Older people's strategies for building trust in online communities through an ethnographical lens

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Abstract
The paper presents key results of an ethnographical study we conducted with 55 older people (aged 59-80) over 18 months while participating in online communities. The results show that trust is very important for this user group. Privacy and concerns about misuse of personal information are important elements of trust for them, and closed social circles and everyday trusting strategies are key ingredients of their virtual and face-to-face trust building processes.

Author Keywords
Older people; trust; online communities; ethnography

ACM Classification Keywords
H.m. Miscellaneous.

Introduction
Much of previous HCI research on trust has focused on e-commerce and been conducted with ordinary HCI users (i.e. young and adult people). In our research, we are looking into trust building in non-ecommerce websites with an ever-growing sector of the population, older people (60+). We aim to understand their trust building process in online social networks and how it can be facilitated with improved Social Network Sites

(SNS). We present key results of an 18-month ethnographical study of older people's use of popular SNS we conducted to this end. The study is framed in the Life2.0 project[1], partially funded by the EU, aimed at making the local network of older people's social interactions more visible amongst themselves and their social circles through geo-located online services.

Related work

The bulk of research: trust in e-commerce

Trust has largely been studied in e-commerce. Much of this research has focused on determining web-based elements, such as graphical design and information quality [e.g. 1] and important company-based qualities, for instance, reputation and external guarantees [e.g. 5], which influence trust building with clients. We have been addressing web-based elements, as well as motivations, social practices and human actors involved in the trust building process, which are important aspects of the second and current wave of HCI research [3], in online communities.

Trust in online communities

We consider that Tricia Wang's distinction between social circles and social networks in Chinese online communities can help us understand trust building in our research. According to Wang [7], social circles consist of people we already know (e.g. friends, relatives) and social networks of people we do not know (yet). Thus, "social circles build on existing relations of trust, and social networks build out new relations of trust" [7: minute 15]. This implies that trust in online social networks is created through 'trust-exploring-practices', and in our research we aim to understand the practices conducted by older people.

Trust, online communities and older people: lots to do

Whilst previous studies of trust with older people have largely focused on exploring the extent to which they trust technologies embedded in caregiving devices (see [6] for a review), there seems to be a lack[2] of research into trust in online communities with older people, despite the increasing adoption of SNS amongst the older population and the importance of trust in social interactions [2].

Our study: setting, participants and methods

We have been conducting our ethnographical study in Àgora, a 26-year-old adult highly participatory educational centre in Barcelona (Spain). Our study adopted a classical ethnographical approach, i.e. we conducted *in-situ* observations and conversations over a prolonged period of time (18 months) with a group of 55 older people (aged 59-80). All the participants were familiar with basic ICT-tasks and 45% with Internet-related tasks. They reported using the computer at least once per week. We conducted the observations and conversations weekly, while the members of our user group were using different community-based technologies, such as Facebook, YouTube, Picasa, Google Maps, Twitter and the Life2.0 community platform[3], and other more common ones, such as e-

[1] http://www.life2project.eu/

[2] A keyword search (*trust, online communities, social networks sites, older people, elderly*) we conducted in academic databases (e.g. Science Direct and ACM DL) yielded no studies.

[3] Life2.0 is a community platform through which older people can ask and offer help to people living in their local neighbourhood and keep abreast of what is happening in their local area.

mail and picture-editing tools, in different ICT courses in the centre. This resulted in over 230 hours of fieldwork. We also set up a Facebook Group in one of the courses, establishing Facebook friendship with 41 older people. Reading their posts and flow of messages, and talking with them allowed us to begin to make sense of the relationship between older people and SNS. We analysed our field notes and the content the participants of the Facebook group posted in their online social network by conducting qualitative data analysis techniques (open, selective and axial coding).

Findings

The nature of trust concerns in online communities

One of the main concerns of our participants is whether the information they post/share in online communities, such as their photos, e-mail addresses or personal videos, can be accessed by people they do not know (or do not want to share with) and that can potentially make a bad use of it, e.g. sending spam e-mails with viruses. At the end of a course session, they also remove any personal documents they put on the computers, which are used by different people, as "*I don't want people I don't know to look at my things*". Privacy, unknown people and the use they can make of the personal information seem to be three key factors in the definition of trust for this group. The complexity and constant evolution of tools to manage privacy settings in online communities (e.g. in Facebook, deciding who can read the posts) makes it difficult for our participants to use them effectively. Instead, they prefer using the private message functionality in SNS, since, in their opinion, it is similar to the e-mail tools they use.

Trusting the technologies or themselves using them?

Our participants did not show any concerns in trusting the technologies[4] they were using. They often pointed out that these technologies do well its job and that they were the ones who make mistakes. This opinion influences how they participate in online communities, especially when they are learning to use them, e.g. in Facebook, they were often afraid of making mistakes which could result in an unwanted sharing of personal information. Trusting their ability to use the technology is the first step they have to take to start to participate in online communities.

Relying on their social circles to trust strangers

Our participants are willing to engage in online communities recommended by trusted people, e.g. family members and friends. For instance, a participant reported having joined a Facebook Group because a friend had recommended it to him. Another participant became a fan of the Facebook page of a local association because she knew the association and two of its members. These examples show that trust in online communities is built by this user group through closed social circles, mostly in face-to-face interactions.

Everyday trust building strategies go online

Gathering information about an unknown person by asking people they know in their neighbourhood or relying on information provided by trusted sources, such as local associations, are everyday trust building strategies adopted by our user group when participating in online communities. For example, our

[4] By "trusting the technology" we mean the user's belief that the system has the functional capability to reliably perform a task [4]

participants considered that a trusted member, e.g. a local association, to whom they could report bad behaviour or ask for further information about others members, would be useful in order for them to trust users of the mutual help service provided by the online Life2.0 platform.

Indirect network ties increases distrust

Our participants find it difficult to understand the message flow through direct (i.e. friends) and indirect (i.e. friends of friends) network ties. Whereas direct network ties are trusted, indirect ones are not. Our participants did not expect to be able to read in their News Feed comments made by unknown people (i.e. friends of their friends) or be encouraged - by the system - to add people they did not know to their friends' list. These indirect ties raised privacy concerns amongst our participants, i.e. can unknown people read my posts?

Discussion and plans for future work

We considered that going beyond identifying trust-cues in websites was worthwhile to start to understand trust in online communities with older people. Our results suggest that privacy control and concerns about misuse of personal information are important elements of trust for this user group, and that closed social circles and everyday trusting strategies are key ingredients of their virtual and physical trust building processes. Our next step is to understand trust further. To this end, we will conduct traditional and online ethnographical research in different communities of older people, to deepen and widen the data collected thus far. We will also conduct co-design with them, which should enable us to discuss implications for designing SNS which support and enrich much better their trust building experiences.

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