Getting Older Adults Online: The Experiences of SeniorNet (USA) and OldKids (China)

By Bo Xie

Introduction

The aging of the population in China and the United States is coincident with the dramatic growth of Internet use in both countries. In recent years, both trends have been topics of academic and popular discourse in these two countries. On the one hand, researchers concerned with age and aging are dedicated to exploring the far-reaching implications of the rapidly growing older population; on the other hand, Internet researchers concentrate on how information and communication technologies (ICTs) are changing virtually every aspect of society and human lives. Surprisingly, however, little attention has been paid to the intersection of these two trends – until recently, the major sources that provided data about older adults’ use of the Internet were survey studies targeted at all age groups. Quantitative data can reveal little about what the Internet really means to older adults, and how older adults actually make sense of the Internet in the context of their everyday lives. I suggest that there are several reasons contributing to this oversight: on the one hand, social gerontologists conventionally do not pay much attention to the influence of technology on aging and later life – when they do, they primarily focus on medical or assistive technologies, as if those were the only technologies that mattered to older adults; on the other hand, ICT researchers often ignore the older population, as if computers and the Internet were young people’s business only. The lack of research on the intersection of the aging trend and the ICT trend calls for more attention.
Recently, a number of academic studies have concentrated on the intersection of older adults and ICTs in the context of Western cultures (for a review, see Xie, 2003). However, those studies have severe limitations: first, most of them take place in laboratory or quasi-experimental settings and therefore can say little about the ways ICTs are actually used and understood in older adults' everyday lives. Second, most of these studies focus on the impact of the Internet on older adults' lives, while ignoring how broader, offline situations also affect older adults' online experiences. Third, most previous research is limited to the individual level; the issues of how the Internet has changed the dynamics of interpersonal relationships and community networks are significantly understudied. A related limitation is that previous research tends to focus on new users or users-to-be while ignoring more advanced older Internet users. In sharp contrast to negative stereotypes that are often associated with older adults, many older Internet users have already moved far beyond the point of only using basic Internet applications like e-mail. As a handful of studies have indicated, a number of older adults are deeply dedicated to interacting with their age peers in online communities, and social interaction that takes place in the virtual world has become an important part of their lives (Furlong, 1989a; 1989b; Kanayama, 2003; White & Weatherall, 2000; Wright, 2000a; 2000b). Unfortunately, still very little is known about the way older adults interact with peers in online communities. Finally, a major limitation of the existing literature on older adults and ICTs is that little, if any, attention has been paid to cross-cultural comparisons of older adults' use and perceptions of ICTs.

To address some of the limitations of previous research on older adults and ICTs, I have designed a research project to qualitatively analyze, compare and contrast Internet use among older adults in two culturally distinct settings: China and the United States. By using ethnographic research methods – mainly interviewing and participant observation, I explore how older Chinese and Americans actually use and perceive computers and the Internet in their everyday lives, and how various social and cultural factors contribute to the differences and/or similarities between older Chinese's and Americans' experiences with new ICTs. A special focus of my research project is older Chinese's and Americans' interactions in senior-oriented online communities, and how those online interactions are influenced by and also influence their offline situations.

The two senior-oriented Internet communities that I have chosen to study are 1) the SeniorNet community, headquartered in San Francisco, California, USA, and 2) the OldKids community, which is based in Shanghai, China. These two sites were selected because they are the first and by far the biggest senior-oriented Internet communities in the United States and Mainland China, respectively. Furthermore, they are comparable because both provide online and offline computer training to older adults, and both offer virtual spaces – i.e., online communities – in which older adults can interact.

In this chapter, I report some preliminary results of this research project. Specifically, I examine how the patterns and characteristics of SeniorNet and OldKids users' online and offline interactions are influenced by the history, mission, and available resource of these organizations. Below I first examine the SeniorNet case, and then move on to the OldKids case. Next, I compare and contrast the findings reported in the previous two sections, and analyze how the differences and similarities are affected by the organizational contexts of SeniorNet and OldKids, which may provide insights that will help senior-oriented organizations to better serve the older population in the information age. Finally, in the concluding section, I summarize the main findings of this study, and how they can contribute to the literature.

The SeniorNet case

The history

SeniorNet is a nonprofit organization based in San Francisco, USA. It was first launched in March 1986 at the University of San Francisco as a research project funded by the Markle Foundation. Its current mission is “to provide older adults education for and access to computer technologies to enhance their lives and enable them to share their knowledge and wisdom.” However, the original goal of SeniorNet was less focused on education and more geared toward helping older adults communicate
through computer networks. The focus had to be changed because the founders of SeniorNet soon discovered that there were not too many older adults using computers at that time. To facilitate older adults' communication, therefore, it was first necessary to train more older adults to use the computer. As Francisca Middleton, the first employee of SeniorNet who, in her own words, "started working for SeniorNet since the first day," states:

We didn't know what we were doing (in the beginning). We kept changing focus. The original idea was to look at communication. There was no Internet as we know of it today. But we knew we wanted to do something so people could connect. Older people would be willing to, able to, and wanted to connect on the Internet. What we found was there were not large numbers of people in that age group yet using computers. So, we backed up a little bit, and we had to think about establishing places where they could learn computers. [Francisca Middleton]

With donations from several computer companies and also telephone companies, in late 1986 SeniorNet established five learning centers (which at the time were called "SeniorNet sites") in different areas of the nation (mainly along the east and west coasts). Each center at the time had only one computer, one printer, one modem, and about 10-20 members who had to share the one computer. With large discounts from American Online (AOL), learning center members were able to communicate and interact in the AOL SeniorNet online community, an area on the AOL network set aside so that SeniorNet could manage on its own. This community has since grown into a large and viable one, as more and more learning center members and also independent members (who were not SeniorNet learning center members) started to participate in the online community with great enthusiasm. In the late 1990s, when the World Wide Web became available and easy to use, SeniorNet built the seniornet.org website, and tried to persuade members of the AOL SeniorNet online community to move over to the seniornet.org online community. Some members did, but the majority of them stayed at the AOL SeniorNet community. As Francisca Middleton recalls,

I remember when we first added our website, I was put on contract for a while, trying to get people from AOL to get on over there (the website). But, some left, some were still comfortable with the setup on AOL so they stay there. Some visit both places. But the majority stayed there. [Francisca Middleton]

The AOL SeniorNet online community was eventually discontinued in early 2004, when AOL decided not to carry SeniorNet any more. Some members were then forced to move to the seniornet.org online community, but many others just stopped participating in the SeniorNet online community.

The seniornet.org online community

The current SeniorNet online community has over 78,000 registered members within and outside of the United States. It has over 600 online discussion groups - the "SeniorNet Roundtables" - that cover a wide range of topics. The SeniorNet website also provides text chatting - the ChatterBox chat room, which allows members to interact from anywhere at anytime. Another feature of the SeniorNet online community that facilitates members' interactions is the user profile. When first registered at this online community, users are given the choice of adding their contact information to their profiles. Therefore, if a member wishes, s/he can post her/his contact information - most likely an email address - to her/his personal profile. Then, each time when s/he posts a message to a discussion group, others can click on her/his name to see her/his profile and get her/his contact information. This feature allows members to easily find and communicate with other people with similar interests.

Members of the SeniorNet online community interact not only online but also offline. There are several self-organized occasions where they...
could meet their online peers in the physical world: first, the annual, nationwide gathering, where members typically meet at a tourist attraction for a couple of days. Second, there are also regional or local gatherings that take place once or several times per year. For those regional or local gatherings, members often meet and spend a full or half day at a local tourist attraction, museum, or restaurant. Finally, two or several people who have met online may decide to get together on their own, in which case the location and format of the get-together may be even more flexible. According to Francisca Middleton, who has participated in many of these gatherings over the past 18 years, the main purpose of all levels of these gatherings is to socialize with peers:

They (the gatherings) are mostly, purely social. For fun. You know, just, I know you online, and, it would be fun to get together. So, let's go to Williamsport or some place. Somebody says, yeah, I can find us a motel or hotel. Maybe organize a site seeing, something like that. [Francisca Middleton]

The format of the gatherings is very casual, and members normally talk about a wide variety of things, including families, past work and life experiences, recent trips, hobbies and interests, etc.:

There’s no organized speech. People are mainly just having a good time ... People talk about their grandchildren, talk about trips they’ve done, talk about the interests and hobbies they may have. It’s just the way you would do if you went to a cocktail party somewhere, and you start talking to people, except that they know one another -- maybe now, it’s been going on so long, there are a lot of them they do know each other. It’s fun. [Francisca Middleton]

Interestingly, in most of the conversations at a gathering, computer- or SeniorNet-related topics are not the main topics (and, not unusually, those words do not even come up during the conversations). In November 2004, while doing my fieldwork in San Francisco, I was invited to go to a lunch gathering that took place at a local restaurant. Twelve members of the SeniorNet online community – eight female and four male – who lived in the Bay area went to this local gathering. Most of them had already known each other from online interactions and also previous gatherings. Because the offline gatherings do not take place very often (this group tends to meet 2-4 times per year), the main thing they did at lunch was to update each other about the changes of their lives that happened since the last time they met. Computers and the Internet were brought up only when one woman started talking about the love of her life – whom she met online – and how her life had been so different ever since then. Computer- or SeniorNet-related topics, however, were never the center of the conversation. This event supports and reinforces the interview findings: i.e., the gatherings are primarily social, just for fun, and not for educational or technical purposes.

It is important to point out that those national, regional, and local gatherings are self-organized – usually by a small group of volunteers, who tend to be active members of the SeniorNet online community – and without any contribution or involvement from the SeniorNet organization. The SeniorNet headquarters indeed “never did anything to encourage or discourage” those gatherings, says Marcie Schwarz, the director of education of SeniorNet.

When asked why the SeniorNet headquarters does not organize national gatherings for members from all over the country to get together, Marcie Schwarz explains, with frustration:

It (the self-organized gathering) was not something that we really anticipated. SeniorNet used to have a national conference every year. Then we had it every two years, and then I think, maybe, in 2000, we stopped, just because there was so much work for the staff to put that on for not a lot of benefit. Mostly some representatives of some of our learning centers and also some of our members came (to the SeniorNet headquarters-organized national conference). But it was never, never as big as a lot of those big gatherings (that were organized by members themselves). [Marcie Schwarz]

The sharp contrast between the low participation at SeniorNet-organized national conferences and the high participation at member-organized gatherings is mainly due to the different focus and format of the two

6. Francisco Middleton, who used to be a full-time employee of the SeniorNet headquarters and now a part-time employee, usually went to the gatherings on her own – i.e., as a member of the SeniorNet online community, rather than a representative of the SeniorNet organization.
7. The SeniorNet-organized national conference is different from the member-organized national gatherings. The former discontinued but the latter continues.
kinds of events: the former was education-oriented and more formal, while the latter is primarily for socializing and very casual.

It (the SeniorNet-organized national conference) wasn't mostly social event. They (the participants) always said we didn't have enough time for just socializing. The learning centers had a special day where they had sessions talking about the curriculum or operational things, or technical matters, sponsorships. Then, for the rest, we had national speakers talking about technology, and workshops about new things happening with technology. Then, in between that, and, at the meals, there could be socializing. But, it wasn't primarily social. It was community building, but the community was an educational focus. The (member-organized) gatherings are purely social. They just talk and organize site-seeing tours, vacation, and a chance to meet each other. Not everybody, like myself, would go to an event that was just meeting a bunch of people, socializing. A lot of our members don't go (to an event purely for social). But, for the ones who do go, it's social. People do want to get to know the other people that they meet online, and they just want to see what they are like, and have fun at a place, you know, do some site-seeing, at a place maybe that they had not been before. [Marcie Schwarz]

The different popularities of the SeniorNet-organized conferences and the member-organized gatherings reflect a serious conflict between the current mission of the SeniorNet organization and the main objective of the majority of its online members. As discussed above, SeniorNet was initially designed to help older adults connect and communicate through computer networks, and educating older adults using the computer was just the means to help achieve that goal. Gradually, however, the means has somehow become the goal, and the goal has become the means. This change of focus can be clearly seen from the following words:

SeniorNet is, I mean, our mission is to educate. We certainly see the value of them (the members) socializing and supporting each other. But just to do something social is not something that we'll do. Unless it was, unless we found that was the way to get them to do something else, maybe we would do that. [Marcie Schwarz, emphasis added]

Although the SeniorNet organization is now geared toward education, the majority of its online members enjoy connecting, communicating, and socializing with their age peers both online and offline. The Internet has enabled them to do so without the help of the organization – instead of having to follow the organization's new direction, individual members are empowered by the technology to take a trajectory that is different from the organization's current one.

The SeniorNet learning centers
The growth of the SeniorNet online community – both the AOL SeniorNet and the seniornet.org online communities – has been dramatic, and the online community has well served the original purpose of the SeniorNet research project: i.e., helping older adults communicate and connect through computer networks. As SeniorNet becomes a more established organization, however, its focus has also changed: the offline part – i.e., establishing more learning centers to educate older adults – has become the primary goal of SeniorNet. The unspoken but obvious reason for this change is that the learning centers generate revenues, while the online community generates almost zero revenues for the organization.

As a non-profit organization, SeniorNet is quite unique because it has its own revenue sources. The organization relies on membership fees, learning center fees, sponsorships, and donations from individuals, corporations, and private foundations. SeniorNet currently has 20,000 members who pay an annual membership fee, which contributes about 75%-85% of the annual revenue. Approximately 5%-10% of the revenue comes from the learning center fees, and the rest is corporate, and/or individual donations. Not surprisingly, the SeniorNet organization now primarily focuses on establishing new learning centers and attracting more students to the new and existing learning centers.

The growth of SeniorNet learning centers has also been quite fast: by the end of 2004, there were over 240 SeniorNet learning centers throughout the United States as well as in other countries, including Japan, Malaysia, and Sweden (over 200 learning centers are located in the U.S.). SeniorNet learning centers are typically the result of collaborative efforts between the SeniorNet headquarters and local nonprofit organizations...
such as senior centers, community centers, universities, public libraries, and senior residential facilities. The current collaborative model requires a local organization to have three things to start a SeniorNet learning center: a site sponsor that provides the location (a room equipped with computer equipment and Internet access), a group of volunteers (at least 12 volunteers to start with, according to Marcie Schwarz), and the funding to pay the SeniorNet headquarters ($6,000 dollars startup fee plus $6,000 for the first two years of operation). The SeniorNet headquarters provides course material, software, and technical support. The instructors of the computer classes at the learning centers are often local volunteers, including older people who have taken computer classes before or have learned computer skills elsewhere (for instance, a large number of SeniorNet learning center instructors are IBM retirees, who had learned to use the computer from work). When volunteers are not available (or when there are not enough volunteers), part-time or full-time employees of the local organization usually fill in the role of the instructors. Each student who enrolls in computer classes at a local SeniorNet learning center is required to pay a $40 annual membership fee to the SeniorNet headquarters, in addition to course fees that each local learning center may charge for courses they offer. After the first year, about 28% of those who took computer classes at SeniorNet learning centers renew their membership and take more classes for the next year.

The SeniorNet headquarters has hired five part-time regional consultants to help local learning centers schedule and manage computer classes and to facilitate communications between the headquarters and the local learning centers. As one regional consultant explains:

Any learning centers that either are going to open a new site, or that have concerns or problems, I’m their contact. I’m their headquarters contact. The first person they contact. And that’s in all areas. That’s in training, in volunteers, technical, and any questions they have or want additional software, need assistance marketing, PR, any concerns they have or any questions that they have, or any help that they need. They come to me for that. [Jan Adkins]

10. Course fees are normally about $25-$50, and some local centers do not charge any course fees at all. The $40 membership fee goes to the SeniorNet headquarters, while the course fees stay at the local learning centers and are usually used to update the centers’ computer equipment.
clear to me that students of these computer classes were not participating in the SeniorNet online community in any ways, mainly because the computer classes offered by the learning centers only taught basic computer skills such as turning on/off the computer and word processing, and/or basic Internet applications like sending/receiving emails. However, at that time I had suspected, or even hoped, that this phenomenon was only an isolated case. It was not until I interviewed the administrators of the SeniorNet headquarters in the summer of 2004 that I started realizing that this phenomenon - i.e., students of the learning center computer classes do not become members of the SeniorNet online community - was indeed not an exceptional but a representative one.

As a result of these teaching/learning styles and arrangements, there is no strong bond or sense of community between the center and the students or among the students. One SeniorNet learning center coordinator, when asked if any local SeniorNet community has been formed around the learning center, responded:

We have a database of all of our students. We send them the latest information that we have on the courses, and invite them to come, that type of thing. There's no interaction with our students (after they finish the class). [Is there any interaction among the students?] Not that I'm aware of. Unless they are doing something on the Internet. We are not aware of that (if they are doing something on the Internet). It's hard, having ourselves do all that effort. It takes a lot of effort to do that sort of thing. [Frank Desko]

Clearly, the SeniorNet learning centers are not set up in ways that may facilitate older adults to learn from and socialize with their peers offline and online. Rather, they primarily serve one purpose: to provide offline education; and the teaching/learning style is quite didactic: i.e., from the instructor to the students. The implications of this learning style will be further explored later in this paper when compared with the OldKids case.

The separation of the online and offline communities & the problems associated with it

Based on my interviews with the administrators of the SeniorNet headquarters and learning centers, it is clear that in the early days of its development, the online and offline parts of SeniorNet - the SeniorNet online community and the offline local SeniorNet learning centers - were much closer and more integrated. Indeed, when the first five SeniorNet learning centers started in 1986, students of computer classes offered by those SeniorNet learning centers were also active members of the SeniorNet online community. Over the years, however, the online and offline parts have begun to pull apart:

When we first started, the online and offline parts were very close - members of the learning centers usually participated in the SeniorNet online community. Over the years, however, the offline part (the learning centers) has become more and more detached from the SeniorNet online community. The learning centers now basically just teach members computers and the Internet, but they don't really try to make members to participate in the SeniorNet online community. The learning centers are running business-like computer training - they are nonprofit organizations, but they are somehow running like businesses. So the learning centers just train older people to use computers and the Internet, but they don't really try to get people to come to our online community. It was not like this originally; but things have changed over the years ... It's not really a big problem, although we would like to see the online community and local learning centers become closer. [Marcie Schwarz]

As a result, currently there is little overlap between members of the SeniorNet online community and those of the local SeniorNet learning centers. Several problems arise from such a separation: first, for students of the learning center computer classes, not participating in the SeniorNet online community means missing the rich opportunities and resources available in the online community. It also means that those older adults are less likely to move beyond the basic level of computer and Internet use. Second, for members of the online community, not going to the local learning centers means they do not have the opportunities to interact face-to-face regularly. Third, for the SeniorNet headquarters and local learning centers, not being able to integrate the online and offline resources means they are considerably less attractive (than they could be) to both the students and potential students, which may be a main reason for the dropping revenues of the SeniorNet headquarters in recent years.

11. To be fair, introducing the SeniorNet.org website is part of the introductory course that local learning centers offer, and students are often taught to register in the SeniorNet online community. However, the introduction is at a very surface level, and there are no follow-up efforts from the learning centers or the headquarters to ensure and facilitate student participation in the SeniorNet online community.
According to the SeniorNet website, in 1999 SeniorNet had a 2 million dollar revenue, and generated a 600,000-dollar profit. For the fiscal years of 2003 and 2004, however, the revenue had dropped to 1.8 and 1.4 million dollars, respectively. Although the expenses had also dropped (1.9 million dollars in 2003 and 1.6 million dollars in 2004), SeniorNet has been running on a loss in recent years.

Francine Lester, the Chief Financial Officer of SeniorNet, argues that there are two main reasons for the dropping revenues: first, the nationwide economic recession; second, the learning centers have already exhausted the group of potential students who could be easily reached and the centers currently do not have strong marketing programs to attract more students from their local communities:

Our revenues have definitely been dropping in the last couple of years. Mostly due to the weak economy. We had a lot of sponsorships. And then the .com started to dry out, so is the sponsorship revenue. So, we've been definitely dropping in the cooperate sponsorships or just sponsorships in general. And membership revenue has been, sort of a down slide, a lot of them due to the fact that some of our older learning centers had been in operation for a long time, and, there's a certain amount of people that could be easily reached, you know, right there, in front of you. It's very easy to get them come into the classroom. But once, after we sort of exhausted that group of easily reached people, the marketing aspects need to be real deeper in order to recruit more students. A lot of times the centers are run by volunteers, and there's not always a strong marketing program put together at each center to market themselves to the community to generate more students. [Francine Lester]

Francine Lester might be right about the influence of the national economy on SeniorNet. However, she may have also underestimated the extent to which the separation of the online and offline parts has affected the popularity of SeniorNet. For instance, if the learning centers could be more focused on introducing the rich resources and opportunities that are available in the SeniorNet online community to the students and the local communities, wouldn't that help them attract more students and therefore generate more revenue?

The OldKids case

The history
First launched in early 2000 in Shanghai, China, OldKids was originally a private, for-profit company. Three young Chinese men – all in their mid- to late-20s – started the business with their own savings and money that they borrowed from relatives and friends. Seeing the big gap between the potential of older adults’ consumption abilities and the services and products available to older adults while at the same time being motivated by the .com fever, they originally decided to build a senior-oriented website that could sell commercial products to older Chinese. This website was designed to be an Amazon-like B2C (business-to-consumer) website, but specifically targeted at the older population in China. After several months, however, the founders of OldKids quickly discovered that the website was not going to be profitable any time soon – the main reason was that there were not enough older Chinese Internet users at that time. As one of the founders – Mr. Wu Hanzhang, the chairman of OldKids – admits,

When we first launched the OldKids website, we just couldn’t get enough visits. We tried everything ... but we soon realized that we had to face the fact that, if there were only a few older adults in China surfing the Internet, even fewer of them will visit our website, not to mention purchasing products from this website. [Wu Hanzhang]

The only logical move was then to educate more older adults about the technology so that there will be more older Internet users (to visit the OldKids website). By mid-2000, OldKids had shifted its main focus from online to offline by providing face-to-face computer training to older Chinese. Because of this from-online-to-offline shift, OldKids now primarily targets local older adults in Shanghai, instead of the older population nationwide or even worldwide (which could be easily reached in the virtual world but not in the physical world).

The offline computer training generates some revenue for the OldKids Company. However, the revenue generated from training individual

12. The three founders of OldKids have taken the positions of the chairman, the president, and the vice president since the very beginning.
older adults is still far from enough to keep the company in good shape. The main reason is that, according to Wu Hanzhang, "it is very difficult to take money from older Chinese's pockets." OldKids computer classes typically charge 120-240 RMB (about 15-30 US dollars) per person, which, to the founders of OldKids, are "very reasonable prices" for such training. However, older Shanghainese do not seem to agree, either because they cannot afford to spend that much on computers and the Internet or because they do not think it is worth it.

Fortunately, the new mission of helping more older Chinese get online has opened the door to a new, important revenue source for the company: i.e., the Shanghai municipal government. OldKids now actively promotes itself as "a private, for-profit company that is doing the government's job" – i.e., doing community service work for older citizens. This new position makes it much easier for OldKids to get support from the government. The local government, indeed, has become the major revenue source for OldKids. For instance, in 2003 the Shanghai government organized two major campaigns – the "One Million families online" campaign and the "Internet Surfing Project for Seniors" – to promote the adoption of the Internet in Shanghai. OldKids, because of its new business orientation, was selected as one of the main contractors to provide training services to older Shanghainese during both campaigns. Doing such business with the Shanghai municipal government generated about 2/3 of the annual revenue for the OldKids Company. Understandably, the founders of OldKids now look to the Shanghai government for revenue generation.

Recently, OldKids has also started trying to get some revenue from doing business with health care products manufacturers. It does so by organizing its members, whom are often the targeted users of those health care products, to (physically) come to meetings where salespersons of the manufacturers introduce and promote their products. OldKids members are not obligated in any ways to buy any products from those manufacturers; however, it often turns out that some members, after meeting with the salespersons and trying out the free samples, sooner or later will be interested in actually purchasing the products. OldKids also advertises some manufacturers' health care products on its website. Compared with the revenue generated from helping manufacturers to promote their products offline, however, the revenue generated from online advertisement is trivial.

The OldKids online community
Although the main focus of the OldKids organization has shifted to offline computer training, the OldKids website still functions. However, its main goal is no longer to generate profit, but to provide a free cyberspace where older Chinese can interact – i.e., a senior-oriented online community. The OldKids managers hope that by providing such a cyberspace, they can build and maintain a large user database, which can be used to improve the reputation and performance of the for-profit part of OldKids (e.g., to prove to the government that OldKids provides community service work to many older adults, to convince potential business partners that OldKids has convenient and effective access or channels to the older Chinese population, and to attract more individual older adults to take the computer classes).

The OldKids online community, therefore, plays an important role in the development of the offline parts of the OldKids organization. Considering the short history of OldKids and especially the low Internet use rate among older Chinese, the OldKids online community is quite successful in terms of providing older Chinese – especially students and former students of OldKids computer classes who live in the Shanghai area – an online social setting in which they can interact with peers. It does so by providing such interactive services as online forums, text chat, and voice chat. Compared with the SeniorNet online forums, the OldKids online discussions cover many fewer topics, and have fewer members to participate. Unlike SeniorNet, however, the OldKids online community provides voice chat service. Voice chat is very popular among OldKids members because it does not require typing and therefore bypasses one of the main barriers of older Chinese's use of computers: i.e., inputting Chi-

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13. This does not mean that OldKids will sell its user database to other companies, according to the president of OldKids, Zhang Zhian.
14. SeniorNet does not provide voice chat mainly because its software does not support this function, according to Marcie Schwarz.
nese characters. Furthermore, OldKids members have discovered that the voice chat room is a great place to display their musical talent: i.e., singing in the voice chat room. In fact, singing instead of talking has become the most common activity in the OldKids voice chat room. Although not everyone likes music or has that talent, for those who do the voice chat room has become the most frequently visited part of the OldKids website. Because of these advantages, the voice chat room has helped to build a strong tie among OldKids members.

One member of the OldKids online community, who insists that the friends he met online or “net-friends” (Wang You) are “just like brothers and sisters,” tells this story:

15. Currently, the most technically mature way to input Chinese characters into the computer is typing on the universally designed computer keyboard, which requires using special software to translate Chinese characters into the 26 English letters. There are currently two types of software systems available, each has its strengths and weaknesses: one is based on the strokes of Chinese characters (e.g., the Wubi input system), and the other one is based on the pronunciations of Chinese characters (e.g., the Pinyin input system). Stroke-based input systems allow users to input Chinese characters fast, but they are usually very difficult to learn. Therefore, the main users of stroke-based input systems are professional typists or others who really need to write a lot on the computer. On the other hand, pronunciation-based input systems are less efficient but relatively easier to learn. This type of input systems has been adopted by the majority of Chinese Internet users. This is because the main requirement of pronunciation-based input systems is that users must be familiar with Pinyin, and most Chinese Internet users (who are younger people) were taught Pinyin in schools. However, for older Chinese who had never had the chance to learn Pinyin in schools, it is much more difficult to use pronunciation-based input systems because they have to learn Pinyin first. Because of the limitations of these input systems, older Chinese Internet users are eager to find alternative input systems. There are two types of alternative input systems currently available: handwriting recognition systems and voice recognition systems. These alternative input systems can overcome the shortcomings of typing-based ways of inputting Chinese characters. Unfortunately, neither technology is currently as mature and reliable as typing-based technology. Furthermore, two more factors have made these alternative systems even less efficient for the group of older Chinese that I study: first, older Chinese learned traditional Chinese characters in schools, but most handwriting recognition systems only recognize simplified Chinese characters, and second, most older Shanghainese are not fluent in Mandarin – they speak Shanghai dialect, which is significantly different from Mandarin, while all voice recognition systems are designed to only recognize the pronunciations of Mandarin.

One net-friend, who lives in Wuhan, has a son working in Beijing. One time the son of this net-friend got really sick and had to be hospitalized. Because he was there alone, his mother was really worried that nobody would take care of him. So she asked a net-friend who lived in Beijing to take care of her son for her. The Beijing net-friend was very nice; she took care of the son just like taking care of her own child. When the son recovered, the Beijing net-friend took him to her home and logged into the OldKids online chat room so that the son could talk to his mother and tell her that he recovered. It was so touching that we all ... (sniffling and unable to speak) ... That was really something. Even now when I think about it I can still feel it. Net-friends are so great! [YXG (login name), male, age 62]

This story clearly illustrates how the OldKids online chat room has facilitated older Chinese’s social interaction and friendship formation.

Similar to the SeniorNet case, members of the OldKids online community also have different levels of offline gatherings – national, regional, and local gatherings – where they could meet and interact with their net-friends in the physical world. The formats of those offline gatherings are very similar to those of SeniorNet member-organized gatherings: i.e., for national gatherings, members often spend a couple of days at some popular tourist attractions; for regional and local gatherings, they usually spend a full or half day at a local tourist site or restaurant. The main purpose of those offline gatherings is also to socialize and to have fun.

Different from SeniorNet, however, the once-per-year OldKids national gatherings are organized by the OldKids organization. Although members are responsible for their own costs, they do not have to worry about the logistics because the organization takes care of it. In addition to the annual national gatherings, the OldKids company also organizes local gathering events or marketing campaigns about 8-10 times per year, which provides another type of opportunity for members – primarily those who live in the Shanghai area – to meet and interact offline. Members also organize various gatherings on their own. In particular, when an OldKids member visits another city, members in that city will normally self-organize a welcome party for the visitor. Such a party normally takes place at a local restaurant, where everyone but the guest shares the cost,

16. The first several OldKids national gatherings took place in Shanghai, while the most recent one (in 2004) was in Beijing.
or, not unusually, one local member's home, where the host provides tea, fruits, and snacks for the rest of the group.

Also different from the SeniorNet case, members of the OldKids online community who live in the Shanghai area meet with their peers in the physical world regularly and frequently, as will be discussed in the next section.

The OldKids computer salons
According to the vice president of OldKids, Wang Yong, OldKids now has over 8000 registered members throughout the nation, and about 2/3 of them are from the Shanghai metropolitan area. The geographic proximity ensures and greatly facilitates OldKids members' face-to-face or offline interaction. In fact, the majority of OldKids users interact with other Shanghai users as much offline as online, if not more. Their offline interactions typically occur on a weekly basis, and primarily take place in various OldKids computer classes and semi self-organized OldKids computer salons (Diannao Shalong) that follow the classes. Each OldKids computer class typically lasts four weeks. During the four-week period, students meet once per week to learn from the instructor, who is usually also an older person (either an employee of the OldKids company or other OldKids computer users who are more advanced in the area). OldKids computer classes typically take place at an Internet cafe located in downtown Shanghai, where OldKids has rented two well-equipped computer rooms for members to use from Monday to Saturday mornings.

In addition to the once per week class meetings, the OldKids organization also strongly encourages students from the same class to meet on their own one more time each week so that they can get additional practice and, more importantly, learn from each other. After the four-week training sessions are over, students are encouraged to continue meeting with and learning from their peers once per week. And the students often do. Indeed, it has now become a tradition that students of every OldKids computer class voluntarily organize and participate in computer salons. Therefore, the OldKids computer classes provide opportunities for older adults who have shared interests but did not know each other before to get together and start interacting, while the computer salons that may last for years ensures the continuity of this interaction.

The structure of OldKids computer salons can be best described as "semi self-organized" because, although the OldKids organization encourages the formation and continuity of the computer salons and acknowledges the groups as an important component of the OldKids community, the organization does not have any real power over or restrictions on the members. Members have a great deal of flexibility in the sense that they are not required to pay membership fees or make any commitments to the OldKids organization, that they can decide among themselves the time, location, activities, and topics of each gathering, and that every member can freely choose to join or leave the group at any time.

An important consequence resulting from this "semi self-organized" nature is that OldKids computer salons often serve two purposes: educational and social. In other words, the OldKids salon is a great place for members to learn computers and also to socialize with their age peers. As one salon member states:

We come here (the salon) for two reasons: to learn, and to have fun. We like to learn new computer applications like Photoshop and Flash together. Some salon members learn faster than the rest of us, and they will help us learn. They are really nice people. We also enjoy chatting. Many of us don't really have anyone at home with whom we can talk. So it's really nice that we can talk with others here. We are having fun. [Atian (login name), female, age 79]

17. OldKids members name their groups "computer salons" instead of "computer clubs" or "computer interest groups" - even though the nature of their groups is indeed closer to the latter two - only because they think "salon" is a fancier word than the other two.

18. Because the targeted customers of the Internet cafe - younger people - usually go to the Internet cafe late in the day, the Internet cafe does not get too much business in the mornings. Therefore, managers of the Internet cafe are willing to give OldKids members good prices - 2 RMB (approximately $0.25 USD) instead of the regular price of 6 RMB per hour - to use their rooms and equipment in the mornings (often between 9:00 am-11:00 am).

19. If the students choose to meet at the same Internet cafe, they can get the same discount from the Internet cafe.
My observations at several OldKids computer salons reinforce this statement. According to my observations, the weekly salon gatherings usually last two hours, and at least half of the time members just chat, laugh, and have fun: salon gatherings often start with members greeting one another, updating news about family members, sharing interesting stories that they heard recently, etc. This normally takes 15-30 minutes. Then someone starts talking about some new skills about a computer application that s/he has just learned while practicing at home, and shows to other members, whom will follow and practice the new skills on their computers. This peer learning process typically lasts, depending on the number and difficulty of the new skills members can share, 40-60 minutes. After that, some members will start playing online computer games, while others will start talking about planning trips or other activities for the next gathering. Overall, the format of the salon gatherings is very informal, and members can talk about anything they want - which includes but is by no means limited to computer or OldKids-related topics.

The frequent offline interactions among OldKids members have greatly facilitated their learning and use of computers and the Internet. In sharp contrast to negative stereotypes that are often associated with older people's adoption of new technologies, OldKids members are enthusiastically learning and using more advanced computer applications such as Flash, PhotoShop, and FrontPage, instead of basic applications like e-mail (most of them own a scanner, digital camera and/or digital video camera, and a printer, in addition to a computer with high speed Internet access). For instance, one member says, with great enthusiasm:

I love to create computer animations with Flash. In average, everyday I spend 3-4 hours learning Flash and making animations with it. It is my favorite thing. I've found it very interesting. I make greeting cards with Flash. I send birthday cards to people. I look at the card, and feel that this is my own work, so I am very happy. Those who got my cards are very happy too, because they know that I made them myself. [Silver fish (login name), female, age 60, emphasis original]

A quick comparison between the types and frequencies of advanced computer classes offered in the SeniorNet learning centers and OldKids suggests that OldKids members tend to take more advanced computer classes than their SeniorNet peers. This is at least partly due to the fact that OldKids members can learn from peers in a face-to-face learning environment (mainly the OldKids computer salons), which has made it much easier and more efficient to learn those more complicated applications. As one member points out:

It is best to learn from those peers who have already understood the application. Why? Because they have the experience. They can teach you based on their own learning experience, which is even better than what the instructor could do. They know exactly where you might make a mistake, what is the most difficult part, and what should be done to overcome the problems. Also, our computer skills and knowledge are pretty much at the same level, which makes it easier for us to understand each other. Learning from peers who are one or half step ahead of you is a very pleasant process. [YXG (login name), male, age 62]

The frequent offline interactions among OldKids members have also affected members' online interactions. First, when participating in the OldKids online community (e.g., in the OldKids online chat room and discussion groups), members are more likely to interact with other members whom they have already met in the physical world, especially other members of the same computer salon with whom they regularly meet offline. For instance, one OldKids salon leader, who always actively interacts with other members of her salon both online and offline, says that she does not chat online with others that she hasn't met in the physical world. When asked why so, she explains:

I'm not very interested. Perhaps it's because they (others in the chat room) don't know me. Each time when I went into a chat room, I just couldn't figure out what they were talking about. Their conversations never made any sense to me. So I always log out very quickly. [hhdd (login name), female, age 57]

Second, the breadth and depth of older Chinese Internet users' online conversations are also affected by their offline interactions. In general, OldKids members tend to talk about more personal, sensitive issues with those whom they have already met offline, while only talking about basic, general issues with those whom they have not met offline. As one member states:
I often feel that I have a closer relationship with those whom I’ve met in real life, as compared to those whom I’ve met only online. With those whom we’ve met in real life, we can talk more about our families, health conditions, etc.; with those whom we’ve never met (in real life), however, we only talk about things at a very general level. [Silver fish (login name), female, age 60]

These older Chinese Internet users’ experiences suggest that offline interactions facilitate online interactions, while the lack of the former inhibits the latter.

The non-profit/for-profit dilemma and the problems associated with it:

As a private, for-profit company that is doing public, community service work, OldKids inevitably faces an awkward situation: on the one hand, as a for-profit company, it is natural and vital for OldKids to make a profit; on the other hand, doing community service work requires OldKids to not make a profit (i.e., to act like a nonprofit organization). The blurry position that OldKids managers have taken — i.e., a for-profit company that is doing non-profit, community service work — has greatly helped OldKids get contracts from the municipal government (and therefore generate revenue necessary for the organization to survive). However, this position has also caused serious problems: on the one hand, it has greatly confused some individual users and potential users. The following comments from a member of an OldKids computer salon clearly illustrate this confusion:

I think OldKids is over-commercialized — if you look at OldKids closely, you’ll see that it is really over-commercialized. They are using this to make money. They just want to make money. They charge you for everything. Nothing is free. And the OldKids website is full of commercial advertising. So I’m not so interested in OldKids. I just wish there could be some organization providing senior-oriented services and websites that were not so heavily commercialized. [Zhou, male, 78]

Greatly disappointed by the “over-commercialized” OldKids online and offline services, Mr. Zhou now participates in one of the self-organized OldKids computer salons once per week, which is free, but has never paid (and is not planning to pay) to take computer classes from OldKids, nor has he participated (and is not planning to participate) in the OldKids online community. Clearly, users (or potential users) like Mr. Zhou are very confused by the current position of OldKids. They cannot help but wonder: if OldKids is really doing community service work for older citizens, as its founders always advocate, then how can it be so heavily commercialized and profit-driven?

On the other hand, the OldKids company suffers financially because, as a for-profit organization, it has to pay taxes, even though a large part of its business is doing non-profit community service. Furthermore, because OldKids is officially registered as a for-profit company, it is more difficult for the organization to receive financial support from public and private sources (e.g., governmental funding and cooperation donation). To solve this non-profit/for-profit dilemma, the managers of OldKids are now considering building a three-component unity that includes, first, a nonprofit organization, which provides community service work to the older population in Shanghai and relies on public and private funding; second, a for-profit company, which provides commercial services — computer training, website design, etc. — to individual older adults and the municipal government, and also develops business partnerships with other corporations such as those health care products manufacturers; and finally, the OldKids website, which provides a free cyberspace for older Chinese to interact. Although the website is no longer expected to generate profit for the company, it can effectively build and maintain a large user database by facilitating older adults’ interaction in the online community. The user database, in turn, can be used to improve the reputations and performances of the nonprofit and for-profit parts of OldKids.

20. Although this plan sounds quite promising, it is unclear when (or if) it will be actually carried out: I first learned of this plan to start a private, nonprofit organization in May 2004, when I interviewed the president of OldKids, Zhang Zhian, in Shanghai. At that time he talked about this plan with great enthusiasm and it sounded like the nonprofit organization would soon be operating. Five months later, however, when I interviewed Zhang again in Shanghai and asked about the latest developments of the nonprofit organization plan, Zhang said that starting a nonprofit organization was still a “strategic idea” and that OldKids had been working on this idea, but was still not sure when it would become operational. Compared with the first interview, he seemed to be less enthusiastic about the plan and also reluctant to explain in detail what or who had slowed down the plan to start this nonprofit organization.
SeniorNet vs. OldKids: Similarities and differences

Both SeniorNet and OldKids were originally designed to focus on the online world, either to facilitate older adults’ online interactions (SeniorNet) or to attract older adults to do online purchases (OldKids). Very quickly (both within several months of the initial launch), however, both organizations had to change the focus from online to offline, and the reason was the same: there were not enough older Americans or Chinese using the Internet at the time (in 1986 and 2000, respectively). Realizing the shortage of older Internet users nationwide, SeniorNet and OldKids both started focusing on face-to-face computer education and training, which has become an important revenue source for both organizations (the difference is that SeniorNet gets the revenue from individual students, while OldKids gets the revenue primarily from the municipal government). Not surprisingly, computer training has now become the primary goal of the two organizations. In both cases the original online focus has gradually and unnoticeably receded into the background.

Although both SeniorNet and OldKids have changed the primary focus to offline computer education and training, the strategies that they use are different. SeniorNet has chosen to establish learning centers in different areas of the nation (and, in recent years, other nations as well), while OldKids has so far only focused on the city of Shanghai, where its headquarters is located. This difference is to a large extent due to the fact that SeniorNet had sufficient resources (originally from the Markle Foundation) to operate at the national and even international level, while OldKids did not – and still does not – have the necessary resources to reach out to other Chinese cities. As a result of these different strategies, SeniorNet members are spread out all over the United States (as well as a couple of other countries), while the majority of OldKids members live in the Shanghai area.

In fact, an important feature of the OldKids community is that, although the OldKids website is in theory accessible globally, in practice the main activities of OldKids take place locally (in the Shanghai area where the company is located). There are several reasons for OldKids’ localized activities: first, OldKids provides face-to-face computer training classes, which often take place at the rented rooms of an Internet café in downtown Shanghai; second, when contracted by the Shanghai govern-
pate serve not only educational but also social functions. Members have found that learning from peers is a more efficient way to learn computer technology, and that the salon is also a great place to socialize with peers.

Conclusion

During the last two or three decades, there have been intense discussions and debates regarding the relationship between the ICT’s and society. Early research (during the 1980s and early 1990s) tended to view the online or “virtual” world as detached from and independent of the offline or “real” world. The disembodied interaction that characterizes the virtual world, according to this view, ensures that individuals can overcome embodied constraints such as gender, race, age, and nationality, and to escape from the social relations and structures of the physical world (for an overview of this literature and critiques, see Wilson & Peterson, 2002). Although there are disagreements about the social implication of this “two worlds” view – for “boosters,” the Internet has created a better place for human beings to live in, while for “debunkers” the virtual world is just a poor imitation of the real world, both sides nevertheless agree that the online and offline worlds are separate and different (Holloway & Valentine, 2003).

Recently, the “two worlds” view has been increasingly subject to critique. Researchers point out that “research on cybercultures has commonly focused on users’ on-line activities, ignoring the way that these activities remain embedded within the context of the off-line spaces, and the social relations of everyday life.” (Holloway & Valentine, 2003: p. 10-11) More and more evidence has shown that, rather than being independent of the offline world, online interactions are indeed deeply embedded in and shaped by offline situations and social relations (Jones, 1999; Wilson & Peterson, 2002).

This study, by comparing and contrasting the differences and similarities between the patterns and features of SeniorNet and OldKids members’ online and offline interactions, illustrates how existing social relations and situations influence older adults’ experiences with new technology. Specifically, this study shows that the frequency of older Internet users’ offline interactions has greatly shaped, first, older adults’ learning style and efficiency. In the OldKids case, the regular and frequent offline interactions among members have facilitated older Chinese’s peer learning in face-to-face environments. Consequently, many older Shanghaihinese are able to learn and use complex computer and Internet applications. While in the SeniorNet case, members usually do not have the opportunity to interact with and learn from their peers in the physical world. As a result, the majority of SeniorNet members have not learned or used more advanced applications. Second, the frequency of offline interactions has also influenced the formation of Internet communities. In general, members who have frequent offline interactions with peers (OldKids) have a stronger sense of community than those who do not (SeniorNet). Third, the patterns and topics of older adults’ online interaction also appear to be affected by the frequency of their offline interactions: the more often older adults interact with their peers offline, the more likely they are willing to interact with (the same) peers online and to talk about deeper, more personal issues.

Furthermore, this study suggests that, although in theory the Internet has the capacity to reach every corner of the world, in practice its influence is largely limited by the different amount of financial support that is available to organizations in different nations. The SeniorNet organization has received generous donations and support from private foundations and businesses since the very beginning, which has made it possible for the organization to make better use of the power of the Internet to reach out to older adults living in different areas of the nation and even other nations. While in the case of OldKids, the organization has never been able to get much support from the outside. Running on a very low budget, the OldKids organization has to limit its primary focus on the Shanghai area, in which case the strength of the technology has not been fully used to benefit older Chinese living in other areas of the country.

Finally, this study also demonstrates how the Internet can change existing situations and social relations by empowering individuals. This is true in both cases but especially clear in the SeniorNet case, where individual members have been able to organize themselves and to take a different trajectory than the organization’s current one. To say it slightly differently, although the organization had initiated older adults’ communication and interaction by introducing to them the new technology, once the initial relationship has been established among the individual mem-
numbers it has the momentum to keep going on its own, even if the direction of the organization is now different. This momentum represents older adults' needs and desire to connect and communicate with others, but it also shows the power of the new technology: if it was not because of computers and the Internet, it would have been very difficult for members of the SeniorNet online community to stay in touch and to organize themselves to do things that they truly desire. In this sense, the online world is influenced by but also influences the offline world.

Acknowledgement

This research was supported by the National Science Foundation (SES-0431373). I would like to thank Ken Fleischmann, Kim Fortun, Birgit Jaeger and two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments on earlier versions of this manuscript.

Evaluation of Senior Friendly Product Development: The Impact of Senior Participation

By Stefanie Becker

Introduction

The increased importance of technology and technological products for everyday life of an aging society has been addressed for more than three decades. Lesnoff-Caravaglia (1988) in this context emphasized the simultaneous progression of an aging population and technological advancements throughout the industrial countries with its opportunities for autonomous living but also with its constraints and challenges for older people.

The opportunities afforded by modern technology and technological products to the elderly have traditionally been discussed in the field of assistive technology and rehabilitation, offering a wide range of possibilities for an independent life despite functional disabilities and impairments. Currently, there are over 80 million people over the age of 60 in the European Union alone and the number is continuing to increase. Also, the risk of becoming disabled is set to rise with age. Given the fact that a lot of seniors aged 60 and older are not officially registered as disabled, the number of people encountering difficulties in everyday life within their home environment is assumed to be much higher. Many of these people can be expected to be increasingly intensive users of everyday and household technology.

As the available options and features of technological products have increased in recent decades, their use has been more widely considered and even been evaluated as an inevitable part of our social life. In the early nineties a new branch of research called gerontechnology emerged,