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The significance of digital citizenship in the well-being of older migrants

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: To understand the increasingly important role of digital citizenship (the ability to participate in society online) in supporting the well-being of ageing migrants.

Study design: Participant observation, social network mapping, ethnographic and life-history interviews.

Methods: Fifteen in-depth case studies examined the role of online participation in fostering the well-being and care of older migrants in Perth, Western Australia. Participants are members of an ‘internet café’ that facilitates their shared development of Internet skills. The case studies are derived from ethnographic research conducted between July and October 2016.

Results: Older peoples’ maintenance of support networks and social engagement, and their access to healthcare services, can be enhanced when they are motivated to increase their digital literacy (the ability to use the Internet for information and communication) through appropriate educational, technological, infrastructure and social support. This support is likely to be more effective when developed through social learning systems that create communities of practice. Improving digital literacy has special implications for the well-being of older migrants because it can enhance their ability to exchange emotional support across distance.

Conclusions: Digital literacy for older migrants can dramatically increase their ability to maintain and expand dispersed networks of support. Effective implementation of affordable and age-inclusive information and communication technology (ITC) infrastructure requires integrated support that connects individuals and their homes with social learning systems to ensure that participation continues as mobility declines. As health information and social engagement are increasingly delivered through online platforms, supporting the digital citizenship of older people is becoming an important equity issue.

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Introduction

The term 'digital disruption' is frequently used to convey the impact of information and communication technologies (ICTs) on future trajectories of industries such as mining and agriculture but is equally applicable to the transformations of ageing and aged care. New technologies such as e-medicine, care robots and computer-assisted living technologies that are creating novel opportunities for providing formal care services have been widely documented.^{1–3} In what follows, we draw attention to a simultaneous phenomenon that is currently less well acknowledged: the ways in which migrant elderly are making use of simple and widely available technologies, such as the Internet and laptop computers, to maintain their social networks, sustain their cultural activities and access culturally relevant information regarding health and well-being. In doing so, they are developing their 'digital citizenship, or the ability to participate in society online' to enjoy greater social participation than might otherwise be possible.⁴

A growing body of research highlights how migration can impact negatively on older people's support networks as family and friends may become dispersed across distance and geographic boundaries.^{5,6} However, there is growing evidence that people living across distance are using a range of tools and platforms, including mobile phones, social media and video telephony, to exchange care and support.^{7,5} It is also clear that the opportunities for older people to benefit from the digital revolution are limited. This evidence of an age-based digital divide is particularly concerning given that in Australia, the government now prioritises access to information and services through its online platforms, including aged care.

A number of organisations are actively addressing the evident gap between the potential for older people to benefit from new Internet technologies and their current level of access to them. In what follows, we report on an ethnographic and qualitative interview-based investigation of one of these organisations. The Internet Café is a weekly pop-up facility in Perth, Western Australia, where older migrants meet to learn how to use the Internet. Founded by the not-for-profit Umbrella Multicultural Community Care Services organisation in 2011, it is a government-funded program that provides digital literacy training for older people who have been identified (by the Western Australian government's Home and Community Care agency) as eligible for a range of services to support their continued and enhanced social participation and civic engagement. The Internet Café's aim is to improve patrons' health and well-being by developing their digital literacy. All of the patrons share a common experience of migration away from their countries of birth several decades ago, but many have also been impacted by the mobility of their own children, resulting in them living at a distance from key members of their support networks.

Through our research at the Internet Café, we show how older migrants are able to establish and maintain autonomy, participation, dignity, access to relevant health and well-being information and distant informal care and support when they are motivated to use the Internet and provided with

appropriate educational, technological, infrastructure and social support. A feature of the Internet Café's approach to digital literacy training is that their elderly patrons acquire the necessary digital skills through social learning systems experienced as a community of practice. This leads us to argue that programs aimed at enhancing the digital literacy of elderly migrants are more likely to be successful if delivered in socially supportive co-learning settings.

Methods

This study is based on participant observation and ethnographic life-history interviews with migrant elderly who participate in the Internet Café in Perth, Western Australia. The Internet Café's parent organisation, Umbrella, provides home and community care for more than 500 clients who were born in 52 different countries; it employs over 100 staff and volunteers who come from 40 different countries.⁸ The Internet Café draws its patrons from these pools of staff and clients, some of whom travel 50 km by car and public transport to attend their weekly lessons. In the 5 years since its inception, the café's support hours have almost doubled from 1200 to 2397 per annum. Client attendance figures vary weekly as patrons are sometimes away visiting distant family and friends. Illness or injury may also prevent participants from attending in person. However, it is not unusual for patrons who cannot attend in person to use the Internet and their digital literacy skills to communicate with patrons and staff at the Internet Café in real time.

Participant observation was undertaken at the weekly café classes between July and October 2016. The frequent and regular visits had the advantage of creating an opportunity to develop strong relationships, ensured that no single visit with any older person was a burden in time or effort for that person and allowed skills acquisition to be observed over time. Visits were also made to the homes of some research participants, providing insights into the extent or limitations of their ICT access at home. In addition, ethnographic interviews of approximately 60 min duration were conducted with eight older migrants, four staff members and volunteers, and four members of the migrants' informal support networks. These included identifying the support networks of each participant and documenting the role of new media in those support networks. All interviews were audiorecorded using digital recording devices and were transcribed by the interviewer for analysis. The result was a detailed picture of the local, distant, virtual, formal and informal support networks of older migrants who use, and are learning to use, ICTs and the Internet.

Qualitative analysis was guided by education scholar Etienne Wenger's typologies of engagement in 'communities of practice,'⁹ which he defines as 'groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.'¹⁰ The principal agenda of the Internet Café's community of practice is learning, and its patrons' method of learning is social. It is what Wenger⁹ calls a 'social learning system.' The elements making up social learning systems include three modes of belonging: engagement, imagination and alignment, as well as three structuring elements: communities of practice, boundary

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