Online communities for older users: what can we learn from local community interactions to create social sites that work for older people

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This study looked at the significance of family and local community connections in determining online community engagement amongst a sample of older people in the south of England. Four catalysts were identified which motivated engagement with local and online forms of community and these were: family, roles, loss and ‘spaces and places’. SNS use (primarily Facebook) was largely family-focussed but alternative social motives were evident in relation to other forms of online community. There was a clear preference for meeting face to face with online communities and social networking sites being used predominantly as tools for achieving this aim. Exploration of the catalysts offers ways that greater community involvement might be further facilitated through social and design initiatives. Suggestions include private ‘family rooms’ within Facebook, anonymous ‘sharing spaces’ in elder-specific communities and a focus on hyperlocal initiatives to connect local and online communities.

1. INTRODUCTION

Whilst the communal benefits of online communities and social networking sites (SNS) are now enjoyed by many Internet users, they remain of limited appeal to many older people (Lehtinen et al., 2009). Current concerns over social isolation and exclusion of the elderly in ageing societies (e.g. ODPM, 2005) suggest that the ability to enlist such communal resources will become increasingly important for this age group. In this study we consider how a small group of older people in the south of England engage with online communities and SNS within the context of their existing relationships in local communities, highlighting motivations for online engagement and the role of family in this nexus.

Previous research into older people’s use of (elder-specific) online communities has shown them to be beneficial as sources of companionship and social support amongst online peers (Wright, 2000; Xie, 2008). The development of SNS has further expanded opportunities for social contact and online community, enabling users to interact and collaborate with others as part of an on-going social dialogue. Such developments could offer greater opportunities for older people to maintain and expand their social connections but so far their enthusiasm for them has remained fairly limited. Whilst 44% of those over 65 are now online in the UK only 25% of them (9% of all over 65s) have an SNS profile (Ofcom, 2013). The reasons for this limited engagement remain poorly understood with studies mostly examining older people’s attitudes prior to adoption. Objections cited at this stage include a lack of knowledge and difficulty in using SNS functionality (Ryu et al, 2009) but also difficulty in seeing such computer activities as relevant or beneficial to their lives, particularly in terms of enjoyment (Ryu et al., 2009), fun and communicative potential (Lehtinen et al., 2009). Overall the lack of privacy and limited control over the social context appear to be their greatest causes for concern (Lehtinen et al., 2009; Gibson et al, 2010; Righi et al 2012).

Research engaging older users of SNS post adoption suggests that they appreciate them most when used to maintain connections with younger family members (Karimi and Neustaedter, 2011; Gonzalez et al, 2012; Nef et al, 2013). This concurs with research into older people’s broader use of computer mediated communication (Lindley et al., 2009) which suggests that they are likely to engage in socioemotional selectivity (Carstensen et al., 1999) when weighing up the benefits of using such technologies. Socioemotional selectivity describes the tendency amongst older adults to gravitate towards emotionally meaningful and pre-existing contact with family and friends as they get older as a particular adaptation to ageing. Carstensen suggests that this is primarily due to a changing perception of time as limited and the desire to spend more of that time with those that we love and trust. In this study we assess the significance of socioemotional selectivity in understanding older people’s engagement with SNS as well as other forms of online community by exploring alternative motivations that exist for them when engaging with...
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These online resources. In addition we consider the relationship between local and online community for older people. With research highlighting the emerging uses of SNS by teenagers that augment pre-existing interpersonal and local community ties (Ellison et al, 2007) we consider whether older users are similarly involved in a translation of local social practices to online communities.

Summarising, our research questions are as follows:

- How does socioemotional selectivity play a part in participants’ interest in community both locally and online?
- What motivations exist at a local community level for older people to engage with SNS and other forms of online community?

2. METHODS

This qualitative study sought to capture the experiences, motivations and preferences of a small group of older people1 with respect to SNS and online community, all of whom were living in the Meridian area2 on the south coast of England. A participatory approach was employed throughout, involving and consulting participants and community groups as part of the research process. Participants of retirement age were recruited through three different elder-specific community portals with a view to accessing participants with a diverse range of online and local community experiences. A deliberate attempt was made to recruit older participants with varying degrees of engagement with online community/SNS as well as those who had no online involvement at all. The community portals chosen included a local community organisation, a local computer club and an elder-specific online community based in the UK called DropBy3. An initial survey with 43 respondents was used to identify a suitably diverse sample which included an equal number of participants from the following: a) elder-specific online communities b) ‘open’ online communities through SNS, e.g. Facebook c) local computer club and d) those not online but connected to a local community organisation. This led on to fifteen individual interviews4 and a focus group5. The final interviewees lived independently in their own homes and were aged between 65 to 87 years with a mean age of 73.4 years. There were nine women and six men. The interviews were semi-structured and used an interview guide which explored five broad areas: 1) ‘a walkthrough of yesterday’; 2) different kinds of community; 3) social relationships; 4) technology and communication and 5) ‘a walkthrough of yesterday online’. Interviews took place in participants’ homes and lasted approximately forty five minutes. Analysis of the interviews was conducted using an inductive process of thematic analysis. Three of the researchers independently coded a sample of the transcribed interviews using NVivo software. Eleven codes were identified at this stage including: 1) family/friends; 2) trust; 3) risks/benefits; 4) barriers to engagement; 5) motivation; 6) shared values; 7) shared place/space/history; 8) fun/work; 9) sense of belonging; 10) being alone: feelings of isolation/loneliness versus happy to be alone and 11) change. These codes were then compared across researchers and analysis was reframed around four recurrent themes or ‘catalysts’. Researchers conducted a second coding of the interviews to explore these catalysts further. These catalysts will now be used to explain underlying motivations for community engagement both locally and online and frame our responses to the research questions.

3. FINDINGS

Our study was designed to investigate two key questions around socioemotional selectivity and alternate motivations for online and local community engagement. Here we address these questions directly using our four catalysts to inform our responses and use direct quotes from our participants to illustrate particular points. In order to protect participant confidentiality no real names are used.

3.1 Family

3.1.1 Family as a conduit

Family acted as an important conduit to community engagement both locally and online. For most of those interviewed, the sense of belonging that we commonly associate with community had its roots in the family, with a suggestion from some that “real community” could only occur through extended family connections in a particular locale. This came through in memories of community as it had been during childhood.

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1 The definition of an ‘older’ person is dependent on the society in which that person lives. In this study this has been taken as retirement age in the UK which is currently 65 for men and 62 for women. However it should be noted that chronological age was not the concern here but rather an individual’s adaptive response to the ageing process by enlisting community resources.

2 This covers the towns of Newhaven, Peacehaven and Telscombe Cliffs, together with the Parishes of Piddinghoe, Rodmell, Iford, Denton and South Heighton in East Sussex, England.

3 www.dropby.co.uk

4 One participant from the Facebook group later dropped out of the study.

5 Analysis of the focus group is not part of this paper.
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“When I was younger, when I was a teenager, the people in families used to live more close together...when I was young, my gran and granddad used to be just down the road. I used to spend a lot of time in their place, as well as my house where I lived, and there was a sense of my uncles and aunts used to come around and I used to love it, you know. It was very personal, a very personal thing in families”, Ray

For many of those interviewed this ideal scenario did not exist in their current circumstances, with family members often living some distance from them in other areas of the country or abroad. In spite of this fact family ties remained the focus of everyday life for most of our interviewees.

Those who were particularly active in their local communities were often physically and emotionally close to their immediate family, seeing them regularly and being involved in their day to day lives. This on-going contact provided opportunities for informal meetings with other local people who were friends and acquaintances of younger family members. Here Janet explains what happened when she moved to Newhaven to help support her grandchildren,

“I didn’t like Newhaven, I didn’t feel I belonged to it at all, it was only the children, and as a result of that all my acquaintances, friends like those two there, are my daughter’s friends, not mine” Janet

Regular contact with younger family provided more formal opportunities for community involvement through school and sports club activities.

Family relationships were also at the core of engagement with SNS in the guise of Facebook. The preferences of family members with regards to particular communication technologies (e.g. mobile phones, texting, email, Skype, Facebook, etc.) were a strong motivating influence, determining the ongoing social practices of the family.

“I do email people. I thought, when I first got my laptop, this will be good to keep in touch with my family, but they don’t really email. The younger ones do Facebook, even the older ones, one of my sons don’t do Facebook, they don’t do email, he doesn’t phone either. I do think about Skype, maybe I could do that, but then again, if they’re not doing it. If they’re not going to be doing it, what’s the point in me doing it?” Betty

Those with a close emotional connection to their family (irrespective of physical distance) were likely to use family-preferred routes for maintaining such connections, often taking the lead from younger members of the family. To this end many of our interviewees (twelve out of the fifteen) had joined Facebook in order to keep abreast of events in the lives of their younger family. For some interviewees this Facebook involvement was a predominantly passive viewing of family posts without comment, constituting a benevolent observation of their online lives as described by one interviewee,

“I’ve got a Facebook account but I only use it to go online and see what the rest of the family’s doing”, Carl

Engagement with Facebook was often accompanied by a sense of distaste at the triviality of exchanges and an awkwardness at ‘ overhearing‘ their family’s private conversations in this public arena. Four interviewees specifically mentioned concern at seeing conversations involving their grandchildren that they felt they were not meant to see. Viewing Facebook rarely translated into active engagement with family or others in this online space and family posts of significance were more likely to prompt direct personal contact with that family member through an alternative (more private) means which usually meant the telephone.

Five of our participants had started to use Facebook in a more ‘active‘ way, by posting their own content to the site. Three of these individuals had close relationships with family living nearby and used Facebook to augment their family and local community involvement. Facebook allowed them to maintain their family connections with a degree of independence, providing ways of expressing their family involvement without having to always be physically present. It also offered ways of extending their social network by getting to know the friends of their family before meeting them in person.

Family dynamics did not always steer an older relative towards using the Internet at all, negating any engagement with online community or SNS. The willingness of younger family members to help older family with such technologies was variable. Janet for instance who did not use the Internet at all decided that genealogy websites might be interesting to her.

“All I wanted to do really was to do my ancestry6. But I haven’t done that yet. I’d quite like to do that but they are always so busy when I see them, my daughters, trying to cook meals and get children off to bed and so forth. My son-in-law says he’ll do it but I don’t know when” Janet

Family members often acknowledged the potential benefit in their relatives getting online access, but did not always recognise the need for support and training.

3.1.2 Beyond family
The strength of family ties and the prevailing use of SNS (particularly Facebook) by family were

6 a reference to using the genealogy site Ancestry.com
significant in determining our interviewees’ engagement with community through Facebook’s ‘friends of family’. However family ties were not always central to these older people’s daily lives and the motivations that exist beyond family are important to acknowledge as they highlight other significant social resources that are available to them. Some of our interviewees had quite weak connections to their family and did not rely on them for a sense of ongoing involvement in life. Even those with strong family ties still maintained activities and friendships beyond the purview of family. Whilst these relationships were sometimes perceived as peripheral they clearly had a part to play in maintaining the shape of everyday life, often taking place with peers and focussing on shared regular activities and light-hearted companionship. This same emphasis was expressed in relation to local and online forms of community.

Communal activities and group membership with peers were important as they provided opportunities for meaningful activity, a source of companionship and opportunities to make new friends. These relationships enabled a degree of independence from family allowing them to maintain their own sense of identity in the face of life changes. All of our interviewees were involved in group activities with their peers in one way or another and the nature of these groups was diverse. Overall there was an emphasis on shared endeavour but also fun and light-hearted companionship. There was an openness to meeting new people and starting new friendships. Those of our participants who were online also took part in online communities. Their involvement with these communities could be purely virtual, taking place through the ‘open’ global forums of the Internet which support anonymous participation; places like Twitter, Reddit and eBay where common interests are shared with other Internet users of all ages. Equally online communities were used to bridge the online and local worlds and make personal contact with peers for companionship and as sources of new friendship. Engagement with online communities of a purely virtual kind and those that bridged the online and local worlds show our participants seeking contact with previously unknown others not on the basis of emotional safety as socioemotional selectivity (Carstensen et al, 1999) might suggest but out of gregariousness and a sense of fun.

3.2 Roles

Community organisations require many voluntary roles to be filled in order to sustain themselves. All of our participants were involved in local community groups of some form or another. These included residents’ associations, community centres, church and faith groups, children’s after school groups, local charities, exercise classes, bowling clubs, art, knitting, tailoring, computing, lunch and travel groups. The role that each person assumed within these groups was significant in terms of motivating sustained engagement and in maintaining a sense of identity through the activities and responsibilities that went with that role. Many had assumed quite active roles in these groups such as trustee, treasurer, organiser, administrator, teacher or general helper as well as engaging as a user or beneficiary of other groups. Some of these roles also informed and motivated engagement with online forms of community.

We found many of our participants shared a similar route towards engagement with community groups, i.e. that of volunteering their services to help sustain an existing service or community centre. The roles they assumed often made use of skills they had gained during their working lives such as Peggy’s accounting skills for her role as treasurer or Ben’s skills in computing and teaching for running the computer club. In other cases the volunteering roles made use of more general skills such as Peggy’s driving for ‘meals on wheels’ or Marie’s selling refreshments and making tea at her grandchildren’s football club. What can be seen as common to all these roles is the importance of being able to make a useful contribution and to ‘give something back’ to their local communities. A number of our participants spoke in particular about the importance of feeling needed, and knowing that they made a contribution that no-one else could.

Whilst our participants might assume responsible roles in relation to certain community groups they were also quite happy to be users of other clubs, services or community centres. This ability to have varying degrees of responsibility in relation to voluntary roles was another feature of these older people’s community engagement. This gave them flexibility in terms of how much they committed themselves to such roles over time, depending on availability and mobility. What may have started as a very active role in a community group would likely transform over the years into that of a passive user.

In comparison to the multitude of explicit local community roles, online communities and SNS did not offer our interviewees such well-defined roles. The only ‘official’ roles assumed online were those which extended local community responsibilities through the creation and administration of online groups. This practice was evident through the use of email lists, Facebook groups and groups within DropBy. Generally speaking online roles were more implicit than this, emerging as a result of stances taken during online interactions. The most common social role taken within SNS (Facebook) was that of the passive observer, as described here,

“One of the grandchildren are on Facebook but we very rarely exchange messages. Simply
because I don’t want to embarrass them because I’m out of their generation and I don’t want to spy on them.” Iris

Beyond this passive stance six of our interviewees had established roles based on fun and light-hearted engagement, posting jokes and humorous videos to online communities and playing word games with others through Facebook.

“I post stuff that I like you know...my basic aim in going online is, going anywhere, is to either be amused or to learn something so the other website that I probably spend more time on than DropBy is Reddit.” Carl

The online roles of sharer, humorist and game player were emergent and implicit arising as a personal interpretation of online communities and SNS. There were very few formal roles within SNS and online communities. These social sites typically cater for the users or beneficiaries of the service without promoting specific roles that members can engage in. Using Facebook for instance does not involve any kind of stated role as part of community membership. Nor do elder specific online communities expect roles to be assumed as part of a member’s enrolment or participation.

A few explicit roles did exist, such as moderators of online peer groups. Moderation was intended to ensure privacy and safety for group members. Here all new members were actively engaged in conversation from the beginning in order to assess their authenticity as prospective members and to make them feel welcome. Informal roles also emerged, such as being part of a ‘welcoming committee’ for new members, with other members joining in this activity. We saw similar behaviour with members of the Newhaven computer club but translating this behaviour directly from a local context to an online one appeared to be problematic. This behaviour was sometimes interpreted as unusual by some of our interviewees who perceived it as an unexpected form of gatekeeping. It seems that the non-hierarchical expectations of Internet governance that have become commonplace particularly in relation to web 2.0 seem to run counter to this kind of behaviour.

3.3 Loss

Loss is an inherent aspect of the ageing experience and present in the lives of all of our participants. It was perhaps most poignantly experienced through bereavement with the death of a spouse or close friend but other forms of loss were also apparent. The loss of significant roles in life and failing health and mobility were also common experiences in retirement which challenged individual autonomy and forced a reassessment of social relationships. The challenge of loss was often countered by greater involvement with community groups and activities particular those involving one’s peers.

This affected the women in our study more than the men with five of our nine female participants having lost their husbands and none of the men having suffered similar bereavements. This caused these women to reflect upon having previously adopted a slightly insular life with their spouse, and a sense of not needing anyone else while they had each other. This had led to feelings of isolation after the loss of their spouse, and an eventual need to reach out and build new relationships with peers.

Loss was often accompanied by a heightened sense of loneliness and a feeling that the home was no longer a place of comfort in the same way it had been before. Some of those interviewed said that there was a point when they found being at home alone unbearable and had to get out and find somewhere else to be as Joanne explains,

“My husband died three years ago and I’d looked after him for a couple of years so I was more or less isolated at that time and I realised that I didn’t want to stay at home and there are quite a number of ladies who have that; they don’t like staying at home alone” Joanne

Involvement with community groups and activities helped assuage these feelings of loneliness and provided a new sense of purpose in life. Communal groups and activities particularly those involving peers provided a degree of companionship and understanding which was not always possible elsewhere (even from family members). It was felt that sharing the experience of loss was sometimes easier with another older person who was more likely to have experienced similar losses as Larry explains,

“it is such a benefit, when your partner dies, and you can, if you want to, you can go down the bowls club, and see your friends, and they’ll all help you over this, because most of them have been through it” Larry

Online community had a role to play here in connecting those with similar experiences of loss and allowing them to share the difficult emotions involved. Although less common, this same need for companionship and understanding was met through engagement with online communities. Daphne explains how she made a new friend through this kind of an online connection,

“I met her about four years ago on a widows forum. We both recently lost our husband and we just seemed to click somehow and we speak practically every day which is nice. It’s just a shame that she’s so far away” Daphne

Online forums are particularly useful when mobility or the lack of a local peer network is an issue.
Those that specifically focus on bereavement make possible the job of sharing difficult emotions with others in a similar predicament. They allow initially anonymous interactions which can be developed into personal relationships where a connection is formed and trust is built up.

Part of coping with loss is learning how to deal with the difficult emotions that arise when someone close to you dies. This is sometimes referred to as the loss-orientation to grief (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). At the same time there is a need to engage with the new situation that has emerged by ‘moving on’ and taking action to create a new life for yourself without that person (the restoration-orientation to grief). It is acknowledged that the grief process oscillates between these two orientations and communal activities can be beneficial for both. Loss in all its forms requires a reassessment of who one is and how one relates to others. Bereavement in particular forces one to reconsider one’s own deep assumptions about where emotional support and intimacy comes from in one’s life.

Whilst not common, online community did have a part to play for two of our interviewees in relation to the loss orientation, helping them to deal with their loss by providing opportunities to share difficult emotions in sympathetic online forums. The physical presence of local community was more important in terms of the restoration-orientation, providing opportunities for shared meaningful activity rather than an overt sharing of emotion. Here SNS and online communities were used to establish new local community connections through the Internet but with an emphasis on face to face meeting as an ultimate objective.

3.4 Spaces and Places

The nature of different physical and virtual spaces and places have a clear role to play in encouraging or discouraging community engagement. Local community centres were seen by many of our participants as the natural place to go if one was interested in meeting people and getting involved in community-based activities. Participation might focus on formal activities such as art classes or computer clubs but there were also opportunities for more informal meetings over coffee or lunch. Both kinds of engagement seemed to be important for communal feelings to take root. Many of our interviewees highlighted the importance of shared interests and activities for forming and maintaining community ties, and specific locations and contexts were seen as indicators of the likelihood of finding people who shared these things. In some cases, shared activity (such as classes) seemed to be acting as a safe way of allowing the possibility of friendships or companionships to develop, without there being pressure if this did not happen.

Having a shared location was also seen as an important factor for communities to many interviewees, and this revealed many further places that could act as catalysts for community engagement on a more informal level. Almost all interviewees spoke about the importance of places such as pavements outside homes, parks, bus stops, local shops and doctors’ surgeries in making connections with people in their local communities. In these places there was no guarantee of shared interests, but a likelihood of a shared experience of the physical neighbourhood and the routines associated with daily living in a certain place (like shopping or dealing with the rubbish collection). These places, as well as more purposeful community spaces, allow people to come together for the implicit sharing of life experience without an expectation of an enduring emotional connection. In some cases these local spaces were a source of lasting friendships and this was particularly true for those of our participants who were not online. In describing some of the important people in his life Bryan said the following,

“a lady and her husband opposite who I pick blackberries for and go and visit. I don’t do just that for them. They do things for me and I do things for them, it’s a reciprocal thing” Bryan

Some participants spoke of the importance of being ‘known’ in feeling part of a community. Accounts of this included the knowledge that neighbours were looking out for unusual visitors, and the development of regular ‘nodding’ acquaintances at the bus stop.

In public spaces the feeling of community was related to the number of people that were present with there being a critical number above which that feeling was likely to break down. As Carl explains,

“to me community is gotta be small, it’s containable"

Some participants had also experienced community engagement through virtual spaces and places, including forums and SNS. Here the nature of shared space was defined in terms of ideas and computer-mediated activities rather than through the physicality of the setting. For some the focus of discussion within an online space was a significant motivation for community engagement. For three of the men in our study this meant engaging with Twitter for news, politics and current affairs. One of these men Carl was also a regular contributor and reader of the social news site Reddit, which he visited every day with the view that,

“there’s a lot more like minded people online, especially on Reddit” Carl

Other interviewees sought out playful interactive spaces as ways of engaging with community
online. Three of our female interviewees played computer games online with others via Facebook. These included traditional offline games that had been brought online, like Bingo and Scrabble, as well as online-only games such as Candy Crush Saga. Such games combine gameplay with social interaction which is facilitated by a separate text-based chat window allowing informal connections to develop alongside the game. Usually these games were played with people they already knew locally but not always. One participant played Bingo on Facebook in a ‘public room’ and had developed a lasting friendship with someone that she had met there. A friendly connection formed with another player whilst they were playing this game and this developed into regular conversations via email. This friendship later moved offline with them meeting in person.

In other cases gregariousness and enjoyable social interaction were all that was needed to frame the online space. This was particularly true of those involved with elder-specific online communities like DropBy. Daphne, who had been an internet user for many years, engaged with numerous online communities via their general discussion forums. As part of this ongoing participation she had developed an ongoing relationship with a particular group of users that she described as her ‘local forum’ even though its members were from all over the UK and abroad.

“Yeah, local online. Yeah, I shouldn’t really use the word local should I really…they’re scattered all over the country, because one of them’s in Spain, he lives in Spain, but I don’t, when I’m talking to it, I don’t look at it that they’re all over the country, we’re just, sort of in a room together if you like…I think that I can honestly say that I’m closer to them than what I am my family”

Daphne

This group which was made up of around 16 people who had first met on other forums some years earlier and had persisted as a group despite having to migrate to different sites a number of times. What was interesting here was the way that the emotional closeness of the group members had been translated by Daphne into a physical equivalent. This was unusual amongst our participants who were usually keen to transcend the online to local divide and meet people in person as much as possible

All of our interviewees who had joined DropBy did so in the hope of making or sustaining local connections. They expressed disappointment that other members of the community were so far away and indicated that they had hoped to make contact with more local people. Similarly much of the activity through Facebook extended local connections by engaging in interactions relating to real world spaces and places. Sometimes this was also set up as an online bridge to connect with local people online such as the Facebook group set up by Bryan for the film club that he ran at the local community centre.

4. DISCUSSION

Social isolation is an issue of relevance to this study with our interviews highlighting the ways that the social resources of local and online communities are enlisted by our participants to maintain social cohesion in their everyday lives. Older people in developed societies are now more likely to live their later years physically separated from family and friends and are at risk of being more socially isolated than ever before in their local communities (McCarthy and Thomas, 2004; Lee, 2006). Encouraging greater community engagement is one way of addressing this.

Our research suggests that a better understanding of the four catalysts identified (family, roles, loss, spaces and places) is important if we are to provide greater opportunities for community engagement by older people through online communities and SNS. Here we reflect upon how the potential of these catalysts might best be tapped by future interventions considering both social and design aspects.

4.1 Social Interventions

4.1.1 Shifting the emphasis beyond the family context

Family was significant in determining a general awareness of the Internet and engagement with SNS through Facebook despite misgivings about the trivial and public nature of interactions there. This was in line with socio-emotional selectivity (Carstensen et al, 1999). However alternative social motives were apparent in relation to other forms of online community. There was a general willingness amongst our participants to engage with strangers, make new friends and take social ‘risks’ online through fun and light-hearted interactions. This challenges the use of socioemotional selectivity as a singular model for understanding older people’s use of online social resources. Research into identity in later life suggests that a number of different identities are important for maintaining wellbeing (Moen et al, 2000). Whilst one’s family identity is often the most significant one (e.g. as a spouse, parent or grandparent) there are other relationships and identities that are equally important. It seems that socioemotional selectivity may be an aspect of family identity but that is not the whole story. There is more to an older person than that which their family sees.

In addressing older people’s social isolation and loneliness it seems pertinent to provide
opportunities for developing new identities online as sources of self expression and relatedness. Employing socio-emotional selectivity (Carstensen et al, 1999) as a guiding principle is likely to limit such social opportunities. Some elder-specific online communities like DropBy and the now defunct SagaZone⁷ have taken a similar risk-averse approach to online community, striving to create safe environments for potentially vulnerable older users. They have done this by encouraging transparent self-disclosure and top-down moderation of interactions in order to reduce online abuse and deception. Whilst this may be appropriate for some older users, many of our participants were interested in a more ‘open’ approach to online interactions where the benefits of anonymity were acknowledged for sharing difficult emotions and making new friends. Clearly there is a balance to be struck between safety and openness in online communities that are still establishing themselves.

4.1.2 Increasing opportunities for peer learning
Family support was significant in promoting the idea of Facebook use amongst our participants with younger family often being instrumental in creating an initial profile on the site. However family support for learning how to use this SNS was variable. Bakardjieva (2005) highlights the importance of ‘warm experts’ who have appropriate knowledge and patience when teaching older people to use the Internet. In this study there were a number of examples of what might be called ‘lukewarm experts’ within our interviewee’s families, i.e. younger family members who acknowledged the significance of the online world to their older relatives but were unable or unwilling to spend much time teaching them how to use it. For a number of our interviewees a peer-led computer club afforded the best opportunity for developing their online skills. We would suggest that providing opportunities for greater peer learning would allow older people to learn about SNS and online community in a way that is more aligned with their particular learning difficulties and age-appropriate motivations.

4.2 Design Interventions

4.2.1 Address blurring of public/ private boundaries in SNS
There are aspects of the design and administration of SNS that do not encourage older people to actively engage with them. In particular the general lack of privacy and the triviality of public exchanges within Facebook were problematic for most of our participants. The general blurring of private versus public boundaries and the expectations of personal disclosure within Facebook (and SNS) culture acted to negate family exchanges for many of our participants. This suggests that socioemotional selectivity may be more prominent in this context making our older participants more risk averse. Online spaces which supported a clear transition from public to private interactions were conducive to growing intimacy (e.g. chat windows in Facebook games) and should be provided and well signposted in SNS. The addition of a ‘family room’ to Facebook functionality would be of great benefit to older users where privacy could be ensured.

Conversely public anonymity was seen as a beneficial aspect of the Internet that was missing from more closed environments like DropBy. The disinhibition associated with anonymous online interaction (Suler, 2004) can allow emotions to be expressed in ways that may not happen with existing family and friends. The establishment of an anonymous ‘sharing space’ would be particularly important for those wishing to share the difficult emotions of bereavement and for those wanting to make new friends through playful interactions.

4.2.2 Support identification through explicit roles
Most SNS and online communities do not encourage people to identify themselves through specific roles which can discourage older people’s prolonged engagement. The significance of social roles in retirement has long been acknowledged as a significant part of healthy ageing (Havighurst and Albrecht, 1953) and underpins a great deal of government policy aimed at the older generation (e.g. WHO, 2002). Roles can motivate local community involvement by providing structured activity and a renewed sense of identity and purpose post retirement. The roles our participants took within local communities were informed not only by their previous work and family lives, but also from their present needs, i.e. to socialise, to positively contribute and to increase self-esteem. There are few similar formal roles that exist within SNS and online communities and establishing these may be an important way of easing older people’s integration into online communities. Such roles would have to support their active contribution to the community and make use of existing skills and experience.

Roles tend to emerge more implicitly online like the ‘answer person’ in a discussion forum (Gleave et al, 2009). In this study implicit roles emerged in the form of family observer as well as sharer, humorist and game player to the broader Internet audience. Some of these could form the basis of more formal roles within SNS and online communities as curators of family memories/genealogists, moderators of online discussions or online tournament organisers. The more explicit development of such roles could lead to greater engagement by some older users.

⁷ www.sagazone.co.uk/
4.2.3 Allow for group sizes which best support feelings of community

In a local context the number of people involved is very important with regards to establishing a feeling of community. A number of our participants noted that when a community group got over a certain size something fundamentally changed for the worse. This emphasises the importance of being ‘known’ within a community where everybody is aware of everybody else’s presence and knows their own particular qualities and skills. There are clearly limits to how many people can be known in this way and the feeling of ‘togetherness’ is therefore limited by the number of community members. This same principle seems to reassert itself online with Daphne maintaining her ‘local’ online group feeling with sixteen others whilst many others expressed a lack of community feeling in relation to large communities like Reddit or Facebook.

4.2.4 Explore uses of SNS and online community that acknowledge older people’s preference for face to face interactions through hyper-local initiatives

Access to local, face to face social interaction was still the test of online community for our group of older people, mostly reinforcing local bonds and resulting in actual meetings. In a similar way to Ellison et al’s (2007) American college students we found our participants using Facebook and DropBy as tools for maintaining and exploring local connections. With disappointment expressed by some interviewees that DropBy did not have as many local members as they had expected. We would suggest that this emphasis on hyperlocal (Hu et al, 2013) uses of social media is something that could be explored further with the older generation through the design of community initiatives which make use of the Internet to support local community interactions. There is also potential for digital augmentation of real-world places. Serendipitous meetings in everyday places such as the park or the bus stop could potentially be enhanced through carefully designed ambient technologies which encourage conversation and potentially allow for the formation of persistent connections.

5. CONCLUSIONS

SNS and other forms of online community have potential for ameliorating social isolation and loneliness amongst older people. In this study they were shown to provide many of our older users with opportunities for maintaining their connections with family and friends. In addition they offered new ways of interacting with strangers and developing new friendships. The four catalysts identified (family, roles, loss and ‘spaces and places’) highlight some of the dynamics that need to be addressed in order to create online communities that are more appropriate and interesting to older users. They invite a revised approach to online community which accommodates older people as a heterogeneous user group with diverse motivations. We argue for an approach that acknowledges their ‘whole selves’ rather than solely defining them by family-centric or risk-averse models of vulnerability. In this paper we have proposed a number of social and design interventions based upon our four catalysts which are intended to promote greater engagement within online community by older users. The generalisability of this study’s findings are limited however due to the small sample size and an implicit bias towards community-oriented individuals within that sample. Engaging older people who are more socially isolated will be an important challenge for future researchers in this area.

Finally we would like to acknowledge the concerns of our participants in relation to the “digital imperative” that pervades post-industrial societies. For almost all of our interviewees there was clear resistance towards the online-only or “digital by default” (Cabinet Office, 2012) trends that exist in public discourse and emerging social norms. They expressed a clear preference for face to face meetings as a basis for community. It should not be assumed that online community by itself can be a solution to the problem of social isolation amongst older people. As our participants reminded us it was the human aspect of community that was the resource rather than the way in which this was accessed.

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7. REFERENCES


