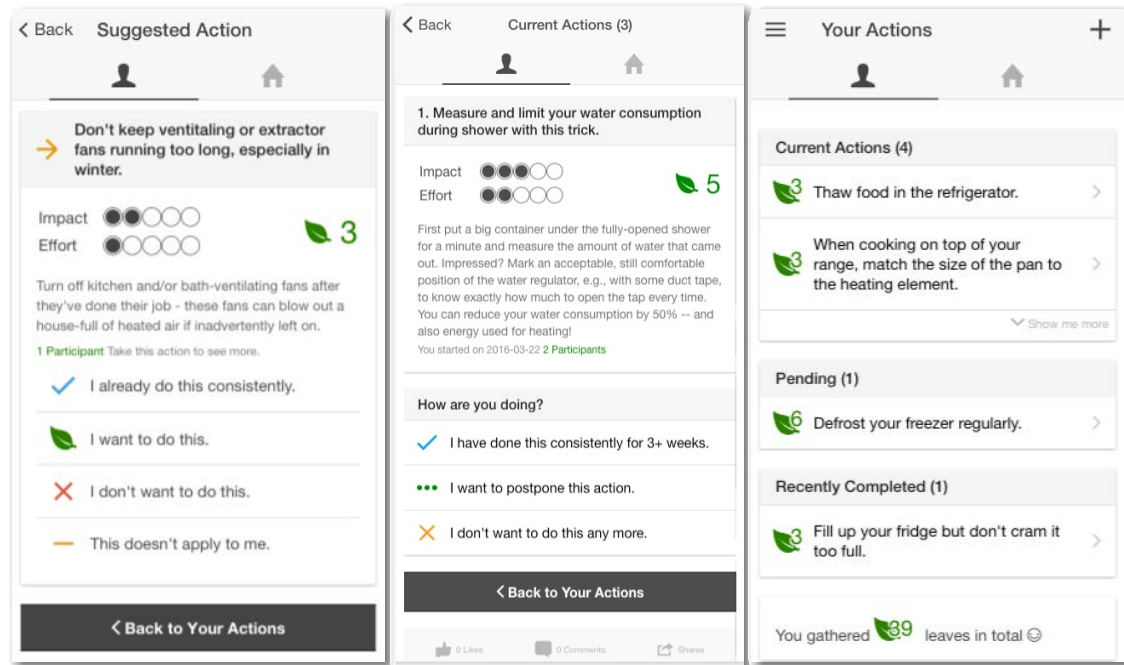


Figure 8: (a) Action suggestion; (b) Action in progress; (c) User actions

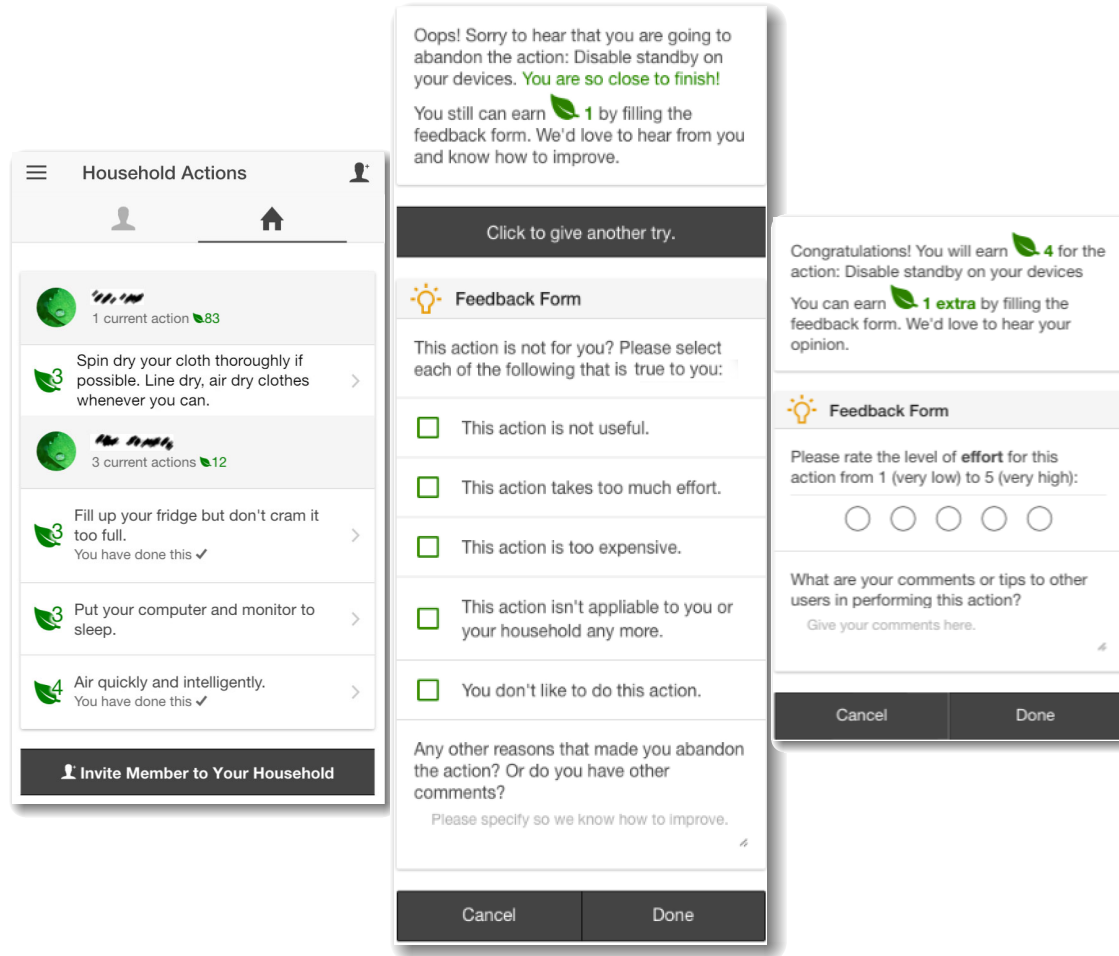


Figure 9: (a) Household actions; (b) Feedback form – action abandoned; (c) Feedback form – action completed

have too many actions at a time) and gives positive performance feedback. In addition, users can invite household members, view and join the energy conservation actions of the whole household (Figure 9 a). Users can also login with Facebook, like, comment, share actions, give feedback (Figure 9 b c) and invite friends. Users are awarded with points (displayed as Green Leaves) once they complete an action, or provide feedback or comments.

4 Discussion

Co-designed with the stakeholders from the test sites, YouPower provides a set of features that facilitate users' behavior change process towards sustainable energy consumption that is implementable in users' daily life as a key to bridge the attitude-behavior gap of people's environmental values (and attitudes) and their actual behavior in energy consumption [18, 23, 24]. From this design experience, a number of design guidelines were derived and are stated in the following, which may be applicable to the development of environmental behavior change interventions beyond the particular case of CIVIS project. First, provide consumers accurate and actionable information about how to achieve the target behavior. At the test sites, people expressed the desire and need to do more for sustainable consumption, and they like the idea of receiving relevant and contextual suggestions and tips for sustainable consumption. Second, provide personalized means and goals to

motivate consumers to voluntarily practice and repeat the target behavior in the specific context of their everyday life. Allow users to freely practice and adapt the process. This facilitates the sense of competence and autonomy which promotes and enhances motivation for behavior change [22]. Third, foster consumers’ intrinsic motivation to engage in the behavior change process. People in the test sites are skeptical about how much money they can actually save by using less energy in households but are driven by intrinsic motives as well as altruistic and environmental values. The social and community-oriented features as those designed in YouPower articulate those values to foster user motivation.

5 Conclusions

YouPower is designed and developed as a set of open source packages that are composable and extensible (under Apache v.2 license) to different needs related to energy conservation and load shifting interventions. The development was completed by June 2016, and different parts were deployed to the test sites in Stockholm and Trento respectively. While the initial deployment of YouPower shows that household engagement varies significantly between the two test sites and among participants, preliminary results do suggest that a community-oriented intervention, such as YouPower, increases user engagement significantly. The results suggest that engagement can be driven not only by individuals’ pre-existing motivations (e.g., financial or environmental) but also by households’ experiences and interactions once they start actively using an application such as YouPower. We conjecture that more user engagement will lead to more energy reductions and better load-shifting results. An extended data collection period for the households’ energy consumption data at the test sites is needed (to obtain an annual energy consumption pattern during the intervention period to be compared to pre-intervention period data) for the research to draw a conclusion on the effect of the intervention on energy consumption behavior in the test sites. This effort is left for future work.

Acknowledgment

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