This is a repository copy of *Trajectories to Community Engagement: Understanding older people's experiences of engagement with online and local communities*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/114767/

Article:

Harley, D., Harris, E. and Howland, K. (2014) Trajectories to Community Engagement: Understanding older people's experiences of engagement with online and local communities. Working Papers of the Communities & Culture Network+, 3. ISSN 2052-7268

Trajectories to community engagement: Understanding older people's experiences of engagement with online and local communities

Communities and Culture Network+ Final Report

Dr Dave Harley, Eric Harris and Dr Kate Howland

1.   Executive Summary

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 exclusion of the elderly in ageing societies (e.g. ODPM, 2005) suggest that the ability to enlist such communal resources is becoming particularly important for this age group. In this pilot study we considered how a small group of older people in the South of England engaged 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 relation to community engagement more broadly.

Previous research into older people's use of computer mediated communication (Lindley et al., 2009) has suggested that they engage in *socioemotional selectivity* (Carstensen et al., 1999) when weighing up the benefits of adopting 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. It appears that SNS are not appreciated by older people because they do not represent meaningful sources of social contact for them (Lehtinen, 2009). In this study we assess the significance of socioemotional selectivity in understanding older people's engagement with SNS as well as online communities by exploring alternative motivations that exist for them when engaging with 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.

Fifteen participants of retirement age were recruited through three different elder-specific community portals which could be accessed through either online or local means. Qualitative interviews exploring everyday experiences of community were analysed thematically and four 'catalysts' were identified which had the potential to motivate engagement with online forms of community as well as influence individual trajectories in terms of local versus online preferences. These catalysts were family, roles, loss and 'spaces and places'.

Family was significant in determining awareness and engagement with SNS in the guise of Facebook with it principally being used as a tool for achieving face to face meetings with family and friends in line with socio-emotional selectivity. Alternative social motives were evident in relation to other forms of online community challenging this model. There was a willingness to make new friends and take social risks online through fun and light-hearted interactions. Roles were significant in structuring and motivating engagement with local community but became problematic in relation to SNS and online communities where explicit roles were hard to find. Attempts at mapping local social practices to online spaces were not always successful.

Loss, in terms of spousal bereavement was particularly common amongst the women in our group and provided a strong motivation for engaging with local community. Elder-specific online communities and bereavement forums had a part to play here in allowing difficult emotions to be

shared in anonymous spaces away from family and friends. Online spaces and places need to support informal interactions as well as purposeful ones as both are important for developing friendships. Perceptions of psychological and emotional distance played a bigger part in determining meetings online than they did in a local context.

These catalysts can inform social and design initiatives which are aimed at addressing social exclusion by encouraging community engagement through both local and online routes. It would be important to consider those older people who lack family support and remain unaware of online community resources. However we should not assume that online community is an obvious solution for all older people. The variety of trajectories encountered throughout this pilot study suggest that there was no common shift towards digital forms of community by older people as some digital policies might imply (e.g. Cabinet Office, 2012). We should remember that it is 'community' that is the resource.

2.   Aims and Objectives

This qualitative study sought to capture the experiences, motivations and preferences of older people in the Meridian area[1] on the south coast of England. Research was conducted with older people of post-retirement age with a view to understanding their experiences of local and online forms of community within the context of their everyday lives.

Our research questions were to understand:
- What motivations exist at a local community level for older people to engage with SNS and other forms of online community?
- How do older people's experiences and expectations of local community influence their attitude towards online communities?
- How does socioemotional selectivity play a part in participants' interest in online communities?
- What are the different routes taken to engagement with local and online communities, and are there identifiable trajectories which are commonly taken?

3.   Methods

This was a qualitative study which took a participatory approach throughout, involving and consulting participants and community groups as part of the research process. Participants of retirement age[2] 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

---

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

[2] The definition of an elderly or 'older' person is dependent on the society in which that person lives. For the sake of this study it 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 response to the ageing process by enlisting community resources.

community portals chosen included a local community organisation[3], a computer club[4] and an elder-specific online community called DropBy[5]. An initial survey with 43 respondents led on to fifteen individual interviews and a focus group. The participants all lived independently in their own homes, their ages ranged from 65 to 87 years with a mean age of 73.4 years and there were nine women and six men. Analysis of interviews was conducted using an inductive process of thematic analysis and this resulted in the identification of four 'catalysts' which were used to explain underlying motivations for community engagement both locally and online. These catalysts frame our responses to the research questions.

4. Key findings

Our study was designed to investigate four key questions around motivations, experiences and expectations, socioemotional selectivity and routes to engagement with online and local community. 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.

4.1 What motivations exist at a local community level for older people to engage with SNS and other forms of online community?

Through our analysis we identified four 'catalysts' which influenced individual trajectories of community engagement, motivating initial moves to connect with community resources, establishing points of contact with the community at large and dictating preferences for local versus online forms of engagement. The catalysts were family, roles, loss and 'spaces and places'. Older people's trajectories towards and between local and online forms of community were idiosyncratic and there was no suggestion of one linear transition from local to online forms of community.

4.1.1 Family

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.

> "I was born, or raised in a small village where everybody knew everybody and I could name everybody that lived in our road from up one side and down the other. These days, I live in a small apartment block and I don't know everybody, whereas as I say, in my young days we lived in a long road and I knew everybody in the whole street. Every house. I knew everybody and they knew me" Daniel

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

---

[3] The Meridian Mature Citizen's Forum (http://meridian-sf.org.uk/)
[4] The Computer Club run at the Hillcrest Community Centre, Newhaven
[5] www.dropby.co.uk

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 also provided more formal opportunities for community involvement through school and sports club activities.

Family relationships were also at the core of engagement with SNS. 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 the posts of family members 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. 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, usually 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.

4.1.1.1 Family as a constraint
The strength of family ties and the prevailing use of SNS (particularly Facebook) by family were 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 important aspects of everyday social life for this group of older people. 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.

In addition family dynamics did not always steer an older relative towards using the Internet at all, curtailing their engagement with all forms of community online. 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 ancestry[6]. 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

Bakardjieva (2005) highlights the importance of 'warm experts' 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 time with them in order to teach them how to use it.

4.1.2 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,

---

[6] *a reference to using the genealogy site Ancestry.com*

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 significant 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.

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 move in and out of responsible roles appeared to be another feature of these older people's voluntary engagement where the ability to maintain such roles might change over the years, from a more active role at the beginning through to later on being 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, such as the person who takes it upon themselves to answer questions posed in an online forum (Gleave et al, 2009). The most common social role taken within SNS (Facebook) was that of the passive observer or 'lurker' as described here,

> "Three 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. 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 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. What was noted in our research was the lack of formally supported online 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 involvement. Nor do elder specific online communities expect roles to be assumed as part of a member's enrolment or participation. A case might be made for creating explicit roles to support greater engagement by older people within these communities; roles that allow them to actively contribute in a meaningful way.

A few explicit roles did exist as moderators of online peer groups and this activity was approached in such a way as 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 as part of the welcoming committee 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 appears to be problematic. Unfortunately this behaviour was interpreted as unfriendly by our interviewees with them perceiving it as some kind of hierarchical surveillance or gatekeeping.The non-hierarchical expectations of Internet governance particularly in relation to web2.0 seem to run counter to this kind of behaviour.

4.1.3 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 are an issue and forums that specifically focus on bereavement make the job of sharing difficult emotions with like-minded individuals a possibility. In addition 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.

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. 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.

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.

4.1.4 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. 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 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 are 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 says 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 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 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[7] and Scrabble[8], as well as online-only games such as Candy Crush Saga[9]. 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.

---

[7] https://www.facebook.com/playbingo
[8] https://www.facebook.com/WordsWithFriends
[9] https://www.facebook.com/CandyCrushSaga

4.2 How do older people's experiences and expectations of local community influence their attitude towards online communities?

The conceptions of community that many of our participants spoke about were very reliant on physical location. Shared place and physical closeness were seen as very important factors, and as a result, particular places were seen as representative of community. This meant that for many of our interviewees online community could not truly exist. For some this meant that their online social activity was limited to extending and supporting local bonds. A number of interviewees did interact with people online, who they would never meet in real life, but there was a sense for some that these interactions were not fully real, with one interviewee describing contacts on DropBy as *"nearer to being characters in a book"* (Iris) than real people. Most interviewees stressed the importance of face to face meetings, and of the two interviewees who did form strong bonds with people they had met online, one had gone on to invite the friend to visit, and the other expressed a hope that one day they might meet.

When discussing local community, some places that fit into the traditional category of convivial public spaces were mentioned, primarily dedicated community centres. It was not clear whether these were seen as having an analogue online, but elder-specific sites and shared interest groups had cross-over for some people, with mentions of sites where participants felt that they were likely to come across people they had things in common with.

Locally, we also heard about many examples of mundane places acting as social gateways even when this was not the intended purpose behind a place. Bus stops, parks, quay-sides, local shops, post offices, supermarkets and doctors' surgeries all had an important part to play in terms of supporting serendipitous meetings in the local community. In these places a sense of familiarity could be established through repeated meetings with previously unknown faces in a particular place. Establishing such incidental familiarity was more problematic online. There were reports of online shopping and visits to product review sites which did lead to similarly serendipitous meetings but no familiarity or lasting connections were established. Similarly whilst Facebook does allow them to report such mundane activities to their friends most of our interviewees were reluctant to engage in such trivial behaviours.

The street where someone lives, and the boundary between their home and the public realm, were important features of many interviewees' experiences of community. Peace Holland and Kellaher found that the environments where older people live have important implications for identity and well-being. In particular, for some older people intervening spaces between public and private were very important. Green space around properties, from private accommodation to residential homes, were seen to act as transitions between the home and the street, and were either used, appropriated or avoided depending on individuals' needs and preferences. The important factor was achieving "a comfortable gradient in the boundary between public and private places" (p.3) (Peace, Kellaher, & Holland, 2003). Peace et al. also found that the wider local neighbourhood impacted strongly on the way that older people identified with the place they live, with factors such as the complexity and interest of the neighbourhood, and the relative status and security being influential (Peace, et al., 2003). One interviewee who lived at a great distance from her family, and had minimal engagement with local community, talked about how

her neighbours kept a watchful eye out for her wellbeing. She mentioned that she had called one neighbour in particular so that he would not worry when the interviewer turned up to her house, and described a time when the neighbours rallied round her after she had a fall at home.

The majority of our interviewees who participated in SNS made mention of uneasiness about the ambiguity of public and private interactions online. In local community settings it is easy to tell whether a conversation will be overheard, and who it is directed to. In online communities this information is left deliberately unclear, with sharing all communications widely being set as the default. This was something that all our interviewees who communicated online were concerned about, to varying degrees.

A further element of expectation about communities came from the family connection. As mentioned above, for many people community is something which emerges naturally from family connections. This understanding could be seen as carried through to online for many of our interviewees who used social networking sites largely as a way of augmenting relationships with family and friends of family.

When we asked our participants about what they thought important when considering a community, we were given many different answers in addition to shared location and personal contact. For example, some highlighted the importance of the number of people in the group, with one person expressing an ideal number of people for a community a sort of goldilocks number, not too big and not too small. Shared interest and empathy, along with an initial friendly welcome were also raised as important elements. The unofficial 'welcoming committee' activity on DropBy could be seen as coming from expectations of community formed locally.

Local communities which formed around an interest such as computing or sport saw themselves equally concerned with the well-being of its members. This was particularly evident with the support given to members of a sports club suffering from bereavement. We did not see evidence of the same expectations of online special interest groups. Our participant who was a regular Redditor made it clear that the ability to be anonymous and fade into the virtual crowd was important to him, and he had no expectation or desire for emotional support from other members of these community.

4.3 How does socioemotional selectivity play a part in participants' interest in online communities?

In the majority of our interviews the significance of family in determining community involvement was clear whether it was offline or online, formal or informal. Socio-emotional selectivity (Carstensen, 1999) can help to explain this family-centric approach to social relationships as something that emerges in later life. The theory suggests that as we get older we start to focus our daily interactions on those with whom we have an established and close emotional relationship as a way of dealing with 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. This tends to prioritise close family (although it may also be close friends) as

shown in this study.

This has implications for how older people engage with online forms of community and SNS. Previous research has shown a preference for family contact through SNS (Karimi and Neustaedter, 2010; Gonzalez et al, 2012) and this study has largely reinforced this view with its family-centric use of Facebook. However whilst socioemotional selectivity can account for the significance of daily contact with family this is not the whole story. There were some important discrepancies with socioemotional selectivity when it came to the development of other online relationships which need to be explained as well.

As already mentioned family ties were not always central to our older people's daily lives. Communal activities and group membership with peers remained 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 were 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 might suggest but out of gregariousness and a sense of fun. This suggests that community involvement can transform the social and emotional landscape of later life and that online forms of connection are providing new ways of making this happen.

4.4 What are the different routes taken to engagement with local and online communities, and are there identifiable trajectories which are commonly taken?
Undoubtedly chronological age does play a part in determining participants' preferences for local over online forms of community engagement. Those who were not online tended to be slightly older than the average for the whole sample (all in their early eighties compared to the mean age of 73.4) and less inclined to show an interest in online forms of community. However age alone was not a sufficient indicator of online reluctance. Joanne who was 87 years old was one of our most active Facebook users and she had only started to use the Internet three years earlier. The trajectories taken by our interviewees were idiosyncratic, being mediated by the catalysts identified and diverging in relation to changing life circumstances. Here we use Janet's example as a way of showing the different routes to community engagement that occur in relation to each catalyst.

Joanne was married to her husband for 64 years and during that time they lived a fairly contented and self-sufficient life bringing up their daughter. Family was her focus and she felt no particular need to engage with the wider community. When Janet's husband died in 2010 this changed everything. She experienced extreme feelings of loneliness and after some time realised she needed to start making contact with new people. After a conversation with a fellow dog-walker she decided to join some local community groups. These included a Travellers Club at the local community centre which organised weekly trips out and a social group at the local church.
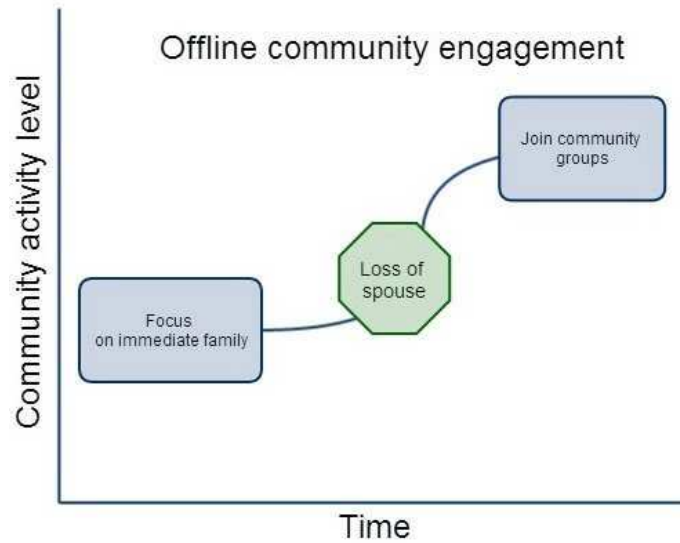

Figure1: Loss as a catalyst for greater local community involvement

As with many of our participants Joanne's route to engagement with SNS (Facebook) came through her younger family. Her daughter now had children and grandchildren of her own and they all wanted to keep in contact with her and make sure that she was alright. Given that Facebook was the main way that they maintained contact with one another within the family they decided to introduce Joanne to this medium as well. Joanne's daughter taught her to use an iPad to access Facebook and all her family now encourage her to post regularly.
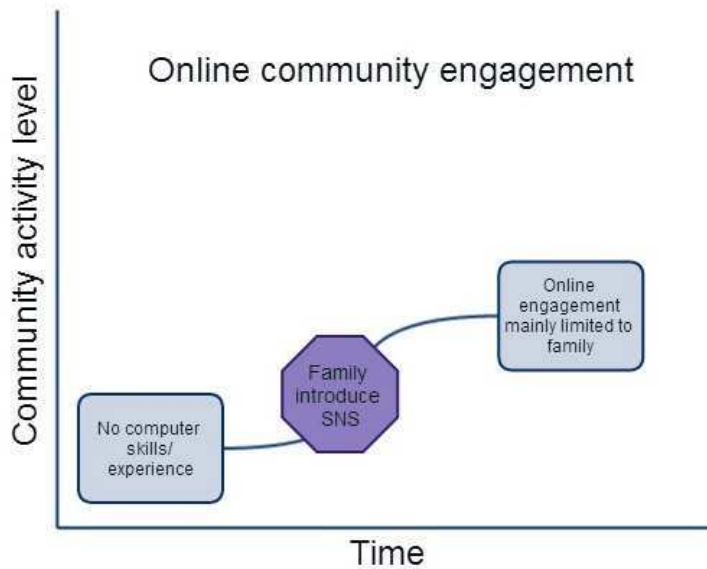
Figure2: Family as a catalyst for greater involvement with SNS

Another common trajectory that we saw to local community engagement was that of volunteering their particular skills to support some 'worthwhile' venture or community group. This engagement often took the form of an active support role such as teacher, secretary, trustee or driver. Over time this would change a little and the engagement with the community becoming as much about social contact as about the function of the role. Joanne had a longstanding role as member of a local tailoring group where she made use of her skills in quilting and patchwork. She had been involved in this group for some fourteen years.
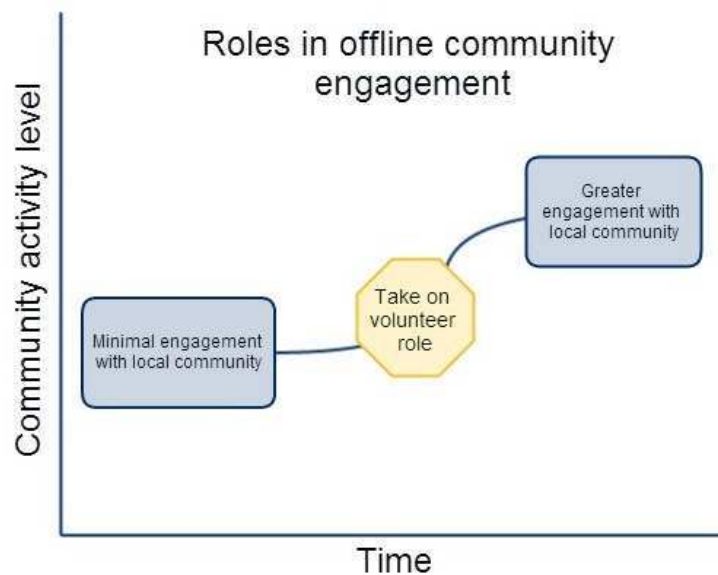

Figure3: Roles as a catalyst for greater local community involvement

Another trajectory which was mentioned more by other participants was in conjunction with

regular use of local spaces and places. A mutual shared need to use a shop, doctor's surgery, bus/ train stop or in Joanne's case a park for walking the dog could lead to a shared life rhythm which would bring people into companionship and sometimes friendship.

Figure4: Spaces and places as a catalyst for greater local community involvement

Joanne's story describes a very positive trajectory with regards to both local and online community. Other participants' trajectories were not always so positive with catalysts sometimes working to negate further community engagement particularly in an online direction. Those of our participants who were not online did not see the need for online social interactions at all viewing them with suspicion and lacking in the human touch.

5.   Key issues:

Social isolation is a central issue being addressed by this study, with our interviews highlighting the ways that the social resources of local and online communities were 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). When social isolation is experienced as loneliness it is often detrimental to the wellbeing of older people (Tomaka et al, 2006) and encouraging greater community engagement is one way of addressing this.

Our research suggests that although there are some identifiable catalysts that can and often do have a significant effect on post retirement life, they do not in themselves guarantee greater community engagement. These catalysts can be seen to represent an opportunity space that can, if catered for, facilitate a trajectory towards online or local community engagement. The four catalysts (family, roles, loss, spaces and places) have the potential to encourage greater

community engagement in different ways and here we reflect upon how these can be used as points of focus for future community interventions. Further research is needed to understand these catalysts more thoroughly but future research and socio-technical interventions should seek to:

5.1 Shift the emphasis beyond the family context

Family was significant in determining a general awareness of the Internet and engagement with SNS through Facebook in line with socio-emotional selectivity. However alternative social motives were also apparent for participants engaging with all forms of online community. This challenges the use of socioemotional selectivity (Carstensen et al, 1999) as a model for understanding older people's use of these resources. There was a general willingness amongst our participants to make new friends and take social risks online through fun and light-hearted interactions. In addressing older people's social isolation and loneliness it seems pertinent to acknowledge the opportunities that remain in later life for companionship and support. Carstensen's theory rests upon a view that enthusiasm for social engagement is limited in later life by a perception of time as finite. Other theories such as gerotranscendence (Tornstam, 2005) have shown that this may not be an inevitable or permanent state of affairs with perceptions of time equally shifting towards time as circular and time as eternal. Such theories may be more useful in addressing the more open engagement that we have seen in relation to online community.

5.2 Address the inadequacies of SNS and online community for older people

There are aspects of the design and administration of SNS and online communities that do not encourage older people to use them. In particular the general lack of privacy was problematic for many of our participants along with the general blurring of private versus public boundaries. These online expectations acted to negate the development of friendships. Online spaces which support a clear transition from public to private interactions were conducive to growing intimacy (e.g. chat windows in Facebook games) and should be well signposted in online communities and SNS.

In addition most SNS and online communities do not encourage people to identify themselves through specific roles which can discourage older people's prolonged engagement. Establishing explicit online roles may aid their integration into certain communities. Finally opportunities for anonymous interaction appear to be important facilities that are currently absent from elder-specific online communities where bereavement is likely to be a common experience.

5.3 Resist the digital imperative and emphasise 'community'

The variety of trajectories encountered throughout this pilot study suggest that there is no common shift towards digital forms of community by older people as some digital policies might imply (e.g. Cabinet Office, 2012). Our findings show that community resources are important in dealing with the challenges of ageing but that the distinction between local and online is not helpful in addressing social isolation. There is clear resistance towards the "digital by default" trends that exist in public discourse and emerging social norms. It should be remembered that community itself is the resource rather than the way in which it is accessed.

5.4 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. 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.

6.   Next steps

Our on-going relationships with the community groups involved in our research give us a route through which to feedback our findings in a productive way. We are in the process of producing partner-specific reports directed at our three principle community organisations:

1. The Meridian Mature Citizen's Forum
2. The Computer Club from the Hillcrest Community Centre
3. The elder-specific online community, DropBy

We will promote further discussion with these groups and make recommendations for future community initiatives based on our findings. In particular we will seek to pursue hyperlocal initiatives (e.g. Hu et al, 2013) in conjunction with local community groups and relevant elder-specific online communities such as DropBy.

7.   Engagement and Impact

This project has taken a participatory approach throughout, involving and consulting participants and community groups as part of the research process. Our on-going relationship with these organisations has given us opportunities to broaden awareness of our research and to engage older people in discussions and debates. During the research we attended the Older People's Day (1st October, 2013) at the Hillcrest Centre in Newhaven where we talked with visitors about our research, inviting a dialogue with them about online and local forms of community engagement.

We were also invited to speak at Age UK Brighton and Hove's AGM as part of their Seminar Programme (15th October, 2013). This was attended by representatives from other major charities and community organisations within the area as well as commissioners from Brighton and Hove City Council. In addition we were invited to participate in a government briefing as part of the 2020health Intelligence Exchange with Paul Burstow MP entitled 'Fit for Later Life' (6th November, 2013)[10].

It is still difficult at this early stage to assess any lasting impact.

---

[10] bit.ly/Mbb6Qe

8. Dissemination

8.1 Papers

Harley D., Harris, E., & Howland, K. (in preparation) 'Designing SNS for older users: what can we learn from local community interactions to create social sites that work for older people' (for submission to the British Computer Society Human Computer Interaction Conference 2014)

Harley D., Harris, E., & Howland, K. (in preparation) '*Nearer to being characters in a book*: How older people make sense of online communities and social networking sites, (for submission to Computers in Human Behavior)

Harley D., Harris, E., & Howland, K. (in preparation) 'What is the relationship between local and online forms of community engagement for older people' (for submission to Journal of Community Informatics)

8.2 Presentations

Harley D., Harris, E., & Howland, K. (2013) 'Trajectories to Community Engagement: Understanding older people's experiences of engagement with online and local communities', Digital Practices, In/visible Communities, EPSRC *Digital Transformations of Community & Culture Network+* annual meeting, Leeds, September 2013.

Harley, D. (2013) 'Ageing, Online Community and Care' Presented at Age UK Brighton and Hove, AGM Seminar Programme, 15th October 2013

Harley D., Harris, E., & Howland, K. (2013) 'Trajectories to Community Engagement: Understanding older people's experiences of engagement with online and local communities' Presentation for the Human-Centred Technology Research Group in the Department of Informatics at Sussex University, 6th December, 2013.

Harley D., Harris, E., & Howland, K. (2013) 'Ageing and Online Community' Presentation for the Age and Ageing Research Group at the University of Brighton, 28th November, 2013.

9. Funding
We are currently exploring connections with the Community21 team at Brighton University with a view to applying for funding for a hyperlocal initiative in the Meridian area.

References

Bakardjieva M. (2005). *Internet Society: The Internet in Everyday Life* . London , Thousand Oaks , New Delhi : Sage.

Cabinet Office (2012) Government Digital Strategy. Available at: http://bit.ly/1guOabh [Accessed 10th February, 2014]

Carstensen, L. L., Isaacowitz, D. M., and Charles, S. T. (1999). Taking time seriously: A theory of socioemotional selectivity. American Psychologist, 54, pp. 165–181.

Ellison, N. B., Steinfeld, C., & Lampe, C. (2007). The benefits of Facebook "Friends:" Social capital and college students' use of online social network sites. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 12(4), article 1.

Gonzalez, V. M., Jomhari, N., & Kurniawan, S. H. (2012). Photo-based narratives as communication mediators between grandparents and their children and grandchildren living abroad. *Universal Access in the Information Society, 11,* 67-84.

Gleave, E., Welser, H. T., Lento, T. M., & Smith, M. A. (2009). A conceptual and operational definition of'social role'in online community. In*System Sciences, 2009. HICSS'09. 42nd Hawaii International Conference on*(pp. 1-11). IEEE.

Havighurst, R., J. and Albrecht, R. (1953) Older People. London: Longman.

Hu, Y., Farnham, S. D., & Monroy-Hernández, A. (2013). Whoo. ly: Facilitating information seeking for hyperlocal communities using social media. In *Proceedings of the 2013 ACM annual conference on Human factors in computing systems* (pp. 3481-3490). ACM.

Karimi, A. and Neustaedter, C. (2011) My grandma uses facebook: Communication practices of older adults in an age of social media. Technical report, Simon Fraser University.

Lee, M. (2006) *Promoting mental health and well being in later life: A first report from the UK Inquiry into Mental Health and Well-Being in Later Life.* London: Mental Health Foundation and Age Concern.

Lehtinen, V., Näsänen, J., & Sarvas, R. (2009). A little silly and empty-headed: older adults' understandings of social networking sites. In Proceedings of the 23rd British HCI Group Annual Conference on People and Computers: Celebrating People and Technology (pp. 45-54). British Computer Society.

Lindley, S. E., Harper, R., & Sellen, A. (2009). Desiring to be in touch in a changing communications landscape: attitudes of older adults. In Proceedings of the 27th international conference on Human factors in computing systems. 1693-1702. ACM.

McCarthy, H., & Thomas, G. (2004). Home alone: combating isolation with older housebound people. Demos.London.

Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) (2005) Excluded older people: social exclusion unit interim report, London: ODPM.

Peace, S., Holland, C. & Kellaher, L.(2005), *Environment and identity in later life*. Growing Older. Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press. Cited in *Research Findings: 18 From the Growing Older Programme*. ESRC. Available at: http://www.growingolder.group.shef.ac.uk/Go_Findings_18.pdf [Accessed 28th November 2013]

Stroebe, M., & Schut, H. (1999). The dual process model of coping with bereavement: rationale and description. *Death studies*.

Suler, J. (2004). The online disinhibition effect. *Cyberpsychology & behavior*,*7*(3), 321-326.

Tomaka, J., Thompson, S. and Palacios, R. (2006), ''The relation of social isolation, loneliness, and social support to disease outcomes among the elderly'', Journal of Aging and Health, Vol. 18, pp. 359-84.

Tornstam, L. (2005) Gerotranscendence. A Developmental Theory of Positive Aging. New York: Springer Publishing.

World Health Organisation (2002) *Active Ageing: A Policy Framework.* Available from: http://whqlibdoc.who.int/hq/2002/WHO_NMH_NPH_02.8.pdf [Accessed 17th November, 2013]