The Fun Culture in Seniors’ Online Communities

Galit Nimrod*1

1Department of Communication studies, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer-Sheva, Israel. The Center for Multidisciplinary Research in Aging, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer-Sheva, Israel.

*Address correspondence to Galit Nimrod, Department of Communication Studies and The Center for Multidisciplinary Research in Aging, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, POB 653, Beer-Sheva 84015, Israel. E-mail: gnimrod@bgu.ac.il

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The cybernetic revolution provides many new possibilities for seniors. One of them is online communities that are dedicated to older adults. These communities seem to be well accepted and thriving. A recent exploratory study (Nimrod, 2010) found that one of the main features characterizing these communities is having a most vibrant fun culture. Hence, the most active threads (streams of posts concerning the same topic and with the same opening post), which consist of thousands of posts, are those containing social games, jokes, and funny stories. Utilizing a netnography approach (e.g., Kozinets, 2002), the study presented in this article aimed to explore the fun culture in seniors’ online communities and examine the various social phenomena associated with this new form of network communication, with the intention of drawing assumptions regarding the communities’ potential impact on successful aging.

Purpose of the study: Previous research found that “fun on line” is the most dominant content in seniors’ online communities. The present study aimed to further explore the fun culture in these communities and to discover its unique qualities.

Design and Methods: The study applied an online ethnography (netnography) approach, utilizing a full year’s data from 6 leading seniors’ online communities. The final database included about 50,000 posts. Results: The majority of posts were part of online social games, including cognitive, associative, and creative games. The main subjects in all contents were sex, gender differences, aging, grandparenting, politics, faith, and alcohol. Main participatory behaviors were selective timing, using expressive style, and personalization of the online character. Although most participants were “lurkers,” the active participants nurtured community norms and relationships, as reflected in the written dialogues. Implications: In a reality of limited alternatives for digital games that meet older adults’ needs and interests, seniors found an independent system to satisfy their need for play. Seniors’ online communities provided a unique form of casual leisure, whose nature varied among different groups of participants. The fun culture seemed to offer participants many desired benefits, including meaningful play, liminality and communitas, opportunity to practice and demonstrate their abilities, and means for coping with aging. Therefore, it may have positive impact on seniors’ well-being and successful aging.

Key Words: Internet, Social Networks, Casual Leisure, Play, Successful Aging

Literature Review

Successful aging has been associated with high levels of physical health, cognitive health, and social engagement (e.g., Rowe & Kahn, 1998), but such formulae fail to do justice to the effective adaptations to the inevitable limitations and losses that people face as they age. Baltes and colleagues (P. B. Baltes & Baltes, 1990; M. M. Baltes & Carstensen, 1999) suggested viewing successful aging in a more inclusive way, by defining success in terms of making the best of what one has rather than reaching a particular objective level of functioning. Remaining actively engaged with life in
older adulthood is a key aspect of successful aging (McKenna, Broome, & Liddle, 2007; Menec, 2003; Warr, Butcher, & Robertson, 2004). To that end, leisure activities often provide a means for older adults to remain physically, socially, and mentally active and enable expressing remaining strengths and enduring interests even in the face of functional limitations.

The leisure literature distinguishes between serious leisure and casual leisure (for review, see Stebbins, 2007). Serious leisure is characterized by considerable commitment, effort, and perseverance and associated with many enduring psychological rewards. Examples of serious leisure include voluntary work or taking part in an amateur theater group. Such activities usually require effort and commitment, but they may be very rewarding. Yet, determining whether an activity is serious leisure does not depend on the type of activity but rather on the level of commitment and effort invested in that activity.

Although the term “casual leisure” serves mainly to clarify the meaning of serious leisure, it is in itself an important form of leisure and far more people participate in it than in serious leisure (Hutchinson & Kleiber, 2005). Casual leisure is defined as “an immediately, intrinsically rewarding, relatively short-lived pleasurable core activity, requiring little or no special training to enjoy it” (Stebbins, 1997, p. 18). Casual leisure includes eight types of activities: play (e.g., dabbling, dilletantism), relaxation, passive entertainment (e.g., watching TV), active entertainment (e.g., party games), sociable conversation, sensory stimulation, casual volunteering, and pleasurable aerobic activity (e.g., walking). These eight types of casual leisure all share a hedonic nature and may be pursued in combinations of two and three at least as often as they are pursued separately (Stebbins, 2007). Additionally, casual leisure is associated with five benefits: creativity or serendipitous discovery, “edutainment” (i.e., entertaining education), regeneration or recreation, development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships, and enhanced well-being (Stebbins, 2001).

The benefits associated with casual leisure suggest that casual leisure may contribute to successful aging. There is vast research evidence supporting this premise, such as the recent studies of the Red Hat Society, an international organization of women aged 50 years or more, that has the mission to “celebrate the silliness of life.” Yarnal (2006) found that membership is a meaningful experience, which provides a rule-free context for establishing, nurturing, and maintaining social relationships. Members noted that not only that they feel better about themselves after participating in Red Hat Society events those feelings also permeate into other aspects of their lives, including relationships with spouses and other family members. In addition, the study found that participating in the organization’s activities is a significant resource that helps older adults in coping with chronic and acute stressors and challenging life transitions and daily hassles, by providing them a context for social support and emotional regulation (Hutchinson, Yarnal, Son, & Kerstetter, 2008). Similarly, a study of an older card–playing group (Outley & McKenzie, 2006) demonstrates that participating in the group provides a coping mechanism for dealing with everyday stress as well as increased opportunities for socialization and strengthening of personal ties.

Observations of play reveal its immense diversity across ages, from infants through older adults (Mannell & Kleiber, 1997; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Yet, the role of play in older adults’ lives has received limited attention (Yarnal, 2006), and most studies address the issue from a therapeutic perspective (e.g., Cohen & Simmons, 2008; Zwartkruis-Pelgrim & de Ruyter, 2008). A qualitative study that examined older adults’ preferences for specific games shows that dominoes, checkers, and bingo are the most appealing games and that older seniors demonstrate the greatest breadth of interest in sedentary games (Hoppes, Hally, & Sewell, 2000). An examination of the meanings that these older adults attribute to games they regularly play identified five recurrent themes of meaning: mental and physical fitness, continuity of past interests, competition, temporal structure, and sense of belonging (Hoppes, Wilcox, & Graham, 2001).

The advancement of computer technologies and the cybernetic revolution provides older adults with many new opportunities for casual leisure in general and for play in particular. Due to the digital divide (Kiel, 2005), the percentage of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) users among people who are aged 60 years old and more is still much lower than that among younger age groups. In the United States, for example, only 42% of people aged 65 years and more use the Internet. Still, their number grows rapidly every year (Boulton-Lewis, Buys, Lovie, Barnett, & David, 2007; Pew Internet and American Life, 2010). In addition to their instrumental function
as an information source and task oriented tool, ICT are used by older adults for maintaining social networks with family and friends, as well as for making new friends, and they help removing geographic and transportation limits. Moreover, elders use many leisure activities offered by the web, such as family trees, photo albums, games, and virtual hobbies (Opalinski, 2001; Pew Internet and American Life, 2004; Xie, 2007).

Digital games (i.e., video, computer, and online games) hold a significant promise for enhancing the lives of seniors (IJsselsteijn, Nap, de Kort, & Poels, 2007). A growing body of research supports the notion that digital games can have a significant positive impact on the older person’s mental and physical health and well-being. Several studies have found digital games to have a positive contribution to seniors’ perceptual-motor and cognitive functioning (Carle, 2007; Goldstein et al., 1997; Miller, 2005), greater constructive use of leisure time (Hollander & Plummer, 1986; Weisman, 1983), increased feelings of success and achievement (Hollander & Plummer, 1986), improved self-esteem (Goldstein et al., 1997; McGuire, 1984; Weisman, 1983), and enhanced well-being (Goldstein et al., 1997).

The rates of older adults, who play digital games at least to some extent, vary in various age groups and in different countries. In the United Kingdom, for example, 18% of the 51–65 years old play digital games. In Finland, every second person aged 65 years old or more (52%) plays such games (IJsselsteijn et al., 2007). Yet, it has been argued that most games do not meet older adults’ needs and interests and that many of these games are either not enjoyable or unsuitable for seniors (De Schutter & Abeele, 2008; Griffiths, Davies, & Chappell, 2004; IJsselsteijn et al., 2007). The major reason for that is the focus of games marketers on younger segments. As they do not target the senior market, they find no reason to study elders’ needs and develop games that meet those needs. Moreover, game developers are usually quite young and therefore “miles apart from average senior citizens” (De Schutter & Abeele, 2008, p.3). Salen and Zimmerman (2003) argued that every game must generate meaning for its player in order to become successful. Accordingly, De Schutter and Abeele suggested that in order to provide meaningful play for older adults, digital games should include themes that are associated with seniors’ lives, foster connectedness, and cultivate one’s self and others.

The Present Study

A recent trend in elders’ use of ICT is participating in seniors’ online communities. Such communities can operate through diverse applications—e-mail lists, newsgroups, forums/message boards, chat rooms, interactive sites, blogs, and similar online media. The number of seniors’ online communities is growing, and some of them have hundreds and even thousands of members. A recent pioneer study (Nimrod, 2010) explored the contents and characteristics of these seniors’ online communities. This study examined a full year’s data from 14 leading online communities, using a novel computerized system. Findings indicated that during the research period, there was a constant increase in the daily activity level. The number of threads has doubled, and the number of authors and posts has tripled. Quantitative content analysis of the data identified 13 main subjects discussed in the communities, including health, retirement, family relationships, and others. Nevertheless, the most dominant content, which significantly exceeded all other subjects, was “fun on line.” This category, unlike the rest of the categories, does not represent a discussion topic. Participants do not discuss fun but rather have fun on line by sharing funny stories and jokes with each other, as well as playing online games, posting riddles, etc. Overall, this category consisted of 140,000 posts. Most of them were posted in forum sections explicitly dedicated to “fun.”

These findings suggest that seniors’ online communities provide a unique form of casual leisure that involves play, active entertainment, and sociable conversation. The present study aimed to examine this premise and to further explore the fun culture in these communities. The study intended to describe this new form of network communication and to discover its unique qualities. By investigating these qualities, assumptions regarding the communities’ potential impact on successful aging could be drawn.

Design and Methods

The study was based on the same data set that was used in the aforementioned pioneer study (Nimrod, 2010), but although the former study utilized a quantitative approach, the current investigation was qualitative and applied an online ethnography approach frequently described as netnography (Kozinets, 2002, 2006; Langer & Beckman, 2005; Sade-Beck, 2004). Netnography
is a research method rooted in cyberculture literature (e.g., Manovich, 2003; Robin & Webster, 1999), which defined cyberculture as a culture that has emerged from the use of computer networks for communication, entertainment, or business. It is “a new qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications” (Kozinets, 2002, p. 65).

Netnography is based on observations of technologically mediated interactions in online networks and communities and the culture (or “cyber culture”) shared between and among them (Hine, 2000; Mann & Stewart, 2000). Applied in various disciplines and in numerous studies, netnography has illuminated many social issues. For example, McLelland (2002) used it to examine communities of gay men in Japan. He found that the Internet provides a unique opportunity for relationship building between individuals who are otherwise deterritorialized, diasporic, and transnational. Another example is a study by Fay (2007), who explored a feminist online network. She demonstrated how online connectivity, along with a differentiated understanding of mobility and academic feminism, shapes belonging in the context of a transnational feminist network.

Although it is a qualitative and interpretive research methodology that adapts the traditional ethnographic research techniques, it is distinguishable from traditional approaches by four distinct characteristics. First, it is mostly based on published texts. Second, it observes behaviors of particular interacting people, but the individuals themselves remain unobservable. Third, it often relies on archives, as online communications are usually saved. Finally, it examines a unique form of private interactions that take place in a public space.

Netnography tends to leave most of the specifics of the adaptation to the individual researcher. The researcher may choose to study the researched communities by utilizing a participative approach, which is closer to traditional ethnographic standards. Yet, the study may also be purely observational in which the researcher is a “lurker” (Kozinets, 2006) who only observes the online communication but does not take an active part in it. The benefit of nonparticipant observations is that they ensure that the dynamics and behaviors in the examined online communities are not influenced by the researcher’s presence (Dholakia & Zhang, 2004).

Netnography suggests the use of specific procedures, including (a) entrée: establishment of research questions and identification of suitable online sites for the study; (b) data collection: direct copying of the texts from the computer-mediated communications and observations of the community and its members, interactions, and meanings; and (c) analysis and interpretation: classification, coding analysis, and contextualization of communicative acts (Kozinets, 2002; Langer & Beckman, 2005).

Entrée

The study examined a full year’s data from the same communities that the aforementioned pioneer study of seniors’ online communities had investigated (Nimrod, 2010), as these communities had rich fun online data. Netnography suggests that data collection should continue as long as it generates new insights (i.e., until saturation). Therefore, analysis ended when new data yielded no new insights. That happened after analyzing 6 communities that were randomly selected out of the 14 communities examined in the previous study (see Table 1). One community had both a forum and a chat room, but only data from the forum were examined. Four of the communities were from the United States, one was from British, and one was from Canadian. However, all of them targeted a global audience.

Table 1. The Seniors’ Online Communities Examined in this Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community name</th>
<th>Address</th>
<th>Community type</th>
<th>Center</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>50 plus</td>
<td><a href="http://discuss.50plus.com">http://discuss.50plus.com</a></td>
<td>Forum</td>
<td>Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cool Grandma</td>
<td><a href="http://www.coolgrandma.com">www.coolgrandma.com</a></td>
<td>Forum + chat</td>
<td>United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Retirement Forum</td>
<td><a href="http://www.early-retirement.org">www.early-retirement.org</a></td>
<td>Forum</td>
<td>United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDF 50</td>
<td><a href="http://www.idf60.co.uk">www.idf60.co.uk</a></td>
<td>Forum</td>
<td>United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Over 50 Golden Group</td>
<td><a href="http://theover50goldengroup.net">http://theover50goldengroup.net</a></td>
<td>Forum</td>
<td>United States</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: IDF stands for I Don’t Feel.*
Since the current study was qualitative, it did not apply any software solutions and tracked the amount of text collected and read, and the number of distinct participants. However, based on the fact that the 14 communities yielded 140,000 fun online posts during the research period (again, see Nimrod, 2010), it is reasonable to assume that the 6 communities together held at least 50,000 posts of that category.

Data Collection

To follow-up on the former study (Nimrod, 2010), the study examined the same research period (between April 1, 2007 and March 31, 2008) and relied on the forums’ archives. Although in the previous research, posts that were described as fun on line were found in various discussions, this study only followed forum sections dedicated to fun (such as “games,” “quizzes,” “jokes,” “humor,” or “other”). The rationale behind this was both theoretical and practical. From the theoretical perspective, the study aimed to explore the fun culture in the communities not the general seniors’ cyberculture, and these sections provided the essence of that culture. From the practical perspective, even though other sections (such as sections on health or family) may have had a random joke or a quiz, reviewing them meant an immense and quite useless effort.

Analysis and Interpretation

All relevant sections were subjected to cross-case analysis and then constant comparison strategies (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to identify contents, participatory behavior, and interpersonal dynamics in the communities. As a first step, the author and her research assistant read each section carefully and generated descriptive codes and categories through open coding. The author and her research assistant did this separately, while constantly comparing the codes and the classifications to assure analysis accuracy and consistency. For example, the category “online social games” included three subcategories, and each subcategory included various codes. When examining a game, each analyst, separately, coded it and classified it into a subcategory. Then, both analysts compared their codes and classifications. In most cases, there was an agreement between the coders. Differences were discussed and adjudicated.

Once establishing this initial coding framework, we used axial coding (making connections between a category and its subcategories) to identify variations found within each category and moved back and forth in collaboration between preliminary subgroupings and revised versions to refine the codes and settle on subcategories. Constant comparison between investigators’ interpretations, between different texts of a specific forum, and between different forums enabled generating preliminary and refined subcategories and axial links. We also used reflexive and theoretical notations to refine the analysis and shape interpretations.

Results

Contents—Types

Examination of the type of contents posted in the communities demonstrated that the majority of posts were part of online social games, while jokes, funny stories, and videos comprised a much smaller volume of posts. After grouping the various games, we divided them into three groups: “cognitive,” “associative,” and “creative.”

Cognitive Games.—Cognitive games mainly included trivia games that challenged participants’ general knowledge and alphabetical games that tested their vocabulary. An example for the latter may be the “Compound words—A to Z” game. In this game, which eventually included 2,196 posts (data are from the archive’s numerator), participants were asked to post in alphabetical order words that are “made when two (or more) words are joined to form a new word.” Similarly, in “Adjectives & Inanimate Objects A to Z” (681 posts), they were asked to post in alphabetical order objects and adjectives that started with the same letter (e.g., agnostic apple); and in “Double T—A to Z” (152 posts), they were asked to do the same with words with a double T.

Associative Games.—The associative games were somewhat similar to the cognitive games in their mechanisms, but in these cases, the previous participant’s post triggered the next one. For example, “Go-togethers” (477 posts) was a game which asked participants to post two items that go together, the first being the former participant’s second item (e.g., peas and carrots, carrots and rabbits, rabbits and Easter baskets, etc.). Similarly, in the “Four word” game (141 posts), each participant...
was asked to write a sentence starting with the last word of the sentence posted by the previous participant (e.g., My feet are cold; Cold feet warm heart; Heart shape cookies rock!).

Creative Games.—Creative games required more imagination, and their outcome was a story, a limerick, or a poem. For example “limericks” (1,108 posts) was a game in which each participant posted one line and the person who finished off the limerick gave the first line of the next one. Another example is the “rhyming sentences” game (1,049 posts), where one participant wrote a sentence and the next one had to post a rhyming sentence. The instructions were “To be as funny/outrageous as you can be . . . for example: I once had a dog by the name of Spot, Who thought he was scoring, but was not.”

Contents—Subjects

An examination of the main subjects of contents, whether they were games, jokes, or funny stories, led to identifying seven main categories: “sex,” “gender differences,” “aging,” “grandparenting,” “faith,” “politics,” and “Alcohol.” The first two subjects seemed to be quite dominant and were present in the jokes’ and games’ content, as well as in the dialogue between the participants. For example, in the middle of a game, one of the male participants asked: “OHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!! Where was I Rena????” and she answered “In the Back seat with Shirley!” Another example is a game titled “Words with Two Meanings”, which included items such as:

COMMUNICATION (ko-myoo-ni-kay-shon).
Female: The open sharing of thoughts and feelings with one’s partner.
Male: Leaving a note before taking off on a fishing trip with the boys.

That humorous and somewhat teasing tone characterized many posts and was manifested in posts concerning “aging” as well. For example:

You know you’re getting old when
1. Your houseplants are alive, and you can’t smoke any of them.
2. Having sex in a twin bed is out of the question.
3. You keep more food than beer in the fridge.

The posts relating to “aging” frequently corresponded with “sex,” as in the example above. Another example is a post-titled “Lovemaking tips for seniors,” which included suggestions such as: “Put on your glasses. Double check that your partner is actually in bed with you”; and “Set timer for 3 minutes, in case you doze off in the middle.” “Aging” also frequently corresponded with “grandparenting.” For example, a post-titled “Lost grandpa” started with the statement: “ALL GRANDPAS, HEED THIS WARNING: Do NOT lose your Grand kids in the Mall!”

“Faith,” “Politics,” and “Alcohol” were mainly popular subjects for jokes or for humorous posts such as “Parochial Elementary Bible School Test Responses” that included real students’ quotes, such as “The first commandments was when Eve told Adam to eat the apple.” Another example is a post-titled “HOW TO START EACH DAY WITH A POSITIVE OUTLOOK”:


PS: Next week we’ll do Nancy Pelosi.”

Participatory Behaviors

Analysis led to identifying three behaviors characterizing participants in the fun sections: “selective timing,” “expressive style,” and “personalization.”

Selective Timing.—There were higher participation rates in the afternoons and during the weekdays. This may suggest that participation was a “core” activity (Kelly, 1999) that provided distraction value during the workweek even for retirees. Participation was relatively lower during the weekends and during the holidays (i.e., in December). A complete break between December 25 and January 8 was evident in many games. Many participants returned to their communities in January. In addition, many new members joined the communities at that time.

Expressive Style.—Participants in all communities tended to use an expressive writing style. This included three components. Participants tended to use various fonts and colors in their posts. They also frequently used common emoticons (e.g., ;), :O) and similes to express their emotions. In addition, many of them utilized “electronic paralanguage” (Mann & Stewart,
which included abbreviations (e.g., BTW, LOL), multiple vowels that represent intonation ("soooooo goooood"), written accents ("Ya know," "wee lass"), multiple punctuation marks ("????"), use of capital letters or underline ("Turn them ALL OFF!"), and use of asterisks for censorship ("big t*ts").

**Personalization.** —Many participants created a personalized online character for themselves, which was reflected in their nicknames and avatars (see Figure 1). Many also added fixed mottos (signatures) that appeared at the bottom of each of their posts, such as “Dogs aren’t our whole lives, but they make our lives whole.—Roger Caras”; and “The best vitamin for making friends . . . . B1”. Although most participants chose to remain anonymous, their nicknames, avatars, and mottoes provided hints about their gender, interests, character, and nationality. These, too, were very often humorous.

**Interpersonal Dynamics**

Analysis of the dynamics in the fun sections yielded complex findings, which we divided into three groups: “actors,” “norms,” and “relationships.”

**Actors.** —Participants were either “regulars,” “occasional participants,” or “lurkers.” Most of the texts were written by the regulars, who visited the communities quite often and posted on a regular basis. Some of them, who exhibited higher involvement, were recognized as leaders. Their leadership manifested itself in taking initiative, as they tended to suggest new games and/or revive abandoned games. They also tended to lead discussion of the games, mediate interactions, and express concern about participants who haven’t showed up for a while. Occasional participants included people who joined a community for a short period and then left or people who visited it infrequently. When they did, however, they actively participated in it. Most of the members, though, seemed to be lurkers. Examining data from the archives’ numerators regarding popular threads showed that the number of views was sometimes dozens and even hundreds of times the number of replies. For example, a game named “PROGRESSIVE CATEGORIES—A to Z” had 298 replies and 31,912 views (1:107), “CHAIN REACTION” had 336 replies and 90,183 views (1:268), and the game “PEOPLE from PLACES A to Z” had 118 replies and 72,944 views (1:618). There is no way to tell whether lurkers actually read the posts or not, but it is assumed that many of them did.

![Figure 1. Examples of personalized names and avatars.](image-url)
Norms.—The communities seemed to have a norm system that evolved with time. Many of the dominant norms associated with “following the game.” This included both keeping the game rules and sticking to it (i.e., not discussing other issues in a game thread). When a player was confused and did not follow the rules, other participants gently pointed out the mistake. For example: “At least two I’s!” or “Very, very good, mate—but that’s not actually the game we’re playing”. In such cases, the confused player apologized (e.g., “I did it again!!”, “ooops too many words . . . sorry!”) and was forgiven (“You’re forgiven! Thank you!”). Similarly, when someone posted something brilliant or funny, participants reacted with a positive feedback. Occasionally, the posts included comments that had nothing to do with the game, such as comments on the weather or the gas prices, but after a couple of posts the game continued.

Although most of the dynamic was within the forums, participants also shared links to other websites, online games, and funny videos. In these cases, they tended to explain why they shared the information (“Here is a nice calm . . . relaxing . . . ADDICTIVE . . . game!”) and added advice (“Turn the volume on”, “watch out for 8 . . . 13 . . . 17 . . . and 18.”). Again, other participants provided feedback (“WOW great video—I laughed all the way through it”). Overall, although being playful and frequently teasing, participants were very friendly and gentle with each other. They tried not to hurt anyone’s feelings and avoided offensive language (“It’s sooo tempting to put something rude here.”).

Relationships.—The “regulars” identified each other and had interpersonal dialogues. Most of the dialogues related to the games (“Hi Heather, Come back and play again. I’ll add an item for you.”), but participants often shared personal information as well. This happened occasionally during the ongoing game dynamics (“I used to live there as a child”) or in designated games such as “MEMORIES . . . YOUTH/LIFE”, in which players shared real experiences (usually funny ones). The regulars also seemed to have “group humor,” and they tended to exhibit self-humor:

“Ibex—You are just a great big chicken!!!! And Muffy—You jumped from E to P and fractured the alphabet and . . . I don’t know what letter I am supposed to use now. I’ll go to another topic and let someone else figure it out. It’s too early and I’m too old to be so confused.”

Group dynamics mostly evolved around games, while sections devoted to jokes usually consisted of one joke after the other, with occasional comments on them. Similarly, group dynamics was more vibrant in forums that were play oriented (such as Cool Grandma) compared with jokes oriented forums (such as IDF50). There was no evidence for relationships that existed outside the forums or even in other sections of forums, but some participants mentioned sending private messages to each other (“I just had a secret message from Rainbow and she said because ‘Wackiness’ does not have two ‘i’s’ it does not count”).

Discussion

According to Kozinets (1998), netnography is useful for three types of studies. First of all, it is used to study “pure” cybercultures and virtual communities that do not exist in real life and are evident exclusively through computer-mediated communication. It is also a tool for studying “derived” cybercultures and virtual communities (i.e., communities that initially existed in real life). Finally, it is an exploratory tool for studying general topics. Although the current study aimed to examine a “pure” cyberculture, the fun culture in seniors’ online communities, it also provided some general insights regarding older adults’ play and casual leisure.

The findings supported the premise that seniors’ online communities provided a unique form of casual leisure. The selective timing of participation, as well as the occasional participation pattern, implied that on the serious leisure, casual leisure continuum, participating in the fun sections of the communities is much closer to the casual end. Participation did not require any special training other than learning how to use the Internet nor commitment, effort, and perseverance. Members visited the communities when they had free time and wanted to enjoy a pleasurable activity. It did not demand a high level of involvement.

Yet, the type of casual leisure varied among the groups of participants. For the regulars and the occasional participants, visiting the communities involved play and active entertainment. Play, which has a more experimental and amateur nature, was mostly reflected in the creative games, whereas active entertainment was evident in the cognitive and associative games, which are similar
to party games. For the regulars, participation was also sociable conversation, as they were involved not only in the games but also in the interpersonal dialogues. They identified each other, exchanged personal information and experiences, and had their own “group humor.” As suggested by Stebbins (2007), participants often pursued these types of casual leisure in combinations of two and three. Participants often played, joked, and had casual discussions in the same thread.

For the lurkers, on the other hand, the type of casual leisure was quite different. Because they did not take an active part in the online interactions, this activity may be best described as passive entertainment, which is similar to watching TV. Because most participants fell into the lurkers’ category, as the archives’ numerators demonstrated, it seems that such passive activity is most appealing for seniors. It is not clear from the data what exactly attracts them. It is possible that they enjoy following real people and dynamics, an activity that is similar to watching reality or game shows on TV. Assuming that lurkers are older adults as well, it is also likely that they enjoy following people their age, as they can identify with them. In addition, it is likely that the humoristic atmosphere in the forums attracts them. Yet, it is hard to draw any conclusion about the lurkers without further investigation, as they were “present absentees” in this study.

A consideration of the potential benefits for the active participants, that is, the regulars and the occasional participants, suggests that all the five benefits associated with casual leisure (Stebbins, 2001) were easily attained within this form of activity. Playing the creative and associative games provided participants an opportunity to experience creativity and serendipitous discovery. Participants also achieved this through using an expressive style in their writing. The cognitive trivia and alphabetical games provided edutainment, as one could learn something new while being involved in these entertaining experiences. Being involved and even just exposed to the humor in the games, jokes, and discussions promoted a sense of regeneration or recreation. In addition, the ongoing dialogue among the “regulars” provided interpersonal relationships.

Upon examination of the various characteristics of that fun culture, however, the potential benefits for the active participants seem to be even more multifaceted. All three types of games played in the online communities provided an opportunity for self-expression, demonstration of abilities and knowledge, and even cognitive exercise. Therefore, as suggested by previous research on older adults’ play (e.g., Goldstein et al., 1997; Hoppes et al., 2001; Miller, 2005), such involvement could lead to many enduring rewards, such as mental fitness, constructive use of leisure time, increased feelings of success and achievement, and improved self-esteem. An interesting fact was that the games in the communities were not competitive. Hence, a sense of success and improved self-esteem could result not from being better than others but from the positive feedback from others on one’s own creativity, knowledge, or sense of humor. Because the study did not measure the outcomes of participation, these possible rewards should be tested in future research.

The seven main categories of subjects reflected in the forums’ contents, whether they were games, jokes, or funny stories, were all associated with participants’ lives. Although some of them were general (i.e., politics, faith), others were more private and even exclusive to seniors (i.e., aging and grandparenting). These subjects, in combination with the open format of the games and the dialogues, fostered connectedness and enabled cultivating oneself and others. Therefore, they offered all the components required to provide meaningful play for older people (De Schutter & Abeele, 2008). This may explain why the fun sections are so dominant in seniors’ online communities and why these communities became so popular. In a reality of limited alternatives for digital games that meet older adults’ needs and interests (De Schutter & Abeele, 2008; Griffiths et al., 2004; IJsselsteijn et al., 2007), seniors found an independent system to satisfy their need for play.

Compared with face-to-face support interactions, online communities have several unique features, including anonymity, invisibility, and status neutralization. These characteristics may explain the dominance of subjects, such as sex, gender differences, and alcohol. These qualities afforded humor and liminality (i.e., a state of openness and frivolity, where normal constraints to thought and behavior are relaxed), which may not be appropriate in other contexts of participants’ lives. Previous research (e.g., Bethea & Pecchioni, 2000; MacKinlay, 2004; Panish, 2002) had demonstrated not only that humor has a general positive impact on seniors’ well-being but that it is also a significant mechanism for coping with the challenges and losses accompanying aging. Laughing
at a problem can distance and diffuse it, provide distraction, reduce stress, enhance a sense of control, and foster optimism and hope. Because “aging” and the losses associated with it (such as memory loss or sexual dysfunction) were a main content in the humorous dialogue, it is suggested that the fun culture in seniors’ online communities provides a means for coping with aging. It may also reflect the positive effect suggested by Carstensen and colleagues (Carstensen & Mikels, 2005; Mather & Carstensen, 2005), which is demonstrated in older adults’ greater attention to regulating emotion and more focus on positive experiences.

Although remaining anonymous, participants did provide certain personal information about themselves through their personalized online characters, as well as in designated games and in the interpersonal dialogues that accompanied the ongoing game dynamics. This created what may be described as intimacy among strangers. The combination of that alleged intimacy with the communities’ liminality created a sense of communitas—an intense feeling of group unity and solidarity, reinforced and facilitated by collective liminality (Turner, 1982). The communitas, however, seemed to emerge only around games not around jokes. This leads to the conclusion that humor alone does not engender the social bonding associated with communitas. It takes a more active and engaging involvement for a group of strangers to have communitas.

That communitas lacked the social support component found in real life groups, such as the Red Hat Society (Hutchinson et al., 2008; Yarnal, 2006) or even in other online communities (e.g., Barak, Boniel-Nissim, & Suler, 2008). Unless participants also communicated outside the fun sections, for which there was very little evidence in the data, their relationships were quite superficial. Such relations cannot replace real relationships and/or significantly help seniors who suffer from loneliness. Still, they may provide enjoyable interaction and, to a certain extent, a sense of belonging. The positive effect of such experiences may permeate other aspects of participants’ lives, including relationships with family and friends.

Overall, the accumulative effects of participating in the fun culture in seniors’ online communities are quite positive. This culture provides participants with the many durable benefits associated with casual leisure. In addition, its unique features enable meaningful play, liminality, and communitas, which may have positive effect on participants’ daily lives. In addition, the humor in the communities, as well as the opportunity to practice and demonstrate their abilities and enjoy others’ feedback, offer important means for coping with aging. Participating in that fun culture enables older adults to remain socially and mentally active and to express their strengths and enduring interests. Because such active engagement is a key aspect of successful aging (McKenna et al., 2007; Menec, 2003; Warr et al., 2004), it is suggested that the communities have a positive impact on seniors’ well-being and successful aging.

Successful aging, according to Rowe and Kahn (1998) is associated with high levels of physical health, cognitive health, and social engagement. Participating in the fun culture in online communities can keep seniors socially engaged even when their offline social networks shrink due to friends’ disabilities and deaths. It also contributes to their cognitive health, as many of the games require activating cognitive abilities. The trivia games, for example, activate the memory, the alphabetical games refresh language skills and the associative and creative games stimulate the imagination. Even if one is just “lurking” the games and does not take an active part in them, these abilities are still triggered.

As far as physical health is concerned, participating in the fun culture has no demonstrable contribution. However, it has benefits for people who face physical constraints that limit their abilities to participate in various outdoor activities. The communities offer such people an enjoyable and varied leisure activity that may replace and somewhat compensate for lost opportunities. Such mechanisms of optimization and compensation fit the Selective Optimization and Compensation model of successful aging, advanced by Baltes and colleagues (P. B. Baltes & Baltes, 1990; M. M. Baltes & Carstensen, 1999). They help older adults make the best of what is possible.

Limitations

Even though the data set examined in this study is remarkably large, it does not represent all seniors’ online communities. Because it examined only English-speaking communities, this study mostly represented communities of relatively well to do seniors from Western countries. Moreover, because this research followed a qualitative approach, it does not provide precise numerical...
information when describing several phenomena, such as the number of posts in each subcategory or the number of participants in each group. The author used traditional terms (such as many or occasionally) to describe the findings, which should be treated as conjectures that require further research.

**Implications and Future Research**

The implications of this study are mainly theoretical. Examining the fun culture in seniors’ online discovered the various social phenomena associated with this new form of network communication. While offering many findings and insights, this investigation provided solid ground for drawing assumptions regarding the communities’ potential impact on successful aging. These assumptions should be further investigated, using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Comparing participants and nonparticipants, as well as different types of participants (including lurkers), will enable us to determine whether and how participating in that culture contributes to older adults’ well-being. Future research should also explore issues such as the quality of the relationships created in the communities, differences between online fun cultures of young and old adults, and between subgroups among seniors (based on gender, age, ethnicity, occupation, health status, etc.). Examining communities from non-Western countries would enable exploring variations in contents and cross-cultural differences. In addition, using software solutions would provide precise information about each of the phenomena described in this study.

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