Probing the Audience of Seniors’ Online Communities

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Objectives. Participation in online communities that are dedicated to older adults is a significant trend in elders’ use of the Internet. The present study aimed to explore the audience of these communities and to discover possible subsegments within that audience and the differences among them.

Methods. The study was based on an online survey of 218 members of 16 English language–based seniors’ online communities.

Results. Analysis demonstrated that the audience of the communities is not homogeneous, as 3 segments of community members were identified: information swappers, aging-oriented, and socializers. These groups differed in their interests, background characteristics, and participation patterns. In addition, results indicated significant differences between the groups in perceived benefits. The socializers were those who reported the highest level of gratification. The aging-oriented reported more “companionship” than the information swappers, and the latter reported more “joyfulness” than the aging-oriented.

Conclusions. The results suggested that members of seniors’ online communities actively select community contents that best meet their psychosocial needs and use the communities interchangeably with other media and activities. Such purposeful use of the communities becomes an integral part of the strategies they utilize in order to cope with later life circumstances.

Key Words: Audience research—Coping—Internet—Online communities—Successful aging.

THE advancement of computer technologies and the cybernetic revolution provide seniors with many new opportunities. One of them is the opportunity to participate in online communities that are dedicated to older adults. Such communities seem to be very welcome by their target audience, and an increasing number of seniors join these communities and become active members (Nimrod, 2010). Previous studies (Pfeil, 2007; Xie, 2008) have tried to explore the benefits of participation in seniors’ online communities. However, as most of those studies were based on qualitative methods, little is known about the people who use the communities. Moreover, because the previous studies lacked differentiation between users, they were limited in portraying how the online communities were experienced by different users. As a result, our understanding of the particular ways in which participation in the communities may affect seniors’ well-being is rather partial. Applying quantitative methods, the study presented in this article aimed to explore the audience of seniors’ online communities. Assuming that members may vary in their interests, the study was designed to discover possible subsegments within that audience and the differences among them, with the intention of drawing assumptions regarding the communities’ potential role in successful aging.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent statistical reports demonstrate that older adults are the fastest growing segment among Internet users (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011; Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2010). Nevertheless, the literature on older adults’ use of the Internet is rather limited. Previous studies explored three main issues, the first being the age-related “digital divide,” which was reflected not only in terms of percentage of older Internet users but also in the usages people made of the Internet. This digital divide was a main concern for many studies that examined the barriers and limitations for Internet use, intervention programs, and their effects (cf. Kiel, 2005). The second issue that was extensively explored was the utilities of the Internet for older adults, and the main functions described were communication medium, information source, task-orientated tool (e.g., shopping, financial management), and leisure activity (cf. Opalinski, 2001). Yet, it seems that the issue that excited most researchers was the third—the impact of Internet use on older adults’ psychological well-being.

Studies demonstrated that learning computer and Internet skills enhances a sense of independence (Henke, 1999) and creates a process of empowerment (transition from helplessness to control and from passiveness to activeness) as a result of the power of change and the power of knowledge (Shapira, Barak, & Gal, 2007). In addition, Internet use is associated with strengthened self-image and self-confidence, higher levels of social connectivity, higher levels of perceived social support, decreased feelings of loneliness, lower levels of depression, and generally more positive attitudes toward aging (Dickenson & Hill, 2007; Fokkema & Knipscheer, ...
2007; Van De Watering, 2005). As successful aging is associated with high levels of psychological health and social engagement (Rowe & Kahn, 1998), such findings suggest that Internet use may play a significant role in successful aging.

The existing body of knowledge regarding older adults’ use of the Internet has two considerable weaknesses. First, most studies so far applied a macrolevel approach and referred to Internet use a single activity, without differentiating between various functions and activities. With the exception of digital games, whose potential benefits for seniors’ cognitive functioning were extensively studied (Carle, 2007; Miller, 2005), relatively few studies applied a microlevel approach and examined specific online activities. Second, many studies lacked differentiation between users. Although older adults are a rather heterogeneous audience, studies on older Internet users tended to examine them as one homogeneous group. Without differentiating between various online activities and various subsegments within the older audience, any argument regarding the role of Internet use in successful aging should be considered as a potentially misleading generalization. Different activities may provide diverse benefits and may also have potential negative impacts. Moreover, just like any off-line activity, online activities may be experienced differently by various users. The generalized approach conceals such distinctions, thereby limiting our understanding of the particular ways in which Internet use affects seniors’ well-being.

One of the first activities that should be studied using the microlevel approach is participation in seniors’ online communities because unlike other online activities, this activity is exclusive for older adults and because such communities are becoming increasingly popular among older Internet users. Online communities are “large, collective of voluntary members . . . whose members share a common interest, experience, or conviction and positive regard for members. Thus, previous research lacked quantitative studies, which may have enhanced this body of knowledge. Second, in all studies, interviewees and/or contents were sampled from one online community only. Third, all previous studies tended to regard the communities as online support groups. Any lay review of the contents posted in such communities would reveal that most of them are not defined as support groups. On the contrary, the communities’ positioning (e.g., “for fun in your 50s, 60s, and beyond” or “for those living life to the full”) tends to emphasize the recreational aspects of participation. Moreover, although indeed some discussions in the communities may be described as supportive, others are intellectual or very casual in nature.

In order to fully understand this social, cultural, and communicative phenomenon, there was a need for a comprehensive research that would examine various aspects of the communities, encompassing many communities and using mixed methods (including quantitative methods). The research project on seniors’ online communities aimed to answer that need. This article reports the final part of this project. The first part explored the contents posted in the communities. Based on quantitative content analysis of a full

(NIMROD, or hence, participating in seniors’ online communities, who visit them. Of participation in such communities and about the people of the Internet. Nevertheless, little is known about the benefits of Internet use affects seniors’ well-being.

Online communities may operate through diverse applications such as e-mail distribution lists, newsgroups,
year’s data from 14 leading online communities (686,283 messages), the study identified 13 main subjects discussed in the communities, including (in descending order) “Fun on line” (i.e., social games played in the communities, jokes and funny stories, riddles, etc.), “Retirement,” “Family,” “Health,” “Work and Study,” “Recreation,” “Finance,” “Religion and Spirituality,” “Technology,” “Aging,” “Civic and Social issues,” “Shopping,” and “Travels” (Nimrod, 2010). Applying online ethnography (i.e., a qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study online cultures and communities), the second part of the project examined the social dynamics in selected community sections. Among other things, it revealed the norm system in the communities, the online relationships between members, and the playfulness characterizing some of the online dialogues (Nimrod, 2011). It also demonstrated how the information provided in the communities serves as a resource in members’ offline activities (Nimrod, 2012). The last part of the project explored the audience of the communities.

To date, the body of knowledge provides very little information regarding the audience of seniors’ online communities. This study aims to provide in-depth understanding of that audience by examining community members’ socio-demographic characteristics, participation patterns, and interests. In addition, based on the wide variety of issues discussed in the communities (Nimrod, 2010), this study proposes that community members may vary in their interests and that not all issues discussed in the communities appeal to them equally. Thus, this study was also designed to explore whether members of seniors’ online communities can be segmented according to their interests, and if so, (a) can the segments be differentiated using background characteristics and/or participation patterns? and (b) are there differences among the groups with regard to perceived benefits gained from participation? By addressing these questions, the relationships between members’ interests and gratifications were explored, and some suggestions regarding the potential role of seniors’ online communities in successful aging were offered.

Design and Methods

Data Collection and Sample

The study was based on an online survey with a convenience sample of 218 members of 16 seniors’ online communities. In order to recruit participants, the principal investigator (PI) contacted the administrators of 30 active communities and asked for their permission to post a call for volunteers on their Web sites. All the communities were English language based, and according to their names, home-pages, and welcome posts, explicitly targeted seniors. Eleven community administrators approved, and nine even posted the call on the PI’s behalf. Three administrators refused, and others did not respond even after three to five requests. In these cases, when it was technically possible, the PI independently posted messages in the communities. Of the eight unauthorized messages posted, five survived. Others were immediately deleted by community administrators and the PI was banned. The remaining 16 (11 approved and 5 nonapproved) communities surveyed are listed in Table 1. Nine of the communities were from the United States, five were British, one was Canadian, and one was Australian, but all of them targeted global audiences. Four communities had both a forum and a chat room, one had a forum and a newsletter, and the rest had a forum only.

The call for volunteers included a short description of the research aims and a link to the survey Web site (a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. The Communities Surveyed in This Study</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment method</td>
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<tr>
<td>Investigator’s post</td>
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<tr>
<td>Administrator’s post in the forum</td>
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<td>Administrator’s post in the forum</td>
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<tr>
<td>Investigator’s post</td>
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<td>Administrator’s post in the forum</td>
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<tr>
<td>Administrator’s post in the forum + PMs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Administrator’s post in the newsletter</td>
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<tr>
<td>Investigator’s post</td>
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<td>Investigator’s post</td>
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<tr>
<td>Investigator’s post</td>
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<tr>
<td>Administrator’s post via PMs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. PMs = private messages.

*a* No official permission.

*b* Authorized but removed after 4 days.
SurveyMonkey application). The first page of the Web site included a longer description of the research aims, detailed instructions, and the PI’s contact information. Volunteers were asked to read the instructions and confirm their consent to participate. Then, they were asked to fill in an online survey questionnaire, which typically took 10–15 min of their time. Respondents were invited to contact the PI with regard to any question they may have, but none did.

Data were collected between July and October 2011, and reminders were posted in the communities throughout this period. Data collection ended when additional reminders yielded no new responses. After screening out participants who did not confirm that they have read the instructions (to guarantee the quality of the data), and questionnaires with less than 80% of the questions answered, the final sample size was 218.

There were no eligibility requirements for participating in the survey and participation was anonymous. Therefore, after considering the characteristics of the study, the Institutional Review Board in the PI’s institution ruled that review was not necessary, and the study was exempted from human subjects review. To maximize protection of human subjects, the research did not use any identifying details (including usernames, Web names, IPs, etc.). Moreover, as aforementioned, respondents were provided with extensive information about the study in the first page of the Web site. This, as well as asking the volunteers to confirm that they have read the information and were willing to participate in the study, was done to make sure that volunteers were able to make an informed decision about whether to participate in the study. In addition, volunteers were instructed to skip any questions causing even mild inconvenience, and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. Participation in the study was absolutely voluntary, and participants were not offered any incentive to participate. Thus, participants had no reason to take the survey more than once.

**Measurement**

The questionnaire included mostly closed and some open-ended questions regarding the following areas.

**Participation patterns.**—The online interview began with several general questions that examined usage patterns, including membership duration, frequency and length of visits, posting behavior, and visiting other communities. Respondents were also asked to report if there were factors constraining their participation in the community, and if so, what were they.

**Interest in issues discussed in the communities.**—Respondents were presented with a list of the 13 most-discussed topics in seniors’ online communities (Nimrod, 2010) and asked to rate their interest in these topics using a 4-point scale ranging from “have no interest” to “very interested.”

**Benefits of participation.**—Respondents were presented with the Paragraphs About Leisure-Form E (PAL-E), developed by Tinsley and Kass (1980a, 1980b). This scale includes a list of 27 paragraphs describing psychological benefits of participation in leisure activities. Respondents were asked to rate the relevance of each paragraph to their experience of participation in seniors’ online communities, using a 5-point scale ranging from “not true” to “definitely true.” Sample questions include items such as “When participating in seniors’ online communities I have an opportunity to enjoy things I don’t find in my daily life” and “When participating in seniors’ online communities I find that getting along and cooperating with the other participants is one of the best things about this activity.” Respondents were also asked if there is anything else that may help the research team to better understand their experience of seniors’ online communities and were invited to describe what the communities mean to them and share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

**Background questionnaire.**—The last part of the interview included a background questionnaire with demographic and sociodemographic questions. The variables examined were age, gender, perceived health, marital status, education, economic status, and country of residence.

**Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed in four steps, the first being a factor analysis to identify the structure of respondents’ interests. The factor analysis was conducted on the interest data using principal components extraction and quartimax rotation with Kaiser normalization (varimax rotation was also conducted, but the quartimax rotation provided a clearer solution according to the principles of simple structure). To control the number of factors extracted from the data, a minimum eigenvalue of 1.0 was used with attributes loading at greater than 0.4. Each factor was interpreted and labeled, based on each rotated factor loading, especially on the highest loading of each factor. In the second step, the interest factors were subjected to a cluster analysis, which specified groups of community members with similar interests. To identify significant differences between groups in terms of their interests, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and least significant difference (LSD) tests were used.

The third step examined each group by their background characteristics and participation patterns. To identify significant differences between groups, cross-tabulations and chi-square tests were employed, as well as ANOVA and LSD tests. The last step of the data analysis was finding differences in perceived benefits between the groups. For that purpose, factor analysis of the perceived benefits data was conducted to identify the structure of reported benefits (using the same procedure as in the first analysis). Then ANOVA and LSD tests were used to compare the mean
scores of each group for the benefits factors identified. A confidence interval of 95% was used in all tests and only statistically significant findings are presented in this article.

Results

Sample Characteristics and Participation Patterns
Most respondents were 55–75 years old, and the mean was 64.7 years. Fifty-six percent were female participants, 64% were married, and most of the rest (18%) were divorced. The average number of years of education was 15.1. Fifty-four percent of the respondents reported having average income and 26% reported income higher than average. Forty-eight percent were from the United States, 33% were from the British Isles, 13% from Australia, and 4% from Canada. Relatively few (2%) resided in non English-speaking countries. Seventy-three percent perceived their health as good or excellent, and only 6% perceived their health as poor.

Seventy-six percent of the respondents were repeat visitors in the community from which they were referred to the survey. Of those, 19% were relatively new members (less than a month) and 63% were “veterans” (more than a year). Forty-two percent of the repeat visitors were “heavy users,” who visited their community every day or nearly every day, and 32% were “medium users,” who visited their community at least once a week. Most repeat visitors (74%) reported that a typical visit at the community lasts up to 30 min, and most (73%) reported being active (i.e., posting) at least to some extent. Forty-two percent of the “posters” were frequent posters, who posted messages in many or in most visits, 11% posted half of the times, and 47% reported posting in few visits only. More posters (39%) tended to answer others’ posts rather than initiate new discussions (5%), but most (56%) did both. Seventy-nine percent reported visiting online communities other than the community from which they were referred to the survey, and 33% did so every day or almost every day.

The Structure of Interests in Issues Discussed in the Communities
The factor analysis of the interest data identified four factors that explained 59.2% of the variance (Table 2). With the minimum factor loading level of 0.4, all interests were included in one of the factors and one was included in two factors. The first factor, labeled “later life issues,” explained 30.9% of the variance and showed a Cronbach’s alpha of .788. It included issues related to challenges associated with later life, such as “retirement,” “aging,” and “health,” as well as more general issues such as “family” and “finances.” The common characteristic of these interests was that they were all associated with daily living. The second factor, “intellectual interests,” explained 11.5% of the variance and showed a Cronbach’s alpha of .596. It consisted of interests that were associated with expanded knowledge and enrichment, and signified a motivation to discuss issues that are beyond the scope of the daily living, such as studies, spirituality, and social issues.

Whereas “intellectual interests” could be quite serious, the third factor, labeled “light entertainment” (variance explained = 8.8%, Cronbach’s alpha = .599), represented interest in issues that are rather playful and carefree. It comprised interest in “fun on line” as well as in off-line enjoyable activities that included “leisure” and “shopping.” The last factor, “advanced tasks” (variance explained = 8.0%, Cronbach’s alpha = .482), was to some extent similar to the first factor in that it dealt with daily challenges, but these challenges were not age related. Instead, they included somewhat complex tasks associated with the relatively more luxurious side of life (e.g., “travels” and “technology”). The one interest that cross-loaded was “finances.” It was associated with both “later life issues” and “advanced tasks.” This may be explained by the fact that it is indeed a complex challenge faced by all economic statuses including the affluent but also an issue related to later life (e.g., retirement planning and savings).

The Three Clusters of Members in Seniors’ Online Communities
Cluster analysis conducted on the interest factors produced an optimal solution (based on distinctiveness) of three clusters, which identified three groups of members in seniors’ online communities (Table 3). The first group, labeled information swappers, which consisted of 41.7% of the sampled respondents, had the highest cluster centroid score in the “advanced tasks” factor and a low cluster centroid score in the “intellectual” and “entertainment” factors and social issues.

Table 2. Factors and Factor Loadings of Respondents’ Interests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interest</th>
<th>Later life issues</th>
<th>Intellectual interests</th>
<th>Light entertainment</th>
<th>Advanced tasks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Retirement</td>
<td>.782</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aging</td>
<td>.693</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>.684</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>.557</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work &amp; studies</td>
<td>.727</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion &amp; spirituality</td>
<td>.706</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civic &amp; social issues</td>
<td>.707</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun on line</td>
<td>.749</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure</td>
<td>.697</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping</td>
<td>.677</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finances</td>
<td>.416</td>
<td>.650</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travels</td>
<td>.632</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>.615</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variance</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>1.140</td>
<td>1.046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cronbach’s alpha</td>
<td>.788</td>
<td>.596</td>
<td>.599</td>
<td>.482</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. Only loadings of at least 0.4 are tabulated. These four factors explained 59.2% of the variance.
factors. Members of this group were labeled as information swappers because based on their interests, they seemed to have the strongest motivation to exchange information with other members that were interested in advanced daily tasks (e.g., finances and technology). The second group, aging-oriented, which included 32.6% of the sample, scored similar to the other groups in the “later life issues” factor. However, it had a low cluster centroid score in the “intellectual” and “entertainment” factors and scored lowest on the “advanced tasks” factor. Members of this group were labeled as aging-oriented because their main motivation for participating in seniors’ online communities seemed to be related to challenges associated with aging (e.g., retirement and health). The third and smallest group, labeled socializers, consisted of 25.7% of the sample. It scored highest on the “intellectual” and “entertainment” factors and scored lowest on the “advanced tasks” factor. Members of this group were labeled as socializers because based on their interests, they had the strongest social motivation for participating in seniors’ online communities. Compared with other groups, they had the highest interest in the intellectual discussions and the light social interaction offered by the communities. It should be noted that the three groups of community members identified in this study scored similarly in the “later life issues.” Hence, the aging-oriented group was mainly characterized by not having additional dominant interests compared with the other groups.

**Differences Between the Groups in Background and Participation Patterns**

Five background characteristics were significantly associated with the interest clusters: gender, age, marital status, income, and health. Analysis indicated that there were relatively more men, more married individuals, and more respondents that reported high income and excellent health among the information swappers than in the other groups. The aging-oriented were significantly older than the other groups. This may explain why they also had the smallest rate of respondents who reported excellent health. The socializers were relatively more women and had the smallest rate of respondents who reported high income.

With regard to participation patterns, only two significant differences between the groups were found. The information swappers and the aging-oriented had significantly higher rate of posters than the socializers. However, among the posters, the information swappers and the socializers posted messages more frequently than the aging-oriented. It is important to note, though, that the number of respondents who answered the questions relating to posting patterns was relatively small. Hence, the results’ significance should be considered with caution. Results are presented in Table 4.

**Differences Among the Groups in Perceived Benefits**

Factor analysis of the benefits data identified seven factors that explained 68.5% of the variance, including “Service,”
AUDIENCE OF SENIORS’ ONLINE COMMUNITIES

Table 5. Differences in Perceived Benefits From Participation Among the Three Groups: One-Way Analysis of Variance and LSD Tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefits factor</th>
<th>Cluster</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>SE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-expression (Factor includes: skills improvement, being active, unusual experience, expressing feelings, making friends, and accomplishment); F = 9.053, p = .000</td>
<td>Info-swap</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>-0.26</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aging</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Socializers</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The sample</td>
<td>N = 218</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Companionship (Factor includes: depending on others, security and stability, getting along, being considerate, return for efforts, and making friends); F = 3.728, p = .026</td>
<td>Info-swap</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>-0.21</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aging</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Socializers</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The sample</td>
<td>N = 218</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joyfulness (Factor includes: enjoying the sensations, self-assurance, easy-going and humorous attitude, and time with the opposite sex); F = 4.084, p = .018</td>
<td>Info-swap</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aging</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>-0.27</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Socializers</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>0.16</td>
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<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. Means that are significantly different (p < .05) according to the LSD tests are denoted by the same letters (“a” and “b”). Hence, if two means are denoted by the same letter, this means that there is a significant difference between the two groups. Due to lack of space, only a word or two were used here to describe each benefit and not the full paragraphs as they appear in the PAL-E form. LSD = least significant difference; PAL-E = Paragraphs About Leisure-Form E.

“Self-expression,” “Companionship,” “Joyfulness,” “Stimulation,” “Standing out,” and “Autonomy.” Additional information about this analysis and the findings that resulted from the qualitative data is described in a separate manuscript (Nimrod, in press). One-way ANOVA and LSD tests indicated significant differences between the groups in three benefit factors: “Self-expression,” “Companionship,” and “Joyfulness” (Table 5). In all cases, the socializers reported the highest agreement. The socializers reported significantly more “Self-expression” than the other groups. This factor consisted of benefits that were associated with a sense of growth (e.g., “a chance to improve my skills”) and change (“opportunity to enjoy things I don’t find in my daily life”), as well as with a high level of openness and self-disclosure (“expressing bottled-up feelings”). The socializers and the aging-oriented reported significantly more “companionship” than the information swappers. This factor included benefits such as “a chance to make friends rather quickly,” “depend on other participants for useful information and emotional support,” and being “considerate of others,” which were associated with the relational aspect of the communities. The socializers and the information swappers reported significantly more “joyfulness” than the aging-oriented. This factor consisted of benefits that reflected general good feeling (e.g., “enjoy the sensations and feelings I experience” and “have an easy-going, humorous attitude toward life”), as well as “feel good about myself” and “enjoy meeting and spending time with the opposite sex.” There were no significant differences among the groups in the rest of the benefit factors.

DISCUSSION

The study presented in this article closed several gaps in the existing body of knowledge regarding seniors’ online communities. Although previous studies provided very little information about the users of these communities, this study offered detailed information about community members, including their sociodemographic characteristics, participation patterns, and interests. In addition, the fact that the study was based on a quantitative approach and on direct questioning of members of many communities, it provided an in-depth understanding of the various ways in which participation in the communities may be experienced. The microlevel approach applied in this study, as well as the differentiation between users, enabled avoiding the generalization characterizing many studies on the role of Internet use in successful aging. Therefore, the study yielded more accurate insights regarding the role seniors’ online communities played in their members’ lives.

Many communication studies explore the functions of media for society and self. Their underlying assumption is that the media fulfill different psychological and social needs at both the microlevel of individuals and the macrolevel of social systems. The Uses and Gratifications theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974; McQuail & Windahl, 1993; Rosengren, Wenner, & Palmgreen, 1985) is a predominant theory representing this approach. It suggests that audience members are active in attempting to satisfy psychosocial needs by means of selective exposure to media and specific contents. Another tenet is that gratifications of some of these needs are interchangeable not just among the various media but also by attending to other cultural or leisure activities. Hence, people choose among various options and their motivation is psychosocial. Studies based on this approach found that all media specialize in gratifying certain types of needs (Adoni, 1985) and demonstrated the displacement phenomenon between different media (Katz, Gurevitch, & Haas, 1973).

Criticisms of early Uses and Gratifications research focused on the fact that it relied heavily on self-reports and was unsophisticated about the social origin of the needs that audiences bring to the media (Katz, 1987). Yet, the emergence of Internet-based communication has revived
the significance of Uses and Gratifications and led to a renewed interest in assessing the value of this approach from a long-range perspective. McQuail (1997), for example, claimed that this approach appears especially suitable for studying the current multichannel media environment. Ruggiero (2000, p. 27) even argued that “the timely emergence of computer-mediated communication has only bolstered the theoretical potency of U&G (Uses and Gratifications) by allowing it to stimulate productive research into a proliferating telecommunications medium.” These claims may explain the significant increase in the application of the Uses and Gratifications theory during the past decade in communication research in general, and in new media research in particular (cf. Chen, 2011; Grellhesl & Punyanunt-Carter, 2012).

Accordingly, it is suggested that the Uses and Gratifications approach is a most suitable theoretical framework for interpreting the findings of the current study. The fact that the three groups of community members identified in this study scored similarly in the “later life issues” interest demonstrates that they all shared a common psychosocial need. Therefore, the communities may be regarded as a medium that specializes in gratifying a “core need” of the community members, namely, the need to cope with the various challenges associated with later life (e.g., retirement, widowhood, and declined health). To an extent, this main function justifies previous studies’ emphasis on the peer support provided in the communities (Ito et al., 2001; Wright, 2000).

The literature on coping strategies distinguishes between appraisal-focused, problem-focused, and emotion-focused coping strategies (Weiten & Lloyd, 2008). Participating in seniors’ online communities may help members modify the way they think about later life and associated challenges (i.e., appraisal focused), and the information provided by their peers may help them to better manage various problems (i.e., problem focused). Still, the fact that members turned to online communities to discuss their age-related difficulties suggests that their coping strategy is also emotion focused (i.e., oriented toward managing negative emotions). Of the various emotion-focused coping strategies identified by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), turning to the communities may be best described as seeking social support. Moreover, as the communities offer a cooperative process, namely, a process in which community members cope together with a problem that is perceived as a common concern (i.e., “our” aging vs. “my” or “your” aging), they may be considered as offering communal coping (Lyons, Mickelson, Sullivan, & Coyne, 1998).

Nevertheless, the findings suggest that the audience of the communities is not homogeneous, and that parallel to the need to cope with the various challenges associated with later life, which is common to all members, some segments have additional needs, as reflected in their interests. In fact, the segment described as the aging-oriented comprised only a third of the sample. Another segment was the socializers, whose additional needs may be described as intellectual stimulation and entertainment, and the biggest segment was that of the information swappers, whose additional needs may be described as instrumental. Although this may be true for other segments as well, the fact that the information swappers had both a high rate of posters and a high level of active involvement among the posters suggests that another need characterizing this segment is the need to be heard. They probably not only seek for information but also enjoy offering their own knowledge to others.

In accordance with the Uses and Gratifications theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974), which suggests that audience members actively select specific contents to satisfy their psychosocial needs, it is reasonable to assume that the three segments used the communities differently not just in their posting behavior but also with regard to the online discussions they chose to follow and/or be involved in. This may explain why they reported different gratifications. The aging-oriented, who seemed to be mainly in need for support, reported significantly more “companionship” than the information swappers. The latter, whose use of the community was probably more casual and instrumental, reported significantly more “joyfulness” than the aging-oriented. It was the socializers, however, who reported the highest level of gratification.

For the socializers, the online communities provided more than practical information and social support. Involving intellectual challenge and light entertainment, participation in the communities seemed to be a somewhat more meaningful activity in their case. As a result, they enjoyed not only the companionship and the joyfulness but also an opportunity for self-expression. This finding is surprising due to the fact that there was a relatively high rate of nonposters among them. It is possible that the relatively high posting frequency of those who do post explains this finding. It is also possible that some socializers experience benefits such as “skills improvement” and “unusual experience” just by following the various discussions. Still, participation in seniors’ online communities appeared to enable this group, more than the other two, to remain socially and mentally active and to express their strengths and enduring interests. Because such active engagement is a key aspect of well-being in later life (McKenna, Broome, & Liddle, 2007; Menec, 2003; Warr, Butcher, & Robertson, 2004), it is suggested that the contribution of participation to members’ well-being is greater for the socializers than for the other groups.

The differences between the groups in their background characteristics provide possible explanations for the differences in their needs, as reflected in their interests. The fact that the aging-oriented were significantly older and, accordingly, less healthy, may explain their focus on later life issues. As the most constrained group, they were mainly interested in facing age-related challenges. The information swappers seemed to be the less constrained group. This
may explain their use of the communities as a means for enhancing their off-line pursuits, such as travels and technology use. The literature on leisure constraints suggests that older women face more constraints to leisure than older men (cf. Jackson & Henderson, 1995). With relatively more women and the smallest rate of respondents who reported high income, the socializers were probably facing such constraints to off-line leisure. Therefore, it is possible that their social and recreational use of the communities provided compensation for reduced involvement in off-line activities and demonstrated the displacement phenomenon suggested by the Uses and Gratifications theory.

Thus, the findings of this study suggest that members of seniors’ online communities actively select community contents that best meet their psychosocial needs and use the communities interchangeably with other media and activities. Such intentional use of this medium becomes an integral part of the strategies they utilize in order to cope with and adjust to constraints and challenging later life circumstances. As most respondents were community members for more than a year, and visited the online community almost every day, it seems that this adaptive use of the communities is also an integral part of members’ lives and daily routine. It is important to note, however, that despite the various differences among the segments, the audience of the communities is relatively well-off. In general, this audience is rather young and healthy, highly educated, and most of its members report at least average income. Given the voluntary nature of participation in the survey, these characteristics may reflect a response bias, as education is a powerful predictor of participation in surveys and volunteering in general. However, they may also be explained by the digital divide (Kiel, 2005), as frailer seniors either do not use the Internet or use the Internet in a manner that is limited to the most basic functions. Bridging the digital divide, by means such as training and friendlier technologies, may lead more seniors to using the online communities and satisfying their various psychosocial needs.

Limitations and Future Research

The convenience sampling applied in this study enabled access to a relatively large number of seniors’ online communities from various countries. Therefore, the sample was more representative than the samples in previous studies, each examining interviewees from one online community only. Yet, the current study has several limitations that should be acknowledged, the first being its relatively small sample size and the inherent bias in this convenience sample—of those community members who are willing to participate in online surveys. The bias also results from the fact that only 16 leading communities (i.e., communities with many members and a large volume of daily activity) were examined in this study. Hence, the participants may be different from users of other leading seniors’ communities, as well as from smaller and possibly more intimate communities. In addition, despite a multinational composition, most respondents lived in English-speaking Western countries. Moreover, as this study was cross-sectional, only associations could be examined and not causalities.

Future research, then, should examine additional communities using quantitative methods, including non-English communities, and explore cultural variations. In addition, they should explore ethnicity-related differences within specific cultural contexts. Future studies should also investigate seniors’ online communities using longitudinal methods to examine their impact on users’ well-being over time and explore how the communities are used in coping with and adjusting to constraints and challenging later life circumstances, for example, in processes of Selective Optimization and Compensation (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Baltes & Carstensen, 1996). Because of the many benefits communities offer, further studies should also compare users and nonusers, look for ways to promote participation among seniors who do not visit online communities, examine professionals’ awareness and attitudes, and consider educational activities. Lastly, additional research should examine other online activities using a microlevel approach and differentiating between various subsegments within the older audience, as this deepens our understanding of the role of Internet use in promoting well-being in later life.

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