

Perceived Attraction of Online Communities among Elderly People

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Seniors as Internet Users

- Seniors are a growing group among internet users
 - » In USA 15 % of the 50 million internet users are over the age of 50
- Interest towards senior citizens as internet users has grown lately



Online Communities

- Open new possibilities for interaction to elderly people who often feel lonely and wish to have more social contacts
- Lack geographical and time-related limitations
- Require both skills to use technological equipment and internet access at home or in such public places as libraries and net cafes to be able to visit online communities
 - » In the latter case there are time limitations due to the opening hours of the service providers



Building Online Communities for Seniors

- Device manufacturers and software developers have to take into account elderly people's special characteristics and needs
 - Companies also need information about the special requirements concerning the architecture and the content of the web sites
- > Important to study elderly people's perceptions of the factors that attract them to online communities



Purpose of the Paper

- The purpose of the paper is to scrutinize elderly people's perceptions of the factors that
 - » encourage them to join online communities
 - » prevent them from joining the communities
- The theoretical background of the study reported in the paper lies on the earlier studies of attraction and non-attraction of company online communities

History and Development of Online Communities

- Social companionship is a key factor of human life
- Online community sites are said to be one of the fastest growing category of web sites
 - » In 2001 the Pew Internet & American Life Project reported that 90 million American have participated in an online group

History and Development of Online Communities

- From the beginning of 1990s services have developed rapidly
 - » advanced search facilities
 - » creating own profiles with personal data and pictures
 - » seeing other's profiles
 - » having private conversations and using avatars, synchronous services as chat systems, instant messaging and texting systems

History and Development of Online Communities

- Rapid technological development of software has increased the demands set to the users' device technology
 - » fast processors, effective display controllers, large memories and high-bandwidth Internet connections

Concept of Attraction

- Explains why relationships are initiated and developed
 - » Some degree of attraction is a necessary precondition for the commencement of interaction, while ongoing attraction determines whether parties are motivated to maintain a relationship or not (Kelley and Thibaut)
- Interpersonal phenomenon
- Studied in many disciplines: mainly in social psychology and in marketing
- Important element in group formation, because attraction power increases cohesion in groups and also defines their limits

Attraction in Online Communities

- Online environment allows the company's websites to represent the company as a personalised entity
 - » Members may communicate with the maintainer using the sites as a media or they may interact with the websites
 - » Online context also allows the members to communicate with each other, which enables us to study attraction in a consumer-to-consumer context
- Attraction is defined in this study as *an online community's ability to draw members*
- In our study attraction is approached from the online community visitor's point of view
 - » *perceived attraction of online communities*

Model of Attraction of Online Communities

(Source: Antikainen forthcoming)

RELATIONSHIP	TYPE OF ATTRACTION	ATTRACTION FACTOR
Member-to-member	<i>Self-related / social related</i>	Knowledge exchange with members
	<i>Social related</i>	Discussions
	<i>Social related</i>	Commercial activities
	<i>Social related</i>	Dating
	<i>Social related</i>	Diversity of people
	<i>Social related</i>	Friendships
	<i>Social related</i>	Playing
	<i>Social related</i>	Roles
Member-to-maintainer	<i>Self-related / social related</i>	Knowledge exchange with maintainer
	<i>Self-related</i>	Maintainers' content
Member-to-service	<i>Self-related</i>	Members' content
	<i>Self-related</i>	Awareness
	<i>Self-related</i>	Service variety
	<i>Self-related</i>	Usability
Member-to-brand	<i>Self-related</i>	Reputation

Methodology of the Study

- The empirical study was focused on the respondents older than 55 years
 - » the age limit in our study is lower than usually used in studies concerning ageing
- Data was collected in both Finnish and international online communities

Collecting Data

- 1 st phase: Asking questions in discussion forums
 - » ET-lehti (www.goldenage.fi/ET-lehti/)
 - » Suomi24 ([www. Suomi24.fi](http://www.Suomi24.fi))
 - » Martat (www.martat.fi)



More data needed

- 2 nd phase: Linking a web questionnaire into discussion forums
 - » Näkökulma (www.nakokulma.net),
 - » Nicehouse (nicehouse.fi),
 - » SeniorNet (www.seniornet.org),
 - » GreyPath (www.greypath.com)
 - » Also Suomi24 and Martat

Web Questionnaire

1. What draws you in online communities? What kinds of activities do you do there?
2. Have you ended visiting some online communities, if yes why?
3. Have you confronted problems with using the sites or services in online communities? If yes, what kinds of? Have you ended visiting because of those problems?
4. Age
5. Gender

Empirical Findings: Attraction Factors

- *Asking for and giving advices*
- *Discussing* with each other
 - » one of the main reasons to visit online communities
 - » lack of discussion seemed to be the main reason to end visiting online community also difficulties to understand the language and metaphors used by younger members, disturbing behaviors as well as inappropriate discussions were mentioned as reasons to stop visiting
- *Binding new relationships* with others
 - » as well as meeting people online were important factors
- Meeting *the diversity of people*

Empirical findings: Attraction Factors

- *Similarity* and sense of community
- *Seeking for dating partner*
- *Anonymity*
- *Information seeking for various reasons from the communities' websites*
- *Awareness*
- *Easiness*
 - » most of the respondents said that they had not confronted any problems.
 - » *the impact of technology-related issues* did not seem to be important attraction or non-attraction factor among elderly people

Discussion & Further Research

- Results seem to verify the existence of the attraction factors earlier identified
 - » Yet, commercial activities, playing, and service variety were not mentioned by the respondents
- Low amount of comments concerning technology related, computer usage and online community usability issues
 - » The reason for that can be that people slowly become more skilled in using the information technology?
- Seniors seem to prefer visiting online communities where other members belong in the same age group.
 - » On the other hand, some of the seniors stressed that meeting people from other age groups and backgrounds
- All in all social intercommunication received more weight in this study than in earlier studies

Discussion & Further Research

- Methodologically, linking a questionnaire to the discussion forums produced better quality answers than posing questions directly in forums
 - Based on the study, we suggest that especially non-profit and public organizations could enhance the well-being of elderly people by creating and maintaining online communities
- > Next step is to quantitatively study attraction and non-attraction of online communities among elderly people to generalize the results

Thank you!

