

Understanding the Incentives of Older Adults' Participation on Social Networking Sites

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Abstract

Social Networking Sites (SNSs) have seen rapid growth in popularity over the last few years, but despite this, adults over 65 years of age still make up a relatively small percentage of users on many of these sites. Previous research has suggested that a perceived lack of purpose is one of the key issues, however with social media constantly being highlighted in the news during natural disasters and crises, more in-depth research is proposed. This research aims to discover if it is possible to design a SNS to be inclusive for older adults by avoiding some of the common issues and negative perceptions of such sites. With suggested psychological benefits, especially during a life transition such as retirement, SNSs may be a powerful technology for ageing adults. Further investigation is required, however, to gain a deeper understanding of reasons for low participation, and how SNSs can be brought more in-line with older adults' perception of communication.

Introduction

At the end of 2010, a statistics website which tracks user numbers on SNSs reported that Facebook ended the year with 585 million active users and demonstrated that adults over 65 were the fastest growing demographic group of that social network. Despite this statistic, adults over 65 made up just 2% of Facebook users, compared with 32% of the users between the ages of 18 and 24[1]. Since that report, the number of active users on Facebook has increased to over 800 million[2]. Considering that over eleven percent of the world's population are actively engaging with this SNS, uptake amongst older adults remains comparatively low, and the gap is not getting smaller. Participation on online social networks in general are also low, with approximately just 10% of Americans over 65 engaging with this technology[3][4], and lower percentages in the United Kingdom, with reports ranging from approximately 2.5-5% of the adult population over 65 using SNSs[5][6][7].

Studies have suggested that concerns about privacy, security and a perceived lack of purpose are some of the issues leading to a low uptake amongst older adults[8][9], but as SNSs evolve into more than just websites for sharing photographs and talking with friends, people are finding that the concept of online social networking can be used for other purposes, such as sharing up-to-date news, participating in charity work and assisting organization during accidents or disaster relief. Such social networking,

bestowed with a purpose beyond general social interaction, is an indication of how important it is that everyone should be able to participate in online social networking. Examples could be seen with Hurricane Katrina (New Orleans), the Haitian earthquake and the 2011 tsunami in Japan, where social media played an important role in communication and distribution of information while other media were hindered by prevailing adverse conditions.

SNSs designed for older adults do exist, but without great uptake. These sites do little to address privacy issues, design problems and security concerns, therefore not providing an easy-to-use alternative where older adults can feel comfortable while discussing community news, sharing personal information with close friends and family, organizing social gatherings and building community. Research is therefore proposed to discover these barriers more in-depth, gaining a better understanding of the factors which cause the age divide on SNSs. With a better understanding of these issues, websites can be created to target the over-65 age category, providing a safe and secure place for older adults to interact in a social way on the internet.

Research

Outline

The purpose of this research is to analyze the reasons for low uptake of older adults, suggest possible solutions and trial these changes on a mainstream social networking sites using the available Application Programming Interface (API) tools. While there has been a limited amount of research on this topic, there are several issues which have not yet been investigated, and this will be the base of the research. Focus groups and a questionnaire will initially be used to investigate suggested barriers and issues, highlighting the variance of importance of these issues for different categories of participants: Current Users, Ex-Users, Indifferent Non-Users and Reluctant Non-Users. From the analyzed results, a prototype application will be designed to integrate with one or more of the mainstream SNSs, at which point evaluations and anonymized usage analysis will measure how the users engages with such a site and desired functionality for future implementations.

Progress

A thorough literature review has been written, and several areas have been highlighted as important for the next steps of research. The current focus is to construct a questionnaire which will help us understand the strengths and variations of different issues for each of the categories of participant mentioned above, identifying issues which are consistent across all four categories, individual to one category or across some but not others.

As part of the research, two focus groups were held to gauge some of the reactions and opinions of social media. The participants of the first were all over 60 years of age and internet users of varying ability. Most of the participants demonstrated extreme caution toward the idea of an un-moderated site with social functionality. Most of the participants used Skype to communicate with their relatives, and while nearly all participants talked about one SNS, Facebook, with a degree of hesitation after regular negative media coverage, one participant demonstrated enthusiasm about using it.

"If you use Facebook appropriately and you're careful how you set it up there's nothing wrong with it. I use it all the time. My sons and their girlfriends are in London, so we're all communicating, but I don't get any rubbish now."

Some of the participants had tried Facebook, before deleting their account. One person described the feeling of invasion after creating an account and finding that it had accessed the contact list in their email address. Features such as these portray a negative image of SNSs, however these are not the defining characteristics of this technology, and therefore it should be possible to create such a site without the functionality that alienates the generations of people over 65.

The second focus group invited seven participants over 60 to take part in a discussion on the technology. All participants, with the exception of one, was a social networking site user, with four of the six participants who used SNSs mentioning that they logged on to their profile every day to view status updates and pictures. Despite this unexpected frequency, all of the participants who were users contributed "very rarely", and simply observed the updates and messages that were sent.

With a perceived lack of purpose being commonly mentioned in past literature as one of the key reasons for the lack of participation, it is hoped that by understanding the purpose of those who do use such sites we can discover why that purpose is not relevant to others who choose not to use them. A key theme in technology to all of the users of both focus groups (users and non-users) was to keep in touch with family members, however, it is not known to what extent the location of family members in relation to the participants' home towns played a role in whether the participants used or did not use social networking site. We hope to discover this in the future, alongside why other platforms, such as the use of Skype, were so widespread for most of the participants regardless of the distance between their family members and themselves.

Future Work

In other research, Gibson et al. noted that a custom-made SNS using the Ning platform demonstrated a degree of success within a computing club, suggesting that this could be due to the SNS having a clear purpose, providing information about upcoming events and classes[8]. With a lack of purpose being identified as a barrier, it is proposed that such a site be designed around a community, such as a neighborhood or a club, or around an extended family.

Our future plans for research involve using the qualitative results of the focus group to construct a questionnaire, which will hopefully provide quantitative values for a wider sample. This questionnaire attempts to measure the impact of various barriers, opinions and features that were discussed in the focus groups, while categorizing the participant as either a current-user, an ex-user, an indifferent non-user or a reluctant non user. By comparatively analyzing these categories we can measure the strength and distribution of each of these opinions based on their categories, allowing us to measure common trends, such as opinions that are widespread across all categories, unique to one category and present in some but not others. This will hopefully allow us to understand why some users do use social networking sites and why some don't, as well as other interesting points such as why the majority of ex-users have left, how non-users differ from current users and the reasons behind indifferent non-users being uninterested in this kind of technology.

By gaining an understanding of older adults and social networking sites and gathering as much information as we can on the topic, we then hope to build an independent platform that can integrate with other social networking sites, such as Facebook, Twitter or Google+. Using the APIs we can construct new interfaces, test new features, avoid common barriers and design for the needs indicated by our participants, while still allowing the users to tap into the resource of the hundreds of millions of users currently on these sites. By doing so, we aim to make social networking sites more inclusive and enjoyable for all generations of people.

Conclusion

With an increasing number of websites implementing social functionality, it is hoped that understanding the boundaries of what is seen as acceptable and what should be avoided will allow developers to cater for wider audiences. Understanding these issues will allow social media to reach new audiences, avoiding the alienation of users over 65, who may have negative perceptions of social networking sites.

Studies have found that SNS usage has psychological benefits, such as increased social capital, reduced loneliness and improved psychological well-being, especially during a life transition[10][11]. Many older adults may experience more psychological benefits of SNS usage than younger adults, due to going through retirement, moving home or the death of a spouse or friend. Such an online service may prove to be a significant platform for support and information, helping people through difficult times and giving them an opportunity to talk about sensitive issues with people in a similar circumstance.

By attempting to understand the main barriers and opinions of this technology, we hope to have control over an existing mainstream social networking site through the use of the provided API tools. By doing so, we aim to provide adults over 65 with a platform for communication which fits around the needs of that person, making social networking sites more inclusive and relevant to a wider audience of people.

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About the Author:



Chris Norval is a PhD candidate at the University of Dundee, Scotland, where he also holds the position of Seminar Organizer within the School of Computing. After completing his undergraduate degree at the same university, he joined the SiDE research project, investigating social networking sites and older adults. Chris's research aims to understand the barriers and motivations of older adults toward using social networking sites, and if changes to mainstream sites could be applied in order to make these sites more compatible with the views of communication of adults over 65, thus hopefully making these sites more inclusive.