sonder – making social life real again.

A STRIKING PROBLEM

If you used public transportation to get to work today, it probably wasn't a very memorable experience. In a city like Berlin, thousands of life hours are wasted every day, because people feel awkward when closely surrounded by strangers in trains or buses and end up doing basically nothing. The atmosphere is tense and stressful because it takes a lot of effort to suppress all human tendencies for curiosity, social interaction and emotional expression. Humanity has to find a way of making this time enjoyable! Travelling together with hundreds of individuals in a safe environment must be turned into a fun and meaningful activity.

A SIMPLE SOLUTION

We will develop sonder, a mobile application that will allow people to identify interesting co-passengers to interact with for a few minutes while travelling in a city's public transportation. The setting of a train or bus offers the unique opportunity to meet and share thoughts with people from all walks of society: These are people you could never meet anywhere else, so hearing their stories can enable the greatest innovations and insights. The design of these spaces is usually perfect for face-to-face interaction. Activities like reading, music, or staring at the floor, on the other hand, are all activities that can be better performed somewhere else. So conversation does not only add the highest potential value to a ride, it also does so at a very low opportunity cost. Yet this potential is hardly ever realized because of a coordination problem that leads to a 'bad' equilibrium: Many people would enjoy a conversation but don't want to take the risk of rejection by someone who doesn't. Given that potential conversation partners don't reveal themselves by talking it is optimal not to start talking yourself. So no one goes the first step. sonder solves this coordination problem, by enabling users to signal that they are interested in interaction without any risk of embarrassment: Before entering, for instance, an underground train, a traveller who feels like meeting new people simply enters his destination into a simple interface. Using the network's maps and schedule, the application identifies the trains that the traveller is about to board and displays profiles of other people travelling on the same route who currently feel talkative, too. They meet. The app also helps to initiate a conversation using the story behind the current trip or a list of questions the users would be interested to talk about.

TARGET MARKET

The app will be designed for urban areas with well developed public transportation networks. It will be launched in Berlin, where communication culture is casual, diversity is high and public transport is safe. The first users will be the more outgoing, curious and communicative types from the age cohort 18-25. The most progressive individuals in this group are disillusioned with social media, and yearn for more real world interaction. All other people in a train compartment will be able to observe when individuals from this initial group start matching up. Once they see that commuting to work can be so much fun, they will rapidly adopt the technology themselves – perfect conditions for viral growth.