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# Conducting Empirical Research with Older People

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## Abstract

We are investigating the role of online communities on the quality of life and wellbeing of people aged 65 years and over. We have conducted workshops and one-to-one semi-structured interviews, and have had free-flowing informal exchanges with our participants who have shared stories and incidents with us. In this paper, we discuss the challenges and opportunities of conducting empirical research with older people.

## Author Keywords

ageing; conducting research with older people; digital by default; elderly; older people; online communities; senior citizens; service users; social connectedness; social interactions; social networking

## ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.3. Group and organization interfaces;  
Asynchronous interaction, collaborative computing,  
Synchronous interaction.

## Introduction

In a year-long [project](#) (August 2012 to July 2013) in collaboration with Age UK Milton Keynes, UK, a local independent charity that works with and for older people, we are investigating the role of online social interactions in supporting people aged 65 or over to avoid or overcome social isolation, to maintain and

develop social connectedness, and to build supportive relationships and companionship. These online social interactions could be via email or Skype or participating in online communities such as on Flickr, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

The **specific aims** of our project are to investigate: a) motivations that people aged 65 and over have for participating in online social interactions; b) advantages that they experience in online social interactions; c) the obstacles that they encounter in engaging online; d) whether there are particular risks for older people; and e) whether there are disadvantages for older people being online such as losing touch with their offline friends and interests, or spending too much time online could be bad for health.

Through our findings related to motivations and advantages, we hope to raise awareness among policy makers about the significance of widening access to the internet among older people and that going online must be made relevant and manageable within, and complementary to, the existing patterns of behaviour of older people. From our investigations on risks, obstacles and disadvantages, we are developing a set of resources such as checklists for addressing privacy and security concerns of older people in online interactions; or how they may be able to balance their offline activities and interests with their online activities; and how different equipment configurations and devices such as iPads and tablets may be able to address the needs of older people. The target audience of these resources will be older people, their families and carers, care providers, website designers, IT equipment suppliers and trainers in local communities and voluntary organisations.

In this paper, we report our experiences and reflections of conducting empirical research with older people, which, we hope, would be useful for colleagues who may be considering conducting research involving older people in the design of products, services and online environments for older people.

### **The research context**

The world population is rapidly ageing. By 2030 over a billion people worldwide – 1 in every 8 of the earth's inhabitants and almost double the current number - are forecast to be over 65. In the UK, 10.3 million people are aged 65 or over and this number is projected to increase to over 16 million in the next 20 years [14]. As and when increasing frailty or other life changes start to impact on people's quality of life, whether living at home or in sheltered housing or in a care home, communication tools that help to overcome potential isolation and loneliness can be of value.

#### *Older people and vulnerability*

Not all older people are vulnerable or socially isolated or lonely and in need of help: many older people, in fact, are active and engaged in volunteering or looking after younger relatives or even studying for degrees or short courses. However, research has shown that the typical profile of over 65s who use the internet differs from that of over 65s who do not use it. Those who do not use it are older, poorer than and more than twice as likely to live alone and to have health problems as those who do [10]. Therefore, the more vulnerable and socially excluded over 65s in our society are likely to be those who are also digitally excluded.

Digital inclusion can be a path to greater social inclusion. Indeed, a recent report [17] concluded:



**Figure 1.** A workshop that we carried out at Age UK in Milton Keynes, UK with six older people.

"[older] people who reported not using the internet were more likely to say that they 'often' felt isolated from others. Conversely, people who said they did use the internet were more likely to respond that they 'hardly ever or never' felt isolated from others." Further, over the last few years, the private sector has been preferential to online customers (e.g., cheaper flight tickets) but now even the public sector is delivering services and products exclusively online or making the alternatives difficult to access. Many of the essential services will be digital by default in the future. Vulnerability of older people stems from the expectations of both public services and private enterprises that all citizens are able to, and comfortable with, communicating online, and, if not, then they (older people) will be excluded from society. The older people who rely heavily on public services and health services are at even more risk of being left behind. In fact, the disadvantages of being offline are now so great that the digital divide is creating social injustice [1].

There are vulnerabilities associated with the older people being online: for example, use of internet for maintaining and/or developing new social networks. Some participants in our project have referred to their sense of vulnerability (e.g. how to exit from a online social network; how do you know people are whom they say they are) and to their need for trusted support that is accessible and timely. Vulnerability also comes from a lifetime of cognitive and social development that has not involved social media: is it possible to convert existing skills and habits into skills for online safety?

Our project does not aim to characterise older people as being vulnerable, but we believe that by

understanding the experiences of older people who use the internet as a part of their daily lives will help inform us how to better support those who have not yet embraced the internet. One of the policy recommendations of the report [17] is that older people who are online should be encouraged to talk through their experiences. Our goal in this project is to consolidate and disseminate stories and anecdotes to encourage older people to get online.

### **Conducting research with the older people**

In our on-going literature review, we have come across several resources that discuss about aspects such as, involving older people in research [3], empathy in designing with and for older people with cognitive impairments such as dementia [16], and the use of certain research methods when conducting research with older people such as the oral history method [5], narratives [20], and phenomenology [15].

In our project, we have conducted workshops with the older people. We have also developed and applied a semi-structured interview protocol for interviews with individual participants. In this paper, we discuss how our research has been influenced by the inputs/advice from older people and some of them have become advisors on our project. Also, we have had to adapt and change our elicitation methods as we have progressed with our empirical research.

### **Our empirical investigations**

In our interactions with older people, we have focused on five aspects (based on the project's aims listed above) related to online interactions of older people: motivations, advantages, obstacles, risks and disadvantages. For example, in a workshop with older

people (Figure 1), the facilitator from the research team introduced each aspect of interest for discussion, and then asked the participants to write their perceptions on Post-it® notes. These Post-it®s were displayed on flip charts (Figure 2) (sometimes grouped around a particular theme) to elicit stories of personal experiences and incidents. The workshops were recorded on audio and video.



**Figure 2.** Post-it®s related to dangers and risks of online social interactions for older people as contributed by participants in one of our workshops.

Depending on the convenience of the participants, we have also carried out semi-structured interviews and have had informal exchanges using email, Skype, phone and face-to-face. The interviews were recorded on audio. The empirical research has been conducted in accordance with the ethical considerations of our university's [Ethics committee](#). Written informed consent was sought before participation. We have applied the thematic analysis technique [7] and used the [NVivo](#) software to analyse the data. Our reflections on the research process are summarised below.

## **Reflections on the research process**

### *Recruitment*

We have recruited older participants through colleagues at work, local voluntary organisations, and in local communities where we work and live. A couple of our older participants who have expressed keen interest in our project have been recruiting on our behalf.

### *Older people as advisors on the project*

Some of our participants with a background in volunteering and social work are critically reviewing our research methods of interacting with older people. One of them said to us: "you shouldn't have set questions or have paper in front of you with questions. You should ask them [older people, participants] for stories,

incidents through some prompts and if they drift away from your research objectives, then you should bring them back - by saying - OK, tell me what happened when you did this... and so on." She added that structured questions could tire old people. She advised us further: "your prompts should be on a timeline - that is, sequence of events across a time line - taking them from the latest event to history rather than the other way around." We later on discovered that she conducts interviews about local history with the older people in her community and is an expert in interviewing older people.

Some of the participants have been discussing the policy and practice implications of our research such as how the older people should be trained to get online, how a system of technical support should be in place, etc., and how the training should be tailored to individual older people depending upon their interests. So if somebody is interested in conducting research on family history, then the training should consist of task scenarios that involve family history websites. Such individualised training can motivate them to learn as they can see a purpose of getting online.

A couple of older people whom we interviewed introduced us to a trainer in their local computer centre and encouraged us to interview trainers as a part of our research project. They felt that we (the project team) could learn about the strategies that trainers use for teaching older people to get online and that we should convert those strategies into guidelines. These guidelines could help other organisations working with older people to get them online. As a result, now the participant set for empirical investigations in our project includes family members and friends who have helped

older people to get online or provide technical support or equipment, ICT trainers, and representatives of local organisations who work with the elderly in the community (See Table 1).

Therefore, when conducting research with older people, it may be useful to identify and invite older people whose experiences are relevant to, and may enhance the development of the research process [3]. It is also important to develop trust and to show a sense of respect that you are willing to learn from them.

*The interviewer-participant relationship*

Some older participants have asked ahead of their sessions, what questions we are going to ask. We have observed that older people like to be prepared before the session: "... 'not knowing' about what is going to be asked raises their anxiety" [18]. A gerontologist colleague advised us: "an interview can seem like a black box for older people". Indeed, an expert in digital inclusion mentioned in her email to us: "There was a film made in our village about the [UK Queen's] Jubilee where they sat older people down and asked them what they remembered from [the] Coronation. ... They had clearly not been prepared for this ... they couldn't remember anything because they had nothing [on which] to specifically focus."

Older people are also anxious about the value of their contributions. A colleague's mother rang up her daughter immediately after the interview to check: "Did I do well?". It is not uncommon for interviewees to be keen to do the 'right thing' and be well evaluated [6]. Being interviewed can be anxiety provoking too for people who are not used to being interviewed. It is probably not a common experience in everyday life that

another person - for an hour or more – shows an interest in, and is keen to understand one's experiences and views on a topic [12]. Therefore, it is important that the interviewer is able to address the interpersonal dynamics within an interview. In [19], the authors, through examples, discuss how older people reminisce about their lives to others depends in part on who is listening, and on the relationship that they and their listeners establish.

One of our team members shared her experiences of *listening*: "on interviewing older people - be ready to listen - which is the same for all qualitative interviewing research but perhaps we need to be a little more patient with older people than with people in the business world or in an innovative and fast moving technological sphere. Some people will talk more, as if they are trying to collect and coordinate their thoughts. On the other hand, some, such as [...], are more reticent. I have long pauses on the tape while I waited to hear more. Perhaps it's because some people are happy with what they do and don't think it very interesting. So, introduce a topic, probe for an example, follow up, be silent".

In [4], they reported that older people would feel most comfortable with a moderator that they perceived as similar to them. In our project, colleagues who have run the workshops are in late 50s and early 60s and have extensive experience of volunteering in the local community. They were very effective in putting the participants at ease. They spoke slowly and clearly and allowed the participants time to think about the question and to respond. We noticed that some of the participants in our workshops felt so comfortable with the facilitators that they went up to them during coffee

Participant	Method
Family members	Workshops, interviews, and stories using Skype, email, phone, face-to-face
Inter-mediaries, trainers, etc.	Workshops, interviews
Older people	Workshops, group interviews, one-to-one interviews using Skype, email, face-to-face

**Table 1.** Participants and research methods in empirical investigations.

and lunch breaks to share their personal experiences of online social interactions and which they didn't want to share in a group setting.

#### *Research methods*

In our interviews with older people, we have noted they prefer conversations where they can relate incidents and stories rather than follow a semi-structured interview protocol. We have noted that sometimes the entire interview has been around a specific theme that has influenced them. For example, in one of our interviews, the participant discussed only about how older people should be trained to learn computers and the internet. This participant oversees the local computer centre and regularly appoints trainers to help the older people to get online. When we shared our experiences with a colleague who is an expert in qualitative research methodology, he said the following: "about 90% of studies are carried out on university students, who know how the 'good participant' is supposed to behave, and who fit into that role neatly. Older people are less likely to be familiar with that role, so they can behave in ways like the ones that you describe".

A member of our research team with extensive experience of working with older people in the community has suggested against using a structured or semi-structured interview protocol: "[conducting an] informal interview with an underlying formal structure has the edge because the language is tailored to the individual". We have, therefore, adopted a relatively flexible interviewing strategy, adapting our approach according to what seemed important to the participants.

We plan to employ an interview guide or wheel to encourage conversation whilst maintaining a focus on the research aims at the same time. In [11] and in [18], the researchers discuss how a wheel can enable older participants to have some control over the conversation without the anxiety of going 'off topic'. The wheel (Figure 3) comprises of segments corresponding to our areas of interest (motivations, advantages, and so on) with some prompts. With our next set of participants, we plan to evaluate the effectiveness of the wheel versus a semi-structured interview protocol or as complementary to the protocol.



**Figure 3.** Wheel with areas of interest and prompts to serve as an interview guide

### **The next steps**

We are planning to combine phenomenological analysis with thematic analysis of the qualitative data that we are collecting through interviews and workshops in our project. Phenomenology, as a research method, looks at people's psychological experience, attitudes and feelings towards a phenomenon. Phenomenological research centres on interpreting and describing first-hand accounts of people's narratives, to draw out a description of their unique everyday experience, the meanings they attach to it, and the underlying essential features of that phenomenon [8].

Phenomenological research helps to draw out a detailed description of an individual subjective experience of using technology [13]. In our case, a phenomenon could be engagement of older people with complex interfaces and technology during online social interactions. Phenomenological analysis could, therefore, highlight the significance of the differences among users in the way they engage with technology, rather than placing emphasis on a common recurring theme or category, as is the case of other methods, such as thematic analysis [7]. The literature offers a range of examples of phenomenological research on people's use of computer technology (see [9]). Studies have also been conducted on uses of personal computers and the internet among the older population ([2], [21], [22]). However, there seems to be a lack of phenomenological research on the role of online communities and social media use among older people. By combining two qualitative methods, phenomenology and thematic analysis, we hope to uncover both the lived experiences and different kinds of engagement with online communities among older users, as well as

the most recurring and important themes and categories characterising this phenomenon.

So far in this project, we have interacted with older people who do not suffer from any cognitive impairments, or have any serious age-related constraints of mobility, etc. Our experiences, therefore, of conducting research with older people are rather limited as we have not yet faced the challenges of interacting with older people who have any age-related declines in sensory, perceptual, cognitive and communication abilities. The research methods and the ways of interacting with older people in workshops and individual interviews will vary a lot to suit the specific age-related constraints of the participants.

We will continue to reflect on our experiences of conducting research with older people and the challenges that we face as our participant set becomes more varied during the project's timeline. We shall share our experiences in future publications of our project.

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