

An investigation into the role of traditional and computer-based social networking on the psychological identity and well-being of older adults

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ABSTRACT

Increasing life-span and advances in medical practice have led to more people who are physically fit and/or mentally agile in a social grouping traditionally identified as being elderly. Development of identity occurs throughout the lifespan and in this age group there are often significant changes to family and work relationships (e.g. redundancy, retirement, children leaving home, grandparent roles, divorce, bereavement etc). Throughout the lifespan, the importance of relevant social support and communication networks is widely recognized as enhancing positive development of identity and well-being. However, social changes (specifically diminishing community life, smaller families, early retirement, families spread geographically) decrease the availability of traditional support structures for many older adults. This lack of support during identity development can lead to feelings of reduced self-worth, role confusion, isolation, depression and physical illness. It is proposed that 'technological apprehension' in older adults denies them the opportunity for alternative support networks and 'online identities'. In summary, this project aims to evaluate the role of 'traditional' and online support mechanisms (e.g. online social networking) on identity in older adults and how these mechanisms affect well-being.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.8 PERSONAL COMPUTING: Miscellaneous – computer-mediated communication, social networks.

General Terms

Measurement, Documentation, Performance, Design, Human Factors, Standardization, Theory, Verification.

Keywords

Older adults, computer use, support, social networks, communication, well-being, identity.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The elderly are the fastest growing population group in many developed countries. In Britain almost one in every five people are over pensionable age [2].

One of the most important quality of life issues for older people

is the quality of their social networks. The relationship between older persons' social networks and well-being has been well documented during the past two decades [3]. Social support plays a direct role in promoting health and well-being, research shows that loss of social support (like loss of a spouse) increases depression [4]. Low social support is an important reason for decreases in life satisfaction and increases in depressive symptoms among older adults [9]. Studies showed that older people show a higher perceived well-being when they have more social interactions [5].

Governments in the developed countries often provide various sources of support for older adults but the take up is low, it is stipulated that it is due to the fact that their use is affected by factors like the user's level of sociability.

According to U.S. Census Bureau from 2005 [11] 28 percent of people over 65 (three quarters of whom are women) live alone. In later life, family members are usually the primary sources of social support, especially one's spouse, children and siblings. Due to many social changes and their character (early retirement, families spread geographically, smaller families, etc.), at this stage of life new social support systems are needed to be formed, like neighbors or friends, in order to satisfy older adults need for interaction and companionship [8,10].

As stipulated by Giddens [6], identities are "projects of the selves" and constructs that people work on all the time, in a constant dialogue between a person and the society, therefore the development of identity occurs throughout the whole lifespan.

Although some research shows that on average older people show higher levels of positive emotions than younger adults [7], in life of older adults there are often significant changes to family and work relationships, like redundancy, retirement, children leaving home, grandparent roles, divorce, bereavement etc. Therefore lack of support in these cases together with shifts in social exposure during identity development can lead to feelings of reduced self-worth, role confusion, isolation, depression and physical illness [3], [8].

Many older people do not have a wide range of options to choose from when it comes to re-establishing or maintaining their social networks. At the same time importance of technology in everyday life increases, with significant advances in online communication and networking [12], [13].

Adler [1] says that being connected to the internet is important to many segments of society but for seniors it is of special importance and a potential use. Over the key benefits of it for older adults he cites: enhancing communications with family and friends. Computer-mediated communication allows geographically separated families and friends to stay connected. Electronic mail allows greater flexibility in developing and

maintaining personal relationships, and online communities for older people can be a place of support and understanding. Therefore a research is needed to investigate and identify the influence of internet communication on identity and psychological well-being of older adults and compare them with the impact of traditional social networking and support one gains from it.

2. PROPOSAL

A variety of methods will be used to recruit local participants and data will be collected in 4 phases:

1: pre-testing to collect baseline data (biographic details, communication and support networks, identity perception and computer use)

2: focus groups to understand views towards current, future and ideal forms of support using different strata of older adults

3: intervention (training in online and face-to-face communication skills) followed by longitudinal evaluation using diaries, Quality of Life scales and semi-structured interviews

4: focus groups repeated

Quantitative and qualitative analysis will be used to develop a model of support, identity and well-being for older adults. Content analysis of focus group discussions will highlight significant themes. Changes in response to the interventions will be assessed using ANOVA with baseline measures as co-variants and regression analysis will examine inter-relationships between variables.

3. METHOD

In first phase of pre-testing, baseline data will be gathered using questionnaires. Questions will include details about education level, marital status, employment and socio-economic status living conditions, leisure activities, questions about communication and support networks, being a member of any social groups or group activities (parish, clubs), familiarity with using email/ use of computers and other ICT (mobile phone).

4. REFERENCES

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PERSONAL STATEMENT

I am a postgraduate researcher in Psychology at Bournemouth University School of Design, Engineering & Computing.

I am only in the initial stage of my project as I just started on 1st of May 2008, currently I am in the process of writing my literature review. Therefore I would be very grateful for any feedback and suggestions you could have for me and the project at this stage.