Using the Internet for Offline Relationship Formation

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This study examines the impact of the Internet on the online and offline social interactions and relationships of members of a senior-oriented computer club. Twenty semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted in February 2005 to collect data. Grounded theory was used to guide data analysis. Major findings include the following: First, within this particular group of older American Internet users, there is little online interaction. The Internet is used primarily as a handy tool to obtain information rather than for developing online relationships. Second, weak tie relationships that develop as a result of face-to-face interactions in computer club meetings facilitate the exchange of information among members. Third, social interactions in the offline environment also provide rich opportunities for older adults to form and maintain companionship relationships. These findings reveal a previously ignored phenomenon: In addition to creating online social relationships, the Internet can also affect relationship formation in the physical world.

Keywords: older adults; social interactions; social relationships; information and communication technologies (ICTs); weak ties; companionship

Until recently, research on the Internet's impact on social relationships has predominantly focused on how the Internet facilitates the formation and development of social relationships in the online world (e.g., via instant messaging or in online forums). Although there is preliminary evidence that social relationships originally formed via the Internet can lead to interactions in the physical world (Parks & Floyd, 1996; Rheingold, 1993; Salem, Bogat, & Reid, 1997; Turner, Grube, & Meyers, 2001), and that Internet use can increase face-to-face interactions among individuals with weak tie online relationships (Kavanaugh, Reese, Carroll, & Rosson, 2005), it remains largely unexamined how the Internet might affect relationship formation and development not only online but also offline.

Currently, the majority of research on social relationships and the Internet focus on younger age groups. Only a few available studies have examined the impact of Internet use on the social interactions and relationships of older adults (Furlong, 1989; Kanayama, 2003; Wright, 2000). However, it is important to realize that social interaction is unavoidable in older adults' computer learning, because currently, even the simplest computer application or system requires training, which usually involves social interaction between the trainer and the learner, and/or among the learners (Dickinson & Gregor, 2006). In fact, in the older population, much information and communication technology (ICT) learning typically takes place in face-to-face, group settings such as computer classes and/or computer clubs. There is preliminary evidence (that was unexpected to
the researchers prior to their respective studies) that social interactions which occurred during the face-to-face computer training and learning process may have contributed to the reported positive association between older adults’ computer use and well-being (Bradley & Poppen, 2003; Eilers, 1989; Karavidas, Lim, & Katsikas, 2005; White et al., 2002). This suggests that when considering the impact of computer learning and use on older adults, it may be not only unavoidable but also beneficial to look beyond the online and technical aspects and pay serious attention to the offline and social aspects of technology use.

Due to age-related changes in visual, perceptual, motor, and cognitive abilities, older adults typically require more time and assistance than younger people in learning to use computer technology (Czaja & Lee, 2003; Xie, 2003). Computer clubs that are characterized by regular, face-to-face meetings provide a convenient way for older adults to obtain much needed continuous, long-term technical assistance. Much research has been conducted to explore how computer training programs—that take place in face-to-face, group settings—can help older adults learn to use new ICTs (Cody, Dunn, Hoppin, & Wendi, 1999; Grad & Berdes, 2005; Segrist, 2004). Evidently shaped by the powerful online informative and communicative potential of new ICTs, however, such research typically focuses on the outcome of the training—that is, how older adults can use Internet applications to facilitate online social interaction after they have learned about the technology. The process of learning to use computers and the Internet in physical, group settings and how this process may promote older adults’ social interactions and relationship formation are often ignored.

To address these limitations of the literature, this study focuses on a group of older ICT learners—who are members of a local computer club—to examine if and how computers and the Internet affect their social interactions and relationships online and/or offline. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, qualitative interviewing method was used to collect data, and grounded theory was used to guide data analysis. The goal of this article is not to produce generalizable conclusions but to examine the implications of preliminary evidence that points in a new and exciting direction, which can be further studied in the future using random samples to achieve representativeness.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from members of one of the SeniorNet learning centers—the SeniorNet Users Group (SNUG) in Oklahoma City—using the snowballing technique (for a detailed description of the history and development of SeniorNet, see Xie, 2005). A total of 20 members—which was approximately one fifth of all registered SNUG members—were interviewed. Participants were within the age range of 67–92 (M = 76.8). Nine of them were female, and 11 were male. Except for one participant who had only high school education, all other participants had at least some college or higher levels of education.
Procedure

Semistructured, open-ended interviews were conducted in February 2005 in Oklahoma City. Participants were recruited using the snowballing technique. Each interview lasted about 1-1.5 hours and was recorded using a digital voice recorder. An informed consent form was completed before each interview was conducted. Pseudonyms were chosen for participants who did not wish to have their names revealed.

Interview Topics

Based on the concepts and findings present in the literature, the initial interview guide, which was used to guide the first several interviews, asked questions about if the participant had interacted online with family, friends, other members of the SNUG, or other SeniorNet members, using applications such as e-mail, instant messaging, and online forums. The responses from the first several interviews revealed unexpected but intriguing findings. Although some members reported occasional use of the Internet for communication with family and friends, typically they did not use this technology to interact online with other members of the SNUG or other SeniorNet members. However, the first several interviews revealed that members had been able to form and develop offline social relationships within the group and had enjoyed the exchange of information and companionship available within the SNUG. After detecting and realizing the significance of this previously ignored aspect of the Internet’s impact on social interactions and relationships, and in keeping with the grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), in the following interviews new questions were added to explicitly and systematically explore if and in what ways the Internet affects social relationships in the offline world.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study was guided by grounded theory, such that data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously to ensure the coevolution of data and theory (for a detailed description of the stages of analysis, see Xie, in press). Due to the exploratory nature of this study, the grounded theory approach was used only to a limited extent in that this study did not include significantly more interviewing or a search for evidence to disprove the emergent theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Results

Lack of Online Interactions and Relationships

Among the 20 SNUG members who participated in this study (who are among the most active members of the group), none reported any participation in the SeniorNet online community that contributed to the formation or maintenance of relationships with other members of the SNUG or other SeniorNet members in general. Only a few members—all were instructors of SeniorNet computer classes—mentioned that they occasionally visited the SeniorNet Web site to get information that could help them with their teaching.
Charlene Francis, the founder of the SNUG who was referred by multiple members as “the most likely person to use the SeniorNet Web site,” admits that she participates in the SeniorNet online community “a little bit; not a whole lot.” She suggests that engaging in online activities may not be a top priority for every older person simply because it may not be of interest to everyone: “Seniors want to learn computers; that is true. But . . . it comes down to the area or areas that an individual is interested in, and it’s not necessarily surfing the Web.” This view is supported by another member, who explains that the reason why he does not participate in the SeniorNet online community is that “it has too many things there that just don’t interest me.” Similarly, another active member, whose only participation in the SeniorNet online community is to “participate in their online questionnaires,” explains that the reason why she has not actively participated online is that “I just don’t have time to sit at my computer and be with a good online discussion group or chat room, or I don’t set my priorities that way.”

The lack of online interaction among these SNUG members is represented by not only their low (or lack of) participation in the SeniorNet online community but also their limited interaction via other communicative Internet applications. Specifically, although some members reported limited e-mail interaction with other members, there was no evidence that SNUG members interacted with one another via any other applications such as instant messaging or chat rooms. In the limited cases when members do communicate via e-mail, the communication is mostly between the instructors and coaches and between the instructors/coaches and the students who are taking the computer classes, and the content is usually restricted to computer-related subjects.

If Internet use does not seem to have significant impact on SNUG members’ relationship building in the online world, what then, is the primary use of the Internet in their everyday lives? The data suggest that, for the majority of the participants, the Internet is simply a handy tool that helps them find useful information—or, more precisely, information relevant to personal matters such as stocks, banking, medical conditions, and genealogy. Although some participants reported occasional use of the Internet for communication, in those cases the Internet was used primarily for communicating with family and friends. Communicating with other SNUG members or the broader SeniorNet community via the Internet was rare among this group of older Americans. In fact, when asked the question “What activities do you normally do when you use the computer?” most responses were “To get information,” rather than to communicate with others. Thus, SNUG members use the Internet primarily for individual, instead of interactive or social, activities. Although the mission of the group is to help older adults learn to use computers and the Internet (which has both informative and communicative functions), SNUG members are not making use of the online communicative and social functions of the technology to develop online relationships with one another.

**Exchange of Information in the Offline Setting**

Although SNUG members do not typically interact online, their offline interactions in the weekly meetings ensure the development of supportive relationships, which facilitate exchange of information that helps solve computer-related problems. For instance, a member says that one of the main types of support he could get from the SNUG is “the training and
becoming familiar with the programs that are available on the computer.” Another member, when asked if his computer problems could always be solved in the SNUG, responds, “That’s a rule . . . most generally they [other SNUG members] can solve the computer problems I have.” Similarly, when asked exactly what kinds of technical support she could get from other members of the SNUG, another member states,

Anything. There is someone in the group who would help you with anything on the Internet that you would think you needed help with. They would help you with anything. And if they didn’t know how or what to do, they would certainly give you someone to help you.

The peer-learning environment of the SNUG appears to be especially suitable for providing informational support to the members. As one member says, “The thing that amazes me is that somebody asks a question, there will be 10 different answers to it.” Similarly, another member states, “You can get technical help here. There are very few questions that somebody there can’t answer. Nobody can answer all of them, but somebody can probably answer some of them.” An important reason is that group members have diverse and complementary backgrounds and expertise, as the following quotes indicate:

There are people in this group who really don’t know how to use the computer, and then there are people that are so knowledgeable that they have built their own computers. So you’ve got a cross section of people that are from different background[s] and have different levels of computer knowledge . . . . People come with their [computer-related] questions and problems, and always, somebody in this group can give them an answer on how to fix whatever is wrong.

I became a very early member of the SNUG. I always find it to be very useful to attend the meetings and learn what’s going on and discuss things with different members. Everybody has some idea, and most of them are pretty good . . . . It’s a magnificent education. Information is very easily transferred from person to person. You ask a question, and you get a good answer.

These members’ experiences suggest that, although the Internet does not seem to increase SNUG members’ interactions and relationship development in the online world, it does help members get together, interact, and develop social relationships in the offline world.

Companionship in the Offline Setting

In addition to facilitating the exchange of information, social relationships formed among SNUG members also provide opportunities for companionship, or interaction that is sought for purely social, enjoyable purposes (Rook, 1995). To use a member’s words, “I do enjoy going to the Thursday meetings, visiting with the other members.” Similarly, another member, when asked what he liked about the SNUG, says,

I like the friendliness; I like the caring that everybody shows to each other. It’s just a good group of people . . . . It’s a wonderful place to socialize, to meet other people, and they have the same interests that you have.
These quotes suggest that offline interactions and relationships among SNUG members have provided them with rich opportunities for not only informational exchange but also companionship. Charlene Francis, in explaining the main reasons why people would want to come to the meetings, says explicitly that the social function is as important as the educational function of the group:

I would say, 50% [of the reason is] to learn, [and] 50% to socialize. I say that because a lot of us are widows or widowers. We have families. But, we don’t have as many friends as we used to have. This gives you a chance to be with people of your own age, talk with people who have an interest in some of the same things that you have an interest in, and then learn the things.

An important reason that SNUG members have been able to develop such companionship is that they have a common interest—the computer—to start with. As these members explicitly point out,

You are discussing something that’s of interest to everyone or they wouldn’t be there. So you have a basis for your conversation, for your interaction. It’s an introduction that introduces you to the people, because you share a common interest.

I was absent [from the SNUG] for 3–4 years. When I came back, some of the old people have gone, and I got acquainted with some of the new people. But, we always seem to have the basis of discussions about computers as a common thing generally speaking.

These members’ experiences suggest that, in addition to the online informative and communicative functions of new ICTs, computers can also serve as a hobby that draws individuals together to interact and, in doing so, develop meaningful social relationships.

Discussion

It is widely acknowledged that the Internet has both informative and communicative functions (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001; Wilson & Peterson, 2002). Yet, this study finds that, within the particular setting of SNUG, typically older Americans do not use the online communicative function of the Internet, and thus the technology is not used primarily for relationship formation in the online world. Rather, SNUG members use the Internet primarily as a tool to obtain online information that is relevant to their personal interests. In this sense, the Internet has little influence on the participants’ (online) social interactions and relationships. An important reason is that these older adults do not have an interest or priority to form online relationships. Their priority is simply to seek information on the Internet, instead of communicating and interacting online. This finding calls attention to the diversity of the older population: the older population is a diverse one that includes individuals who have different needs, interests, and preferences (Xie, 2003). Although some older adults may enjoy forming social relationships purely online, others may not. As such, researchers and educators dedicated to improving older adults’ use and adoption of ICTs should adjust the goals of the training programs to better accommodate the diverse needs of older ICT learners.
Importantly, this study also finds that face-to-face interactions in the regular computer club meetings have greatly ensured the formation and maintenance of social relationships among the members. Compared with relationships with family and close friends, the relationships among SNUG members are less developed and limited in that they usually involve fewer discussion topics and rarely involve discussion of personal or intimate subjects. These weak tie relationships greatly enhance the diffusion of information or ideas (Granovetter, 1983). This study provides empirical evidence that weak ties can facilitate the exchange of information among older computer learners. Weak tie relationships formed among SNUG members in the offline computer club setting provide older adults with not only informational support but also companionship. As the participants of this study repeatedly point out, companionship exchanged within the SNUG is an important reason that has kept them with the group for prolonged periods of time (in some cases, more than 10 years). Computers and the Internet play a central role in the process of forming and developing companionship among the members because, first, the technology is the reason why these older adults get together in the first place, and, second, the technology gives individuals a shared interest or topic about which they can interact and develop relationships.

The findings of this study suggest that, in addition to facilitating online information exchange and relationship formation, which has been well documented in the literature, computers and the Internet can also facilitate the exchange of information and the formation of social relationships in the offline world. Face-to-face interaction in the computer club setting, in this sense, is another way that new ICTs can affect individuals’ everyday lives. This alternative view of the impact of new ICTs has generally been ignored in the literature, mainly because the online functions of the Internet are so powerful and (arguably) innovative that they tend to overshadow everything else. This can be seen from earlier Internet research that almost exclusively focused on the online aspect of the impact of the technology (for a review and critiques, see Wilson & Peterson, 2002). Recently, there is an increasing awareness in the literature which holds that the online world is not separate from or independent of the offline world; rather, online interactions and relationships are deeply embedded in and shaped by offline situations and relationships (Wilson & Peterson, 2002). In particular, a couple of recent studies suggest that individuals’ perceptions of the quality of online social relationships are influenced by the quality of their offline social relationships (Cummings, Butler, & Kraut, 2002; Mesch & Talmud, 2006). This study pushes this increasing awareness even further by arguing that new ICTs can greatly affect social interactions and relationships in the offline world even without having any significant impact on online interactions and relationships. This new emphasis on the offline effects of the Internet should not be interpreted as undervaluing the online effects of new ICTs. Rather, the argument here is that research needs to bend back a little in the offline direction so that the online, as influential and powerful as it is, does not keep overshadowing the offline.

Different from previous research that perceives the Internet as a new type of media (Haythornthwaite, 2002), the findings of this study lead to an additional understanding of the Internet, that is, the Internet itself—as compared with the online informative and communicative functions that this new medium affords—can be a subject that facilitates social interaction and relationship formation. More precisely, the process of learning to use the Internet—in a face-to-face, group setting such as the computer club, as found in this study—can be a social process that allows the formation and development of meaningful social relationships.
In addition to these theoretical contributions, this alternative view of the Internet also has important implications for education and practice. To improve the use of new ICTs by technologically underserved social groups (including older adults and also other underprivileged groups such as ethnic minorities, rural communities, and individuals with disabilities), educators and practitioners need to first become aware of this additional function of the Internet and then develop training programs accordingly to make the best use of this function. In particular, computer training programs should emphasize not only the end result, or if the trainees could seek information and communicate online after they have learned to use the technology, but also the process, or if the trainees could seek information and develop relationships during the process of learning to use the technology in the physical world. Although further examination is required before a firm conclusion could be made, the findings of this study provide preliminary evidence that such a new emphasis might help improve the efficiency of computer training programs and also increase the social relationships and integration of older adults. Given that older adults’ relative lack of ICT use may not be a generational phenomenon and that future generations of older adults may also lag behind younger people in terms of ICT adoption and use (Loges & Jung, 2001), computer training programs that integrate and make use of this offline function of the Internet might benefit not only this but also future generations of older adults.

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References


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