Proposed Improvements by Analysis of Older Adults' use of Social Networking Sites

C. Norval
School of Computing
University of Dundee
Dundee, Scotland, DD1 4HN
+44 (0)1382 388237
chrisnorval@computing.dundee.ac.uk

J. L. Arnott
School of Computing
University of Dundee
Dundee, Scotland, DD1 4HN
+44 (0)1382 384148
jarnott@computing.dundee.ac.uk

V. L. Hanson
School of Computing
University of Dundee
Dundee, Scotland, DD1 4HN
+44 (0)1382 386510
vlh@computing.dundee.ac.uk

ABSTRACT
Despite the initial low uptake, the number of adults over 65 actively participating on Social Networking Sites (SNSs) is on the rise. Previous research has suggested a number of reasons for the low percentage of users over 65 years of age, however more research is required in order to understand why older adults, who use SNSs, do so, in addition to the research which attempts to understand the reasons for those who don't. The authors propose a collection of points to be considered in future research, as well as observations on how these points could be analysed. Through understanding the reasons for certain older adults choosing to use social networking sites, in addition to the reasons for adults choosing not to use such sites, a much more valuable insight into why older adults make up a predominantly small percentage of SNS users may become apparent, and what is causing this trend to change.

Categories and Subject Descriptors
K.4.2 [Computers and Society]: General.

General Terms
Measurement, Design, Security, Human Factors.

Keywords
Social Networking Sites; Privacy; Older Adults; Purposeful Social Media; Inclusion.

1. INTRODUCTION
During 2010, the most popular Social Networking Site (SNS), Facebook, grew from 337 million to 585 million active users[1]. Adults over 65 were mentioned as being the fastest growing demographic group, however despite this, older adults still made up just 2% of the active user base at the start of 2011. Since these figures were released, Facebook has grown to more than 750 million active users[2], and despite over 10% of the entire population engaging with this SNS, uptake amongst older adults remains comparatively low.

Studies have investigated the potential reasons for a low uptake amongst older adults on social networking sites, indicating that concerns over privacy, security and a perceived lack of purpose may be reasons behind the low numbers of older adults taking to social networking sites[3][4], however with the prolific nature of social functionality within websites, it is becoming increasingly evident that SNSs can be purposeful. In recent years, SNSs have played a large role in the dissemination of up-to-date news, charity fundraising and disaster relief[5][6][7], a significant example being the United Nations releasing a list of must-follow twitter accounts for information during the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan[8].

Much of the research previously conducted attempts to discover the reasons for low participation through investigating older adults who do not use SNSs, and while this gives a good insight into reasons of why people are hesitant to join such sites, it does not provide the entire picture. By including factors discussed by older adults who do use such sites, a much more accurate picture of how social networking sites could become more accessible for older adults may become available, through providing functionality which is more in-line with older adults' views of communication.

2. Reasons for Low Participation
A study by Lehtinen, Näsänen and Sarvas found that a perceived lack of purpose may be one of the fundamental reasons as to why older adults who do not use SNSs have no interest in doing so[3]. The participants, all of whom did not use social networking sites, labeled users of such sites as "*self conceited and vain*", while also mentioning that a lack of confidence in computer skills, fear of committing social blunders and an incompatibility with their existing perceptions of social relationships were all contributing factors to their decision.

A further study was conducted by Gibson et al. to further analyse reasons for low participation. Issues such as privacy and design were highlighted, in addition to participants feeling "vulnerable" sharing personal information online[4]. The preconceptions of using social networking were also mentioned, with one participant stating that it was "*a female thing*", and another commenting that "*social networking is just gossip, isn't it?*".

Gibson et al. noted that the older adults in the computing club had no problems with using a custom SNS which was created for the group, and it was suggested that this could be due to the older adults not viewing the website as a SNS. The purpose of the website was to provide information on upcoming classes and for

communication between members in a safe environment, and the focus for the site was on the club, rather than any individual. This SNS was used by 76% of the club's members, which demonstrates that without privacy concerns and with a clear purpose, the older adults saw value in this social networking site, and used it to obtain information and communicate.

While both studies provide an interesting perspective of how some older adults view social networking sites, they do not capture the entirety of the situation. Despite older adults making such a limited presence on SNSs, the percentage of those who use such sites is increasing at a significant rate. The opinions of these users will provide a different perspective, equally as useful, for understanding how older adults perform social tasks online, how a site can become purposeful and the concerns that are difficult to overcome for users and non-users alike.

3. Focus Group

In order to probe the points of view discussed above further, a focus group was set up using participants of the SiDE user pool[9]. Eight participants, four males and four females, all of whom were over 60 and with varying experience of computers, were asked to discuss their views on social-based websites. The participants were not chosen based on criteria relating to SNS usage, and of the eight participants, two were engaging with SNSs frequently, with another two discussing how they had previously tried such a site and subsequently removed their accounts.

 The remaining four participants voiced many of the concerns that were highlighted by the papers of Lehtinen et al. and Gibson et al. discussing how they did not understand the purpose or how such a site would benefit them in any way. Privacy concerns and a lack of trust toward a specific SNS were evident, and many of the participants expressed a need for moderation on any website which provided open public communication.

The two participants, however, who used SNSs, defended the use of them, stating "*If you use Facebook appropriately and you're careful how you set it up, there's nothing wrong with it*". One participant explained how Facebook was used to communicate with their sons, who lived in America, and mentioned that "*it has a lot of advantages, providing you're careful*". Both of the participants who used social networking sites provided an alternative perspective to older adults and SNSs, giving a more balanced insight of how they can fit into the lives of retired people.

4. Discussion

With Social Networking Sites (SNSs) becoming increasingly widespread, they have become a popular subject for researchers. Few papers have investigated older adults and social networking sites, and even fewer have investigated how older adults who do use social networking sites do so. It would be interesting to know why some older adults have no issues using such sites, and whether these viewpoints may or may not counter-argue some of the suggestions of previous research. Understanding the opinions of both users and non-users could provide a much more comprehensive understanding of the factors relating to how social networking sites could be tailored in the future to be more accessible and friendly for older adults.

This research might provide interesting results based on the opinions and factors relating to the suggested reasons for such a small percentage of older adults engaging with this kind of technology. Through a better understanding of these reasons, we might be able to anticipate whether the number of older adults using social networking sites will continue to accelerate over time, remain low due to concerns and a lack of interest, or stay the same until a site which is compatible with older adults' views on communication becomes available.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

6. REFERENCES

[1] SocialBakers. 2011. Facebook in 2010: 7.9 new account registrations per second. Available at: http://www.socialbakers.com/blog/109-facebook-in-2010-7-9-new-account-registrations-per-second. [Accessed on 18 August, 2011].

[2] Facebook Statistics. Available at: http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics. [Accessed on 18 August, 2011].

[3] Lehtinen, V., Näsänen, J., and Sarvas, R. 2009. "A little silly and empty-headed": older adults' understandings of social networking sites. *British Computer Society Conference on Human-Computer Interaction*, 45-54.

[4] Gibson, L., Moncur, W., Forbes, P., Arnott, J., Martin, C., and Bhachu, A.S. 2010. Designing Social Networking Sites For Older Adults. *24th BCS Conference on Human-Computer Interaction, HCI2010, Dundee, Scotland, UK, 6th-10th September, 2010*.

[5] Goolsby, R. 2010. Social Media as Crisis Platform : The Future of Community Maps / Crisis Maps. *October 1*, 1 (2010), 1-11.

[6] Jumo. Available at: http://www.jumo.com/. [Accessed on 18 August, 2011].

[7] Torrey, C., Burke, M., Lee, M., Dey, A., Fussell, S., and Kiesler, S. 2007. *Connected Giving: Ordinary People Coordinating Disaster Relief on the Internet*. IEEE.

[8] Albon, C.R. 2011. Must-follow twitterers on the earthquake in Japan. *UN Dispatch*. Available at: http://www.undispatch.com/must-follow-twitterers-on-the-earthquake-in-japan#. [Accessed on 19 August, 2011]

[9] SiDE: Social Inclusion through the Digital Economy. 2011. Available at: http://side.computing.dundee.ac.uk/. [Accessed on 22 August, 2011]