

The Supportive Behaviors of Older Social Network Site Users

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Author Note

This research was supported by the Margaret Ellen Kalp fellowship at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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Abstract

This paper outlines a new multi-wave study of older adult users of social network sites. The goal of the study is to develop a grounded understanding of the phenomenon of older user social network site adoption, to identify and investigate ways in which the social network site facilitates access to supportive resources, and to evaluate the outcomes of access to supportive resources in social network sites. The paper draws on a preliminary analysis of 15 semi-structured interviews with older, late-adopting social network site users to present emergent themes. Reconnection is identified as a salient use motivator among older users of social network sites. We then explore the social network sites as a location of social support for older users; Emotional and informational support are readily provisioned on social network sites, whereas instrumental support is not commonly requested or provisioned. The role of cross-contextual disclosure and technological alternatives are briefly explored as potential explanatory variables.

Introduction

By Wellman's (2001, 2002) telling, increases in technological intermediation in social life resulted in the shift from door-to-door society to place-to-place society. Advances in transportation and communication technologies have made spatial exploration and relocation possible for a wide swath of the population. Innovations in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT's) reveal the potential for Wellman's final transformation, a de-emphasis on place and a focusing on person-to-person connectivity. In such a setting, ICT's enable ad-hoc personal connectivity - one can be in and with their personal network irrespective of place.

The rise of ICT's and personal networking has spurred research on the effects of ICT use on relationships, community involvement and social capital. Social capital, a multi-disciplinary and multi-theoretical construct, examines the relations between social structures and an individual's available resource pool. For example, Coleman (1998) describes social capital as a structural resource enabling the provision of human capital - resources and skills that effectuate positive outcomes. Putnam's analysis (2001) locates social capital in the community, exploring the relation between social ties and community support and vitality. In line with Wellman's conception of the personal network, a key measure of social capital is an individual's network size. Recent analysis of personal network size in the United States highlights a troubling trend; McPherson and colleagues' (2006) replication of Marsden's (1987) analysis found a 1/3 drop in core discussion network size.

Scholars in the fields of human-computer interaction and information studies are keenly interested in the ways in which socio-technical systems can produce and maintain social capital (see Davenport & Snyder, 2005). Resnick (2001) theorizes socio-technical capital, an elaboration of social capital that identifies ways through which socio-technical systems can

produce and enable social capital. Wellman and colleagues' analysis (2001) of the Internet highlights the tie-reinforcing, network-structural nature of medium. Ellison and colleagues (2007) used the social network site Facebook to project a new variant of social capital - *maintained social capital* - which reflects an individual's ability to keep close ties that once would have been lost due to transition or relational degradation.

The emergence of social software and the popular adoption of social network sites (boyd & Ellison, 2007) represent an opportunity for researchers to extend their exploration of the social outcome of ICT use in a large-scale, naturalistic setting. To date, the research has largely focused on the characteristically young early adopters. However, recent trends in adoption of social software, and particularly social network sites, indicate that an older audience is rapidly embracing the technology (Lenhart, 2009).

The adoption of social network sites by older users presents an interesting research opportunity. The study of this population will enable us to explore ways in which their experience of the sites is different from early-adopting, younger users. These differences have practical and theoretical implications. Late-adopters stand to inform our greater understanding of social network sites. Adopting a reflexive stance, we can look critically at the technology and identify ways in which the tool is socially supportive.

The present study

The present study explores the experience of older, late-adopting users of social network sites. The study, to be run in three waves, employs a mixture of methods: Interviews, a survey, and a user study will inform our findings. The study employs a mixed methods approach to address the challenges of the setting. Because adoption of social network sites by older users is prevalent, we are challenged by between-group variation, which may contribute to varying

understandings or *Technological Frames* (Orlikowski, 1992; Orlikowski & Gash, 1994) in the population. The study's goal is threefold: First, to develop a grounded understanding of the phenomenon of older user adoption of social network sites. Second, to identify and investigate ways in which the social network site facilitates access to supportive resource for older users. Third, to evaluate the outcomes of these supportive resources in social network sites, and make recommendations based on these findings.

The study will be conducted in three waves. The recently completed initial wave is a set of semi-structured interviews with older users of social network sites. The goal of this phase is to provide a grounded understanding of older users' uses of social network use. The second phase, under development, is a survey designed to evaluate the relationship between older users' social network site use and supportive resources. The third phase of the project, designed to triangulate the interview and survey findings, will employ a user study to explore the supportive features of a social network site. The outcome of this study will be used to elaborate processes of support in social network sites, as well as provide actionable design and implementation recommendations.

Rapid Communication

This paper reports early findings from the recently completed first wave of the study. During this wave, we interviewed fifteen late-adopting, older users of social network sites. Solicitation of participants occurred via snowball methods, though a strong response to the solicitation allowed for purposive selection of respondents to maximize variation. Study criteria required participants to be 40 years or older, and have joined a social network site within the last two years. Interviews were conducted in-person or by phone. The interviews lasted

approximately 40 minutes to 1 hour, and participants were compensated \$10.00 for their participation.

Of the participants, nine were female and six were male; Two participants were in their 40's, six were in their 50's, and seven were in their 60's. The interviews were semi-structured, drawing on existing literature and theory, as well as themes that emerged during the data collection. Participants were asked to describe their history using social network sites, their motivations for adoption, and their opinions about the site. They were also asked questions about their supportive use of the site, the makeup of their networks, and their privacy and information sharing behaviors.

The interviews are in the process of being transcribed and open coded, using the Atlas.Ti qualitative analysis package. Since this process is not complete, the preliminary findings represent the analysis of interview memos and notes. Two themes of particular socio-technical relevance are explored in this preliminary analysis. The first theme is the emergence of reconnection and relational rejuvenation as a driver of social network site use. The second theme reflects the types of social support provisioned and received through social network sites by older users.

Reconnection as Driver

We asked participants to describe the composition of their contact lists (or friend list) on social network sites. Among older users, family and personal friends were a dominant social groups represented in the contact list. A large number of participants also reported the presence of reconnected or rejuvenated relationships in the contact list. While these connections generally represented a small portion of the contact list, their inclusion proved highly salient. This may be

an effect of novelty, but it was clear that connecting with friends after 20, 30, or 40 years was a meaningful experience.

In Wellman's conception of the place-to-place society, we frequently reevaluate and reconstruct our networks as we relocate. However, residential mobility is a common, stress-inducing practice, inducing social isolation (Shklovski et al., 2006). Repeated network dislocation associated with mobility has left the life stories of many individuals incomplete. The practice of reconnection on a social network site may serve as very important purpose in the reconstruction of these life stories.

Reconnection of relationships across time can be thought of as a process of rejuvenation, which is different from the process of relational maintenance or repair. Rejuvenation is a dialectical process through which relational partners regain intimacy through reciprocal disclosures (Wilmot, 1994). Relational rejuvenation via the Internet is not a new phenomenon: 36 percent of all adult users have used a search engine to find out information about someone from their past (Madden et al., 2007). A number of our participants indicated they had "Googled" past contacts before joining the social network site. However, the particular affordances of social network sites, with a news feed promoting interaction, seems to form a different sense of intimacy with reconnected partners.

Reconnection was often cited as a source of complexity in management of the information space. Particularly, lack of common ground and ideological divergence introduced boundary issues for reconnected communicants. Participants also reported discomfort in managing disclosures across the multiple boundaries of friends, family and reconnected persons. Finally, participants discussed instances of reconnected communicants disclosing inappropriate or embarrassing bits of information in the social network site. The management of the

complexities of a life-course spanning information space is a theme to be explored in subsequent waves of the project.

Supportive Social Network (Sites)

In the first wave of interviews, we gauge the efficacy of the social network site as a location for the provision of social support. We explored three main conceptions of social support: emotional support, instrumental support, and informational support (Braithwaite et al., 1999; Cohen & Gottlieb, 2000). We operationalized *emotional support* as positively affective communication, *instrumental support* as supportive actions contributing to the accomplishment of an external goal, and *informational support* as informative communication accomplishing reduction in uncertainty.

Participants reported social network sites to be emotionally supportive. A comment on a photo or a reply to a status update was routinely perceived to be emotionally supportive, and positively affective of the mood. Participants felt that the social network site was a place where positive communication was the norm; some reported blocking or removing friends that communicated negatively. Notably, the outcomes of participation in the emotionally supportive were downplayed, as most participants reported momentary mood elevation as the sole outcome.

The social network site was also regarded as a place where informational support was provided. Many participants responded affirmatively to the prompt: "find out about a good restaurant or get a movie recommendation." Participants generally counter-indicated use of the social network site for instrumental support. While a few indicated that they acted externally on information received through the social network (finding out about a meeting or show), most did not perceive the social network as a place where they would seek instrumental support.

Two themes for further exploration emerged regarding social support in social network sites. Many participants felt uncomfortable with the concept of asking for support in the network. Variation in audience context, and the public nature of networks seemed to be the salient factors. People did not want to broadcast their needs to everyone. The second theme is a demonstrated willingness to provide support through the social network. The participants may be uncomfortable asking for support, but they would be happy to help out a contact in needs. The disconnect between willingness to ask for and willingness to provide instrumental support may be reflective the overlap between virtual and real world networks; there is a strong motivation to help friends, but a person in need has more direct and privacy-maintaining means (telephone, email) to make a solicitation of support. This concept will be elaborated in the analysis.

Conclusion and Limitations

This paper outlines the trajectory of a new study of older adult users of social network sites. The goal of the study is to develop a grounded understanding of the phenomenon of older user social network site adoption, to identify and investigate ways in which the social network site facilitates access to supportive resources, and to evaluate the outcomes of access to supportive resources in social network sites. Utilizing grounded techniques and mixed methods for triangulation, the goal of the study is to provide actionable design and implementation recommendations to enhance the supportive nature of social network sites.

The preliminary findings reported in this paper are drawn from notes and memos from 15 interviews with older, late-adopting users of social network sites. The themes reported here are necessarily broad, as they will serve as a point of elaboration in the full analysis.

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