

What is Community?: Informing the Design of a Community Building Platform for Low-Income Black and Latino Residents

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Online communities can offer under-resourced populations an avenue for upward social mobility by capitalizing on community connections and the pooling of resources. UpTogether, a non-profit organization, attempted to access this potential by providing its members with a novel social media platform to interact with like-minded others. Yet, despite members' interest in building greater connections within the community, few people utilized the platform to engage with their groups. By examining 25 participant interviews, we explore participants' conceptualizations of community and their experience on the platform. With this, we identify their expectations of community and pose recommendations for future initiatives aimed at building community—online and offline.

Keywords: community, online communities, under-resourced, platform design, social media

1. Introduction

For the last 50 years, Americans have witnessed a radical decline in the robustness of their social lives. Affiliation with local organizations and civic groups has plummeted [40], as has the number of interpersonal supports [34]. Trust has decreased [48], while rates of loneliness and depression have increased [12, 49]. Yet, meaningful social connections bolster physical and mental health [50], and these ties may have even greater importance in low-income communities, where they help better ensure neighborhood safety [43], and the collective sharing of limited resources [44].

Many researchers identify Internet communication as a contributing factor to negative changes[e.g., 34, 40, 49], though others refute that idea, demonstrating the usefulness of online communication for reinforcing emotionally meaningful relationships [9]. Other scholars have noted that, rather than being a tool for good or ill, the internet has simply reconfigured social

connections [41], which are now often characterized by one's "pervasive awareness and persistent contact" with relationships over time [23].

But what does all of this mean for the 21st century urban community? Can the internet's tendency towards "networked individualism" [41] be leveraged to strengthen broad based neighborhood-level connections? More specifically, can novel social media platforms be designed to improve social capital—the resources acquired through relationships [7]—for residents of low-income neighborhoods that need it most, and in a manner that reflects their values? Elaborating on limited research on social media design for low-income groups, this study foregrounds low-income Black and Latino users' understanding of, and desire for community more broadly, as a lens through which to understand design.

Findings revealed that while users appreciated the simple, easy to use platform, they craved greater connections within their groups and their neighborhood community at large. Findings reflect users' conceptualizations of community as a space for like-minded, reciprocal exchanges, which varies somewhat from their visions of online community where people primarily connect over shared interests. Findings point to the challenges for design that fosters connections that span online and offline space, and provide direction for future non-profit design hoping to foster community engagement for low-income Black and Brown community groups. They also underscore the importance of exploring the nuances in user perspectives of these under-resourced and often underrepresented groups.

2. The Importance of Online Community

A great deal of research has explored the ways in which online communities provide an avenue for people to connect with others around the world. For

our purposes, an online community is defined as any virtual space where people interact to converse, exchange information or resources, learn, or play [30]. Online communities, such as Facebook Groups, Reddit Threads, and Twitter, provide both public and private channels for people to connect over shared interests and experiences. For instance, among a multitude of examples, research documents parents' use of online discussion boards to seek parenting advice [1, 2], entrepreneurs' use of online groups to seek mentorship and build a customer base [27, 28], and the use of online communities to exchange medical guidance from peers experiencing similar health challenges[37]. Built around networks of similar individuals, online communities can provide an avenue to information and social resources.

2.1 Online Community for Marginalized Individuals

Mainstream avenues of information and resource sharing often exclude the most marginalized populations and, therefore, the Internet can be an especially important resource for marginalized peoples. For instance, transgender people must often turn to online communities to access healthcare information when facing unwilling or ill-equipped providers [6]. Others studying online job-seeking found that employment platforms like LinkedIn were less accessible to low-income users since they catered more towards white collar jobs. Low-income jobs seekers mention turning to platforms like Facebook and Twitter to see how people described their experiences working for local companies [53]. Therefore, online communities can provide private or semi-private avenues to seek advice and social support. In many of these cases, people preferred anonymity for personal safety reasons. In other cases, semi-private disclosure, such as to closed online groups, allowed people to share experiences with a vetted community online.

Of course, online communities are not entirely safe considering risks of scams and online abuse. Users of online communities, particularly the most marginalized, regularly balance the opportunities and risks of using online communities [X-blinded for review]. Many online community users from low-income [X-blinded for review] and undocumented immigrant [21] populations have online risk awareness and proceed with caution. By weathering this risk, individuals from these communities may access health [10], social [36], and business and entrepreneurship [X-blinded for review] resources that may support quality-of-life and socio-economic mobility. Individuals from marginalized communities have diverse and varied concerns, and assuming a universal

experience of marginalization would be naive; nonetheless, shared concerns that we point to here may help unpack culture and context-specific experiences in future studies.

2.2 The Effective Use of Technology in Community Programs

To maximize the benefits of technology use, individuals must effectively employ the technology [11]. For instance, social media users must use the platform with a specific goal in mind (connection) and have the ability to achieve that goal [11,19]. To enact effective use, individuals engage in adaptation (i.e., taking actions to gain access) or learning (i.e., learning about the system itself) [11].

Community programs have effectively implemented technology to benefit low-income urban communities[51]. Information and communication technologies (ICTs), and especially Web 2.0 technologies such as social media[47], allow individuals and communities to connect, collaborate, and build social capital [16,29]. For instance, through Facebook use, a coordinated effort between community members resulted in an environmental initiative that eliminated uncollected garbage in the Nairobi slums[51]. Moreover, community program research reveals how technology may empower community members. For example, Fox and Le Dante (2014) worked with low-income community members to understand their core values, and these findings informed a local project where members documented neighborhood history. Through their participation, the program and technology centered the community members' needs and helped them gain a sense of shared identity and a present and historical connection to their community. Thus, through technology use, low-income communities can have positive community-based benefits, especially when that technology aligns with an organization's identity and goals.

In this particular case, to support the organizational aim of encouraging group connections, Uptogther created an internal social media platform. By creating their own platform, UT hoped to focus those group conversations on shared interests and community building efforts.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

A complicated relationship exists between internet technology and neighborhood community building. As described above, the internet is a means of connecting people with shared and sometimes marginalized life experiences to build social capital; however, many

people perceive online and offline community as functionally separate because of their differing constitutions. Users often find themselves within narrowly constituted online communities with multiple sub-networks of people with shared histories and interests, that contrast those of the pre-internet era [21, 38]. This highly selective form of network building takes a somewhat different form than the networks created in one's neighborhood, where relationships are primarily grounded in shared location or identity rather than interest. As such, everyday users—much like early internet scholars—may have a limited view of what they can source from online communities.

Therefore, we embarked on a twofold investigation to reconcile the differing needs and values associated with online communities and community at large. We sought to understand the abstract (imaginary) and concrete (experiential) needs of community members so that we might identify and meet users' pre-existing expectations of online communities. In doing so, we hope to lessen the threshold for users' to satisfy effective use [11] by increasing usability and sociability. We draw on the work of imagined communities [3]—wherein we may locate the core tenets of a community's "imaginaries" [8] (i.e., how they conceptualize community) and examine how these core features intersect, or appear, within their technological and experiential expectations of online communities in order to optimize design that can best fit their needs. Using this framework, we aim to provide recommendations that may help organizational designers focused on regional revitalization that bridges the differing needs and values of online and offline community.

3. Research Questions

Given the tensions outlined above, these data explore the perceived effectiveness of a novel, in-house social media platform intended to foster interpersonal and local community ties for low-income Blacks and Latinos involved with a specific organization. We focus on users' perspectives of community more generally, and their experiences connecting with group members through UpTogether specifically. We thus pose the following research questions: *RQ1. How do study participants conceptualize community and its meaning in their lives? RQ2. How did participants generally respond to their experiences with UpTogether as an organization? RQ3. How did participants feel about experiences with their small groups? RQ4. Finally, how did participants feel about their experiences with the UpTogether platform, and what recommendations did they give for better aligning platform design with their visions of community?*

4. Methods

4.1 Sample

Interview participants came from a longitudinal field experiment—with quantitative analysis underway for reporting elsewhere—that examined group engagement and social support associated with online and offline groups. As part of the field experiment, a subset of participants was recruited for interviews at baseline and at study completion. When participants completed their baseline experimental questionnaire, they indicated their willingness to participate in two interviews (i.e., one at the beginning of the study and one at the end). Baseline interview data was described in a previous paper [X-blinded for review], and focused more broadly on how study members used the internet as a means of social connection and support. These interviews occurred before small group communication or the 16 month receipt of financial support. Participants received \$30 per baseline and follow-up interview. After additional recruitment, 25 participants completed follow-up interviews—the focus of this study. Twenty-three participants identified as female, one as male, and one preferred not to say. Participants' ages ranged from 29 to 57 ($M = 41.8$, $SD = 7.59$). In addition, 12 participants identified as Black/African American, 3 as multiracial, 2 as white, 5 as an "other" race, and 3 preferred not to say. Regardless of race, 11 participants identified as being Latino. People were placed in groups by topic interest. There were 17 in a entrepreneurship group, 6 in a parents support group, 1 in a continuing education group, and 1 in a self-care group. Interviews took place between February 21, 2023 and April 3, 2023.

4.2 Procedure

When participants submitted their applications for the program, they indicated a specific area of interest from a list of possible topic areas. These included: parenting, entrepreneurship, health/fitness/nutrition, community service, pursuing more education, and financial goal setting. The UpTogether organization then manually sorted participants into small groups of 4-6 people based on their area of interest. Each group was then randomly assigned to one of two conditions (i.e., online versus offline). At the end of the program, spanning August 2021 to February 2023, we recruited participants for this interview study to reflect on their experiences with the program and the online and offline social networking groups.

Remote interviews occurred over the phone or the virtual video platform Zoom. Only audio was recorded for analysis. Interviews lasted approximately 32

minutes on average (min = 11 minutes; max = 70 minutes). The Spanish-speaking participants received recruitment messages and consent forms in English and Spanish and could request a Spanish-conducted interview. Nine participants were interviewed entirely in Spanish. All interviews were transcribed into English for analysis.

At the start of each interview, the interviewer(s) introduced themselves, confirmed participant consent, and outlined the timeline for interview compensation. Four of the authors, two English-speaking undergraduate research assistants, and two Spanish-speaking undergraduate research assistants conducted the interviews.

4.3 Organizational Setting

UpTogether(UT), a non-profit organization that provides “historically undervalued communities” with access to financial and community resources that help them “move up, together, out of poverty,” [51] funded this research. In March 2021, the mayor of Oakland, CA announced their partnership with UT (formerly known as the Family Independence Initiative) to provide local families with a one-time \$500 cash stipend for their participation in the Oakland Resilient Families Initiative, which was conducted over 18 months. The Oakland Resilient Families Initiative, created by UpTogether, aimed to help UT members located in East Oakland, CA form online and offline support groups within their community. Anyone living within target zip codes of low income and at least one child under the age of 18 could apply, regardless of documentation status. These zip codes were primarily Black and Latino. Low income was defined as “at or below 50% of the area median income, which is about \$61,650 per year for a family of 3” [14].

As part of UpTogether’s mission, they partner with government, philanthropy, and community-based organizations to provide financial support to members and they seek to foster community through social networks that can increase access to informational and social support (e.g., share employment opportunities, information about community events, social support, etc.). In their own words, UpTogether states that: “Community is the heart of UpTogether. Groups are a source of community for members” [55].

The UpTogether organization designed an internal social media platform to complement other forms of social interaction between members. This platform, also called UpTogether, provided a place for potential in-group connection and information exchange. Members could access the platform via desktop or mobile phone. Participants could only access the content of fellow group members (~4-6 people total).

This differed from previous iterations of the platform that allowed UpTogether members to interact with all other UpTogether members (see [X-blinded for review] for additional details).

The platform provided prompts to guide conversations between group members, but only members could initiate conversations by sharing and responding to posts. These included prompts to: ask a question, specify potential contributions, name goals, and share miscellaneous information. Groups could create group names, specify a check-in schedule, articulate the group’s purpose, and post any agreements made as a group. At the beginning of the study, the platform allowed members to create and share content to the group for other members to view and then respond directly to post creators via email. Four months after the study’s inception, UT made changes to the platform to allow users to publicly comment, and be seen, on posts within their groups. Of the 313 individuals participating in the program, 215 chose to participate in the field experiment.

Unlike other social media platforms (e.g., Facebook), the UpTogether platform restricts conversations and activity to members within their assigned groups. Members could not see content outside of their groups and the platform only included members of UT from low-income areas in the United States. While UT assigned Oakland Resilient Families Initiative participants to small groups and provided access to an internal social media platform, UpTogether did not facilitate participants’ participation in their groups or on the platform and did not have formal requirements for within-group participation.

4.4 Interview Protocol & Analysis

All interviewers completed training over one month, focusing on improving interviewing techniques such as probing interviewee responses and adapting question ordering to participant responses. Interview questions were grouped into five areas: perceptions of community (e.g., *What comes to mind when you hear the word, ‘community?’*), perceptions of UpTogether as an organization (*Let’s say you were talking with your neighbor or a friend. How would you describe UpTogether to them?*), group connections (*How would you describe your relationship to your group members?*), and thoughts on the platform itself (*What were your motivations for [posting/viewing group content] on the UpTogether platform?*).

After interviews were transcribed, we created a matrix with key themes organized by target questions. Two authors then critically reviewed the excerpts using an iterative process to identify themes, evaluating the themes within and across transcripts. After organizing

concepts into overarching categories to reduce redundancy and identifying disconfirming evidence [30, 49], latent themes emerged and exemplar quotes were selected to represent core findings.

5. Findings

5.1 What is community?

To begin, we contextualized findings through the lens of participants' desire for and understanding of community broadly (RQ1). Our analysis revealed that participants imagine community as a place where they can reinforce their own sense of security and opportunity:

"When I say the word "community," I think a group of people that live upon each other and that they come together to help the general neighborhood that they live in— to what they can do to make it better— help each other out."

This vision was largely characterized by reciprocity ("I can go knock on their door for sugar... or I can give her a recipe"), both in the exchange of physical goods or time. As one person said:

"If you say, "Hey, I'm running late. Could you pick up my son?" If I can drop him off at home for you or if you need me to keep him until you get off work, that's a sense of community."

Multiple participants also noted that community members should be "one-minded" and demonstrate a common unity, "almost like a single organism," though this did not mean the dissolution of individual agency:

"We can still be individuals... But then still have a common unity when it comes to the safety, wellbeing, you know, schools, roads, and you know, restaurants, and gas stations..."

5.1.1 The Oakland Community. When asked for examples of community, most participants thought of Oakland. Perceptions of Oakland differed at the environmental and social level, where some saw Oakland as highly community oriented and others saw it in a state of decline. As evidence of the former, one participant mentioned:

"In the Oakland community, they do get together. They put out flyers to help. Just pretty much any and every one, like if they need help with resources to help with getting clothing, stuff like that, they're very resourceful and they try to help others by connecting with flyers, word of mouth..."

At the same time, other participants questioned the current vitality of the neighborhood, noting:

"...there is still a lot of mental health issues going on. There is still a drug epidemic that's going on in

the communities, alcoholism and homelessness. And so it's kind of hard for everybody to kind of stick together. "

Regardless of whether or not participants viewed the local community in a negative or positive light, it was clear that a key aspect of "community" for many users was the local physical or "offline" environment.

5.1.2 From Community to Online Community? In addition to exploring conceptualizations of community, RQ1 also probed understandings of "online community" beyond the UpTogether social networking platform. Interestingly, whereas one-minded cohesiveness was the most prevalent characteristic mentioned when describing community in the abstract, common interests (e.g., music, art, travel) or experiences (e.g., disability, parenting) predominantly characterized visions of *online communities*.

In most of the online groups that participants were already part of (unrelated to their UpTogether membership), members engage in information exchange by viewing and posting within the group— (e.g., "...I can talk to new people and I meet new people and I can learn from people and teach people"). Participants also highlighted the breadth ("online you reach a broader collective") and depth ("with online you don't get as much of that one to one and that personal contact") of connections within online communities, with an emphasis on the utility of those relationships. For example, when discussing their online diabetic community, one participant noted, "you could actually reach out and talk to any and everybody at any time," for information to supplement conversations with a doctor. Conceptualizations of online community included unity and common goals but, more prominently, low stakes conversations from which participants inform themselves and share their knowledge of a specific area emerged as central features of online communities.

5.2 Organizational Connection

Our second research question (RQ2) examined participants' relationship to UpTogether as an organization. When asked about how and why they joined UpTogether, participants described seeking both financial support and community building opportunities. A few were initially incredulous that they could receive monthly cash payments with few strings attached (e.g., "to be honest, I wanted to see if it was real"; "I just thought, well, you know, why not look into it,"), but everyone in the sample was ultimately quite appreciative of the additional financial support each month. Indeed, multiple participants mentioned experiencing less stress because of the

monthly assistance, and some mentioned having an easier time with specific expenses, including gas, rent, groceries, kids shoes, a professional license, monthly bills and paying off debt.

But participants clearly identified the social networking component of UpTogether as a draw. For example, when asked about her motives for joining, one participant noted that the money was a “main incentive,” but that she was also looking for:

“...a strong community around myself, because...I don’t really have a lot of outlets. Like I work from home. And, you know, I have children, so I’m always busy. So I don’t really reach out to my community as much as I should...”

Multiple people expressed an interest in building their networks and tapping new resources of knowledge. Two people in this sample had hopes for creating ties to support small business ventures specifically. And though a few people engaged their groups, for others, these social aims were ultimately not fulfilled. As one participant said:

“I thought I was going to be able to meet people in my neighborhood where we could make a change—network, maybe even start a small business.”

However, despite the lack of networking for most of the participants in our sample, participants deeply appreciated the organization and what it did provide. Indeed, when asked whether they trusted UpTogether as an organization every participant answered in the affirmative.

5.3 Connections to Small Groups

Our third research question (RQ3) explored how participants connected with the members of their group. Although most participants expressed interest in connecting to people of similar backgrounds, one of the most striking findings was that many people did not engage with their groups. When asked to identify why they did not engage with their group, a few participants mentioned already having a network where they sought support and needing to know people on a deeper personal or intellectual level before asking for advice or support. As one participant noted:

“I just, I don’t know them well enough, I should say. So I don’t really know, you know, if they would give me good advice. [Laughter]”

While some hesitated to reach out because they lacked a natural connection with their group members, others did not seem to know where to begin group interaction (e.g., “...no one in the group, including myself, took that initiative to take charge of the team, and we just didn’t. No one reached out to anyone”). Many participants indicated that they had attempted to

contact other participants—to no avail. Some participants believed that fellow group members were not responding to their messages, (“I did the reach out thing, but nobody responded”) while others placed the blame on themselves and their lack of technical knowhow. For those who managed to overcome these communication barriers, logistical issues arose regarding what conversation topics to probe and organizing group members for synchronous interaction:

“Just the only challenge really is like trying to find a schedule that works for all of us...So we can all talk together instead of like everybody having their own separate conversation...”

Participants who successfully engaged with their group did so in a variety of meaningful ways. Some leveraged their relationships with fellow group members to acquire new knowledge relating to business, coping mechanisms when encountering personal challenges, and miscellaneous tips and advice (e.g., “I take a lot of tips from everyone”). A few participants also found support amongst their group members when encountering personal challenges:

“...actually I had lost a family member... one of the members had texted me out of the blue one day and asked me how I was doing. So when she texted me, I just broke down and I told her what happened. She prayed for me and stuff, so I really appreciated that from her, so yeah.”

While less common, in cases like these, group members provided rich forms of support for one another, suggesting connections that extend beyond superficial support.

5.4 (Under)utilization of the Platform

Finally, the fourth research question (RQ4) examined participants' reactions to the platform and recommendations for improvements. First, most participants passively consumed platform content, using the platform as another resource for learning about the program and the study. In a couple instances, participants reported watching videos or opening links to neighborhood information that had been posted, and one participant posted information that they received from their kids' elementary school that they thought relevant to their group. In most cases, however, participants did not actively engage with the platform and did not explain why. In those few instances when they did explain, participants either said that they did not actively use any social media or confessed that they did not know how to use the site well-enough to connect with their group. A handful of participants said that their lack of use involved a lack of understanding (e.g., “Even though I visited the platform, I didn’t know how exactly the platform works.”) or problems

accessing the internet at home, and others said that lack of connection to the group also influenced their use of the site, as described in the previous section.

As a result, participants articulated ways that UpTogether could better facilitate group connections, such as being more involved in initial group meetings, facilitating conversations or suggesting prompts and ice-breakers. Some participants also suggested changing the composition of the groups. This included: assigning a group leader to help motivate group interaction, segregating groups by sex or married v. single people, making groups larger, or including a group member that had already been through the program to provide guidance and facilitate conversation. Finally, a couple of different people mentioned that they would have liked mandatory meetings to help motivate group interaction, and a couple mentioned a desire for in-person meetings specifically.

Some participants also had recommendations for improving the platform experience. Although most participants did not propose changes (“it’s an easy platform to use”), a few wanted more guidance from UpTogether staff on how to use the features of the site or suggested adding site content, such as prompts to facilitate group interactions, or the inclusion of community-relevant information and small-business or educational content for those members that desired community and personal development. As one participant recommended:

“On the platform- that they would put more news articles and things like that. I would usually have to go to Facebook to see exactly what's going on in the community, like if there is any new podcasts.... I wish that they would add that to the UpTogether link...just add more information, basically.”

Contrary to these suggestions, one participant explicitly appreciated the lack of excessive information that resulted in a less cluttered and easier to navigate site. Finally, one participant requested direct login to the site, rather than receiving a sign-in link via email or phone. This was the only recommendation directed at interface design.

6. Discussion

This study aimed to better understand the experiences of users of the UpTogether platform who participated in the Oakland Resilient Families Initiative, with the intent of learning how a social media platform built in-house by UpTogether may help low-income Black and Latino residents build new social networks within their neighborhood. We sought to examine participants’ community imaginaries

against the opportunities and expectations for community-building provided in the platform as a starting point for considering specific design choices that could help participants build relationships in one modality that would effectively translate to the other.

First, we examined the opinion participants held of the organization, UpTogether, after sixteen months of participating in the UT program (RQ2). Participants expressed general satisfaction, and often outright appreciation, for the assistance provided by UT. Additionally, although most participants did not successfully connect with their fellow group members, this did not appear to negatively affect their opinion of UT despite these connections being promoted as one of the benefits of the program. Although opinions of the organization remained positive, sense of community and community engagement, much like financial assistance, are linked to social capital and higher quality of life [40]. Therefore, to deliver on UpTogether’s mission, understanding how to improve engagement on the UpTogether platform is essential.

Therefore, we asked participants about their experience using the platform to connect with group members (RQ4). Most users perused the site for information purposes (e.g., to seek info from UT, to view what others posted) in a passive manner. Although this use echoes the patterns of use found on other social media [46], it is somewhat antithetical to UT’s aim to build community and participants’ desire for greater group communication and community related platform content. That is, in addition to wanting changes that would better facilitate group interaction, users also wanted to see more information on the UpTogether platform that would connect them to local events. We elaborate further on the implications of this for future design below.

Relatedly, we examined interactions within groups to elucidate the factors that affected communication between group members (RQ3). Members identified many factors that limited their engagement with others on the platform including confusion about platform mechanics, lack of response to posts, and lack of knowledge about other members. Thus, participants could not effectively use the technology and access the organization's desired benefit of the technology [11]—to enable social connections (and therefore increase social capital). Of those participants that did interact with their groups, the level of intimacy in these connections varied. Some exchanged both informational and social support and, in at least one case, provided a resource during a very stressful time. These findings point to the potential for UpTogether groups to be a meaningful community and capital building resource, even if additional work is needed to stimulate communication.

Finally, we considered how participants imagine community (RQ1). In doing so, we identified three key features of conceptualizations of community broadly: *relational alignment*, *place*, and *reciprocity*. First, participants primarily described community from a relational perspective [13, 33]. For example, words such as “bond,” “connection,” and “unity” position the relationships between community members as central to their understanding. Second, participants emphasized the geographic nature of community, often noting their connection to their neighborhood—or the city of Oakland. Third, participants also emphasized the supportive and reciprocal nature of community—a place where all parties could give and take freely as needs arose, helping as much as being helped and thereby reinforcing the community writ large.

By contrast, experiences and expectations of online communities were prominently characterized by their utility for information seeking and reinforcing specific aspects of identity (e.g. parenthood). Furthermore, participants focused on lower stakes connections within a structured, low-conflict environment where technology enables easy and consistent communication. In other words, participants somewhat expected to keep with the targeted nature of “networked individualism” [38] where ties persist in distinct sub-networks over time.

The distinction between these conceptualizations gestures toward the distinction between *community as responsibility* and *community as resource*[39]. Community as social responsibility considers people’s motivation to make contributions to their community, even in the absence or detriment of individual gain [38]. This seemed consistent with the general community imaginary. Investigations that position community as resource dominate the sense of community and community engagement literature [38, 39]. When examining community from a resource perspective, scholars concentrate on community engagement and psychological well-being that stems from an individual’s desire to fulfill social, psychological, and resource needs [38]. This was more central to conceptualizations of online community, and may be a useful distinction for designers when considering how to encapsulate both. We elaborate on this further in the following section.

6.1 Recommendations for Future Design

Participants gave feedback that can guide recommendations when updating this platform and designing other similar platforms. Research on an older version of UpTogether’s platform found that a lack of participant trust had tempered engagement, which led researchers to recommend anonymous posting options

[X-blinded for review]. UpTogether solved this through different means, however, by designing a system in which participants only engaged within-group. While this simulated the more targeted network structure that characterizes social networks today [41], it created new problems for UT members, many of whom did not feel comfortable jumping in and starting group conversations. By limiting the platform only to groups, members seemed to flounder without additional guidance or structure on how and when to engage—impacting the platforms’ usability.

First, we encourage organizations to take advantage of existing social media platforms (e.g. Instagram, Meta, etc) that already facilitate internet-based group connections. Although they may not allow as much internal control, they offer more familiarity, ease, and breadth which can address many participant concerns. Moreover, given how participants used the site, and the ways that they conceptualized online community as spaces for mutual growth and information exchange, we recommend that UpTogether frame the platform largely as a place to share local community information to meet users’ *community as resource* expectations of online communities.

Additionally, to increase the sociability, and therefore sustainability [31], of this online community, we suggest creating a socially interactive component to these informational posts (e.g., marking attendance at an event, sharing reviews of a daycare) to help meet their *community as responsibility* needs. Whether the local community information involves job fairs, parades, childcare options or any other number of local topics, tying the small groups’ shared interests (e.g. parenting, entrepreneurship, etc.) to the larger geographic community needs may offer an excellent bridge between community imaginaries and actualities as community members enact their identity as local residents and share their knowledge and expertise, similar to other neighborhood level technologies that foster informational and social support [15, 20, 22]. Thus, just as many dating websites spontaneously give matches silly prompts to kick-off conversations or threaten to unmatch users if they don’t interact, platforms designed to connect local strangers may need to add a few additional carrots and sticks to spark greater engagement.

6.2 Limitations and Conclusion

A limitation of any qualitative study is the lack of generalizability to a broader population. Although we gained insights about designing for community building for members of low-income Black and Brown neighborhoods, triangulating these findings across quantitative studies would lend additional support and

yield new insights. Also, since many participants did not engage their groups on a regular basis, we can only consider strategies that *might* enhance group engagement without actually testing those. That is, these data largely tell us what *didn't* work and why—how participants' desire for community and group engagement contrasted with their actual experiences. Again, we feel that foregrounding user perspectives on “community” is critical to optimizing future design, especially when designing for demographic groups [4] that might be removed from the life experiences of many UX designers. Thus, future studies would be well-served to implement some of these strategies and would hopefully yield greater user engagement as a result.

7. References

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