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Online Support for The Elderly – Why Service and Social Network Platforms Should Be Integrated

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Abstract

Most developed countries currently face a demographic change towards an aging society. In this respect, the so-called transition age between 55 and 75 is crucial for individual health and wellbeing, since it usually is connected with the transition from work life to retirement. This leads to a fundamental change in daily routines and social life, often causing mental or physical health problems. Online Social Networks have been studied for some time already as a means for supporting social inclusion of elderly people. On the other hand, by healthcare providers and welfare organizations an increasing number of support services for elderly people are or will be provided also online in the future. However, the combination of both aspects in order to provide a more holistic online support for elderly people, in particular to those between 55-75, has not been discussed so far. Therefore, in this paper we argue in favor of the concept of an integrated online service and social network for elderly people and present an outline of its intended functionality.

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1. Introduction

Germany, like other developed countries has to deal with a constantly aging society and the consequences of the development. It is reported that in Germany by the year of 2060 more than 33% of the population will be over the age of 65¹. The age of 65 determines the transition from working life to retirement and therefore marks the transition between working life. The shift in Germany's demographic profile poses significant challenges for the government,

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healthcare providers, and the society at large². Using the possibility to provide services for elderly users online can help to reduce these costs and provide them faster and independent from time and place³.

It is also necessary to keep the elderly functional, both in a cognitive and physical way, and active in society. Emotional support from social networks can keep elderly people functionally capable⁴ especially because social integration is essential to satisfy basic human needs like being loved and the need to belong. Communication and exchange with other elderly people, friends, and especially family members can help to form a feeling of social connectedness and expand their social contacts. The development of Online Social Networks has further increased opportunities for social contact and enables users to interact and collaborate with others as part of an on-going social dialogue⁵.

However, the benefits for elderly users of using a social or a service network are limited to the purpose of the certain type of the network. A combination of both online network types can be enhance the benefits of using online networks. Thus, this paper presents an outlook of the possibility to combine both functions into an integrated social and service network.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 gives an overview of the related work. The argumentation for a combined social and service network is presented in section 3, and section 4 describes the derived functionalities of a possible social and service network platform. We conclude with a summary of our findings.

2. Related Work

Due to the fact that elderly people easily feel socially excluded, many authors emphasize the importance of online social network sites^{3,4,5,6,7,8}. They provide a context within which different individuals are able to interact with each other and be socially connected². Current social networks like Facebook, Twitter, and Linked In are more likely to be used for the maintenance of already existing ties, although they generally allow the for the creation of totally new online ties². The more general usage is from offline to online, therefore online social networks can help to strengthen and intensify people's offline relationships⁴. In addition, studies of co-located communities that are supported by online networks have shown that computer-mediated actions have a positive effect on the interaction and involvement within the community^{9,10,11}. To benefit from the usage of online social networks, elderly users must use these networks, not only to stay in contacts with already existing ties but to connect with users they do not know. Different studies show that a lot of elderly users do not see the purpose or benefit of using social networks^{12,13,14,15}. Lehtinen et al. have suggested that the existing social networks do not seem to fit the everyday communication of elderly users¹⁶. Other reasons for not using online social networks are safety concerns¹⁷ and user interfaces that do not fit the requirements of elderly users^{6,18}.

Online service networks on the other do not aim to connect users on a socially basis but delivering services online¹⁹. Recent online service networks like ebay and Amazon do not only deliver services and products to users, they also provide possibilities of active participation in selling and offering product or services online²⁰. They do not only focus on the possibilities to retrieve services, these networks also support interpersonal relations and interactions, occurring during and after product and service sale²¹. In this way online service networks are able to connect people who do not know each other based on similar interests in products or services. Still, after a product or service was purchased and there are no discrepancies to discuss there is no communication necessary. This is because the original idea of service networks is to sell products or services, not to get in contact with other users²².

As the literature shows, the possibility of social exclusion can not be solved by technology yet. Even though today's elderly users are more familiar with usages of online technologies, they still hesitate to use them. In addition, existing social and service networks are not designed for elderly users regarding the user interface and functionality. The existing networks are not able to support elderly user to interact with other users they already know as well as with unknown users, based on similar interests, problems, or residence.

This is why, this paper presents a new approach with combining an online social network with an online service network into an integrated online social and service network to overcome the reason why elderly users do not get to know other users via online networks and provide the necessary functionalities.

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