

REDEFINING COMMUNITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE:
AN EXAMINATION OF THE PHYSICAL AND FACEBOOK COMMUNITIES OF
GENERATION X

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.....Thanks to Sally for your support through thick, thin and everything in between.

Without your influence and guidance, pursuing my education would have only been a pipedream. Also, thanks to those who have believed in me. You helped carry me through.

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ABSTRACT

As technology evolves, it is reshaping the way that people communicate and define community. Online social networks, such as Facebook, bring people together in a digital environment. However, it is not clear whether participants reap some of the same benefits as they do with offline relationships and communities. This qualitative study will utilize one-on-one interviews to examine the generation that has bridged the technological divide, Generation X, in order to gauge whether physical communities and Facebook seem to provide similar benefits.

INTRODUCTION

Technology is changing rapidly and reshaping the way people communicate. In the United States, it is virtually impossible to go anywhere without hearing a mobile phone ringing, seeing a teenager text messaging, running into a wireless “hot-spot,” with open access Internet connectivity, and seeing people handling their business and personal needs on handheld devices. There is no question that as a society, the United States is wired.

However, there has been speculation that these advances come with a cost. Technology often takes the blame for impairing youths’ and young adults’ abilities to communicate on an interpersonal level. In the United States, a new English has emerged in the digital space as a result of instant and text messaging platforms. This language uses acronyms and abbreviated spellings that often include letters and symbols and there are online dictionaries to help decipher the meanings of these new “words.” Additionally, ‘emoticons’ allow us to express our feelings using carefully positioned punctuation marks.

While today’s youth, the Millennials, are rabid consumers of these technologies, the generations that came before them are also rapidly adapting their communication preferences to incorporate these advances. Generation X has had to endure the push of the past and the pull of the future, having to bridge the technological leaps that have occurred between the Baby Boomer generations and those that have occurred during the Millennials’ emergence.

Generation X is defined as those individuals born between 1965 and 1980. Both the generation before, Baby Boomers, and the generation after, Millennials, have been

heavily studied. However, some have defined Generation X as “the ignored generation” because of the lack of research that has been done on this group (Stephey, 2008).

For Generation Xers, life existed before cable television, the microwave, the mobile phone, the computer and most certainly, the Internet, among other advances. Charged with taking the reins from the retiring Baby Boomers, Generation X is bridging the gap of technological advances in a way that no other generation has seen in the history of the world. Yet, the impact of these changes on this generation have not been widely recognized, discussed or studied. It is for this reason that this research was inspired.

This study will examine the online and physical, also considered offline, communities for Generation X study participants. Using the popular online social network, Facebook, the researcher will examine participants’ views of community to find what benefits they feel they derive from use of Facebook and compare these responses to examine whether those benefits are similar to what they derive from their physical communities or whether there are clear distinctions. The study will look for patterns in responses to the qualitative study to identify whether Generation Xers are experiencing similar benefits from online and physical communities utilizing a Uses and Gratifications framework in addition to seeking whether or not Facebook is replacing direct interaction with physical communities.

Online refers to being connected through computers that have connectivity with the Internet. Social networking is how individuals connect with one another through a variety of methods and for multiple reasons. Humans are social creatures by nature and

need interpersonal relationships in order to be psychologically balanced (Coyle & Vaughn, 2008).

Facebook is a Web site that is designed to allow people to connect with others, often with similar interests and from specific locations. It is very easy for members to build networks of friends and special interest groups. It is not only the fastest growing social network on the Web today (Lafayette, 2008), it is also the largest in existence today and as such, it will be the subject site for this study. It features a variety of geographic, demographic and special interest networks which members have the opportunity to join. In recent years, the site has expanded to include fan pages and group pages in order for members to “like” and connect with their favorite celebrities and brands. These pages allow users to connect with the brands, products, concepts, entertainers and others that help to individuate them.

Facebook also has fairly stringent standards on how accounts can be created and facilitated. Members sign up with a legitimate email address and create their Facebook profile to connect with others on the site (About Facebook, 2008). In a testament to how powerful the site has grown, Facebook founder and CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, was named Time Magazine’s Person of the Year in 2010.

For the purpose of this research, community is simply defined as a group of individuals who share an interpersonal communication with one another. Communities come together for a multitude of reasons: family, geographic, demographic, special interests, trauma, recovery and more. In this study, the researcher will examine how the actual communities that Generation Xers are a part of the virtual communities that they build on Facebook.

A theoretical framework that has been applied across multiple media, Uses and Gratifications will examine physical communities as a medium as well as online communities that exist on Facebook. While its use in emerging digital technology is increasing in frequency, there are no known studies utilizing Uses and Gratifications theory to examine physical community.

This study has value to the communication, psychology and sociology disciplines. From a communication perspective, it will help to understand the mindset of Facebook members when they are active with their network of friends and groups. This will provide insight for information providers and marketers to better reach engaged audiences. From a psychology/sociology perspective, this study begins to scratch the surface of human connectedness in an emerging digital environment and whether virtual connections provide some of the same benefits and fulfill the same needs as physical connections. This could eventually lead to new treatments for disorders such as depression, social isolation and various phobias. Additionally, social networks are in the news more frequently as the cause of divorces, crimes, job selection and even a recent death of an infant whose mother was being allegedly neglectful due to her Farmville game habit.

Uses and Gratifications Theory was chosen for this research because it will help to clearly identify the benefits of both online and physical community. The researchers will isolate key responses and code these within the framework of theory by examining the five gratifications; escape, social interaction, identity, inform and educate and entertain (Blumler & Katz, 1974). The rationale for this will be to establish key benchmarks about online and physical communities, to look for trends between them, to

begin to determine whether they provide the same benefits and fulfill the same needs, and to guide future research.

This primary guiding purpose of this study is to explore how Generation Xers who utilize Facebook define community and whether they use it to connect with existing friends and acquaintances or to build new relationships. This research will also serve as a foundation to guide future studies in the realm of mediated communities compared to physical communities. Additionally the purpose of this study will be to examine the ways that this demographic defines community and whether or not online community provides the same gratifications and meets the same needs as physical community.

As the world of technology evolves, so will the findings of studies such as this. But, why should we care specifically about Generation X's place in this? With the Baby Boomer generation poised to pass the torch of business and politics to Generation X, it will become increasingly important to understand how the generation that bridged the technological divide relates both intra and inter-generationally.

Community

Any research of this nature must first look to define community. However, there is a common theme that runs throughout much of the discussions around existing research; community is difficult to define.

In the forward for Cohen's, "The Symbolic Construction of Community," the editor noted how challenging it can be to try to define community, yet acknowledged that it was one of the "key ideas" of social science (Cohen, 1985, p. 7-8).

From scientists, to practitioners to researchers, the concept of community consistently proves elusive. Almgren noted that establishing a definition has proven

difficult for sociologists, noting the “notion that community is embodied in the village or small town where human associations are characterized as *Gemeinschaft*: that is, associations that are intimate, familiar, sympathetic, mutually interdependent, and reflective of a shared social consciousness (in contrast to relationships that are *Gesellschaft*—casual, transitory, without emotional investment, and based on self-interest) (Almgren, 2001, p. 362).”

Citing Mannarinni and Fedi’s 2009 report, researchers note the lack of theoretical and methodological concept of community (Nowell & Boyd, 2010). Scientists, researchers and theorists continue to struggle with whether community research should center on a geographical, bordered concept or a series of connections through organizations and a sense of membership.

‘Community’ means different things to different people. We speak of the community of nations, the community of Jamaica Plain, the gay community, the IBM community, the Catholic community, the Yale community, the African American community, the ‘virtual’ community of cyberspace, and so on. Each of us derives some sense of belonging from among the various communities to which we might, in principle, belong. For most of us, our deepest sense of belonging is to our most intimate social networks, especially family and friends. Beyond that perimeter, lie work, church, neighborhood, civic life and the assortment of other ‘weak ties’ that constitute our personal stock of social capital (Putnam, 2000, p. 273-274).

In a testament to the challenges of standardized definition, Fernback noted, “we group ourselves in aggregated physical villages that we call communities – urban, rural,

suburban or even walled; we similarly group ourselves into symbolic subdivisions based on lifestyle, identity or character that we call communities – religious, leisurely, philosophical, or even virtual (1999, p. 203-204).”

The consistent lack of a standard definition makes it difficult to identify what community really means. Thus, while there are a number of ways in which people connect, the concept of community appears to be a highly personalized idea. However, throughout history, researchers have devoted a great deal of effort to examining the ways individuals connect.

Religion and nationalism were some of the earliest ways in which researchers attempted to define community. However, even within these frameworks, a consistent definition has proven challenging. To assess why it is so difficult to define, we must look at the historical construct of community.

Although not within the framework of media theory, some researchers have attempted to identify key benefits that individuals obtain from community to help better understand connectedness. In McMillan and Chavis’ research, they defined community as having four elements: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection (1986).

Throughout history, there has always been a common thread to tie groups of individuals together to form communities. Through the evolution of language and media, members of religious communities were able to begin to think more along the lines of nationalism (Anderson, 1983).

Religion has provided a strong connection throughout history. Anderson pointed to the distance that can exist between various members of the same religion; however,

indicated that there are always distinct languages and connectedness to tie members together. In his look back to the origins of religion and spirituality, he pointed out unifying languages that existed within religion and acknowledged those languages as an early form of “media (1983, p. 20).” Putnam also had the same sentiments regarding spiritual connectedness, noting that religious communities have provided a strong sense of “social capital,” which in his definition represents connectedness within and between our social networks, and support not just spiritual connection, but also focus on a variety of causes and missions (2000).

Shared mentalities have always provided commonalities from which it is easier to put defining lines around community. The emergence of nations gave rise to patriotism and national pride. In his exploration of the emergence of nationalism, Anderson defined nations as “imagined political communities,” noting the lack of direct contact between members (Anderson, 1983, p. 15-16). He defined imagined community through Cf. Seton-Watson, who noted that even in the smallest nations, people will not know one another directly, but are united in their minds by a sense of “communion (as cited in Anderson, 1983, p. 15).”

As nations and religions evolved, so did communities. The introduction of the printing press changed the way borders were drawn, how individuals connected and ultimately redefined the concept of community. Anderson’s look at the concept of “Imagined Communities” was one of the first to tie the concept of community to media. In his work, he notes the origins of language among groups to be a form of media, which was later followed by newspapers and then evolved to mass production (1983).

Newspapers and books used the concept of “mass” to redraw the lines of community and the world was forever changed. Anderson examined excerpts from four books written in the 1800’s (1983). The common thread among the readings was a sense of nationalism in each text. The readings were focused on locality, servitude and a sense of responsibility to the main characters. While Anderson delved deeper to demonstrate the unifying thread between these readings and imagined communities, the language used in these texts were not much different than the languages of religion, they were just able to reach a larger number of people simultaneously. The emerging “mass media” were allowing community to expand beyond nations and religions and center around printed words.

As social science evolved so did the interest in what makes a community. Putnam popularized the notion of evolution and devolution of community in America. In the 1960’s, community was often defined by organizations. As outsiders looking in, the 60’s seemed to idealize the concept of connectedness. The free-love movement and perceived independent spirit and unity through division seemed to provide the perfect framework for a new definition of what makes up community. In his exploration, Putnam looked at the ebb and flow of the concept of community through his social capital theory framework. This framework noted that “social networks have value,” which indicated that individuals’ and society’s productivity is affected by their social circles (Putnam, 2000, p. 19).

The concept of productivity makes sense when one looks at the power of “movements.” Putnam noted that the larger organizations, non-profit, cause-related, special interest and more, have grown in prominence and even political power in this

country. While not the only indicator of community involvement, participation in these organizations gives some insight. While people were engaged and social in the first 60-70 years of the twentieth century, through the 1990's that level of participation dwindled. The communities that do remain are those that are very singularly focused, where very like-minded individuals connect on a single, narrow issue (Putnam, 2000). This makes sense when we think about today's media. There are Websites for niche special interests and sites such as Meetup.com that are designed to connect people via physical community based on very specific interests.

Putnam went on to theorize where and how social connections were most likely to form. These connections were usually: political, civic, religion, workplace, "informal social connections," such as those in bowling leagues, at the local bar, book clubs and more. He reported that in the late 1990's we were spending much less time with our communities, investing in social capital (Putnam, 2000). As a result of his findings, the title "Bowling Alone" was born, likely based on his observation that while bowling as an activity was on the rise, league bowling was in decline.

League bowling was not the only social activity in decline. Between 1960 and the 1990's participation in causes, missions and church activities was down as much as 50 percent. Unions in the workplace, which once created a sense of connectedness, were unraveling. Additionally, he noted how camaraderie in the workplace also declined for a myriad of reasons including the more competitive working environment and a climate of constant reorganization (Putnam, 2000).

As American society moved through the twentieth century, it seemed that things were becoming more fragmented. Researchers have constantly looked to emerging

media to see what, if any impact, advances were having on the already unclear definition of community.

One such examination looked at a neighborhood's response to a New York City phone outage that lasted for several weeks in the 1970's. The study found that while two-thirds of those affected felt more isolated, one-third took the time to go out and connect face-to-face in their community (Putnam, citing Wurtzel and Turner, 2000, p. 168). The summation of this study is that people were more apt to connect with the people around them when they didn't have access to the people who were part of their telephone tree. While some believe that access to the telephone created a feeling of "psychological neighborhoods," Putnam concluded that the telephone merely fosters existing community, but does not replace physical community (2000, p. 168).

Reflections sometimes include nostalgic recounts of physical connections and interpersonal relationships with those who have surrounded us:

My history in community building began on the front porch of my grandmother's house. It was there on summer evenings that my sister and I would sit in the twilight on the steps and listen as the neighbors walked by, sharing the ups and downs of life in Richmond, Virginia. Our community there was defined by our neighborhood, and most of the people all lived nearby. Older or younger, they shared similar values, life challenges, traditions and culture. And they helped each other out. It was here that I learned my respect and care for older adults – and what it means to be part of a community (Creating online community, 1997 | 33)."

Here the author painted a vivid image of what community meant to him and what neighborhood communities often looked like in the United States from the 1960's through the 1990's (Creating online community, 1997), the coming of age period for Generation Xers. Largely shaped by geographical ties to one another, community once required physical connection (Andrews, 2002).

As we moved into the coming-of-age years for Generation X, the 1980's, media were becoming an increasing presence in our lives, with the birth of MTV and the growth of cable, radio and print outlets. Citing a study by Kingston and Nock, Putnam indicates the isolating power of emerging media in the 1980's. Time in front of the television had replaced conversation and connection. Couples were spending three to four times as much time together in front of the TV than they were spending engaged in conversation with one another. Additionally they were spending six to seven times as much time in front of the TV than they were with community activities (2000, p. 224). Putnam connected this increased interest in TV viewing to a decreased interest in civic engagement. (2000).

As an additional testament to our society's obsession with the TV, in the mid-1990's television viewing consumed approximately 40 percent of the average American's leisure time. While the 30 years prior saw an increase of six additional hours a week of free time, most of those hours were taken over by TV viewing. This seemed to be a continuation of the trend Putnam cited in a 1982 study by Scripps-Howard which found that 80% of leisure time activities for average Americans took place at home (p. 222-223).

He identified significance in two aspects of emerging media. First, news and entertainment had really become increasingly unique to individuals versus focused on things that the masses enjoyed. Secondly, as technology continued to emerge, it allowed individuals to consume it more alone versus in group settings (Putnam, 2000). However, this was in the time of one-way communication from the media. Enter the 1990's and computers were becoming more prevalent and the Internet was beginning to take hold in a globalized society.

Putnam posed several relevant questions. First, "will the Internet in practice turn out to be a niftier telephone or a niftier television?" Also, "will the Internet become predominantly a means of active, social communication or a means of passive, private entertainment? Will computer-mediated communication 'crowd-out' face-to-face ties (2000, p. 179)?" Putnam seems to be posing the questions that this study will attempt to address and questions whether the Web communities of the future would serve as fulfilling "social capital."

At the time "Bowling Alone" was published the digital divide was much larger than it is today and as we will see in the discussion of the literature, people often used online profiles to create personas that were radically different than the real life individual. However, Facebook has changed the landscape with most individuals creating profiles that closely match their real-world selves. Perhaps this is partially due to the idea that share-ability of Web content has also become much easier and people want to uphold their virtual reputations. Plus, our online profiles are becoming ways businesses and individuals are screening prospects and employees. Thus our virtual identities are increasingly becoming a virtual mirror of our physical selves. Increasingly social sharing

has spread on the Web, allowing people to easily share content from any site to their social networks and beyond.

As Putnam, Feldstein and Cohen note, today the gap in the digital divide is more about those who have access to computers and the “computer have-nots (2003, p. 47).” When individuals lack access to computers and technology it puts them at a disadvantage in their communities. Researchers have begun to delve into the area and have started examining the power of online, or virtual, communities as they compare to physical communities. While we have seen repeatedly that community is a highly studied, yet seldom understood area; layering online, or virtual community, onto existing research presents presents similar challenges with an additional variable.

In an attempt to examine the relationship between online profiles and offline personalities, one study used observation, surveys, interviews and content analysis to examine how the face-to-face and online bulletin board interactions between a Hong-Kong lesbian women’s group known as the Queer Sisters affected one another. While Nip did not examine whether or not the Web boards were effective at facilitating new social connections or expanding on existing ones, she did look at how the bulletin boards impacted the face-to-face interaction. Nip found that 76% of the women felt a sense of belonging, contributing to a sense of community, due to their participation on the bulletin boards (2004).

As the discussion turns to our digital presence, we see that the same challenges exist when it comes to defining community. In her introductory paragraph, Reich does an excellent summary of the challenges surrounding the study of online and physical communities:

Communities are foundational to the field of Community Psychology yet they are difficult to define and measure. Once viewed as social groups with ties to geographical locations, online communities interact free of physical or face-to-face contact. This cyberexistence makes the study of communities more challenging. Social networking sites (SNS), such as Facebook and MySpace, are referred to as online communities; however, research has yet to explore whether these sites engender a psychological sense of community (PSC) for users (2010, p. 688).

While it may continue to be challenging to create a standardized definition of community, understanding how people connect online and how that affects individuals' sense of connectedness is an important area to explore as we learn more about the positive impact of social connections on overall well-being. Belonging is something that human beings long for. Reich noted in her research that one area of that was examined was perception of "membership (2010)." Membership is one of the community benefits that McMillan and Chavis discussed in their work (1986). Reich found very little discussion or evidence supporting this benefit as participants did not see their participation in Facebook or MySpace as remotely "exclusive (2010)."

Fernback coined the term computer mediated communication (CMC) and notes that this lends to thinking about these forms of communications as communities. She summarizes, similar to physical communities, "cybercommunities are characterized by common value systems, norms, rules, and the sense of identity, commitment, and association that also characterize various physical communities and other communities of

interest (1999)” In the outside world, these values also apply within many physical communities and are benefits that participants can achieve.

In another effort to define community in a digital framework, Blanchard developed a measurement for ‘sense of virtual community (SOVC)’ by building off of the existing ‘sense of community (SOC)’ measurement. She defined SOVC as “members’ feelings of membership, identity, belonging and attachment to a group that interacts primarily through electronic communication (Blanchard, 2007).” Blanchard’s findings noted that researchers are attempting to look at online community and physical community in the same way; however, there are key variances, which will be discussed later, that make this a flawed approach.

Some may question whether social networking sites should be defined as media. However, they share information, educate, inform and connect. It could be argued that social networking is truly the intersection of media and community. Cohen did not set out to further define community, rather he noted how symbolism plays a part in the construct of our communities (1985). Facebook has become part of our everyday discussions, with people looking to use the site as a connection tool.

We could look at Anderson’s work and apply some of the same concepts to Facebook. For people who are connected as “friends” there is a unique bond. There is a language that is unique for posting to someone’s “Facebook wall” or commenting on the “status.”

In this study, the researcher will look at online community and physical community through a concept quite similar to social capital theory; meaning that there is a defined value to community. However, it could be argued that community is not to be

defined and is unique to the individual. As such, this study will look at the concept of community as a medium and will utilize the uses and gratifications framework to examine what participants glean from their communities as well as how each participant defines community.

In preparation for this study, preliminary discussions have indicated that community has a nostalgic or historic reference. Early casual conversations around the concept have led to reminiscent walks down “memory lane” and discussions about how the fond childhood community memories are made brighter by the ability to connect with favorite people, places and things on Facebook.

In this study, the researcher will attempt to tackle the challenge that Reich and Fernback noted by exploring whether or not Facebook offers users a true “psychological” sense of community, especially in comparison to the sense of community that they may receive from their physical communities.

Generations painted a vivid picture of traditional community (Creating Online Communities, 1997); however, community is changing. For teenagers, it’s all about reaching them in a way that works for them, and that usually involves their technological devices (McLean, 2007). Today’s teens grew up with the Internet, cell phones, instant messaging and texting. Most teens have built their communities both online and offline. However, Generation Xers were part of the transition from reality to virtuality.

Now it is hard to go anywhere online without finding new communities and the groundwork has been laid for quite some time. Traditional media outlets have been trying to figure out the best way to get into the mix for over a decade. MySpace was acquired by Fox News Corp. in 2005 (Siklos, 2005) and sold to artist, Justin Timberlake

and venture capitalists in 2011. Rumors have circled about which media corporation might soon takeover Facebook. However, not all traditional outlets are interested in buying existing online assets. Some are interested in building their own communities.

One small south Florida publication, *Sunline*, could be considered somewhat of a pioneer in the online community space. In the late 1990's, the publication was focused on building a community element that included area information, events, special offers and much more. With only 100,000 residents in its distribution area, the site received an impressive 10,000 visits per day. In 1998, the site had 4,000 paying subscribers and more than half of them had created custom user profile pages (Lasica, 1998). Since then it seems that new online community opportunities pop up every day.

Is all of this online community building a good thing? Casual conversation over new media often leads to discussion over whether or not technology is creating a barrier to interpersonal relationships. With email, text messaging and instant messaging, face to face discussions could become impaired.

In her 2004 ethnography of the virtual community, Cybertown, Carter examined an online destination where visitors sought out social connections. By looking at how people built their communities, what types of connections were formed, and how the relationships from Cybertown moved to the offline world, she argued that the virtual world was no longer a unique, separate existence for participants, rather it was "part of everyday life." Although some might assume that a virtual community would be filled with young men and teenagers, Carter found that her typical respondent was a 29 year old female Generation Xer despite the fact that she did not specifically recruit within these parameters (2004).

Cybertown was a virtual community where individuals were able to take on unique identities in an online city (Carter, 2004). While these virtual communities are not the same as social networks, with research in the early stages, we may be able to generalize some of the findings across both areas. Despite the fact that individuals can take on unique identities in these virtual worlds and be anyone they would like to be, Carter's findings indicated that participants tended to be honest. She also found that deep and meaningful relationships seemed to develop within Cybertown. Carter met numerous contacts from her time in Cybertown and even invited one online "friend" to stay at her home. However, she did admit to a transition time during which the two emailed, exchanged pictures and later talked on the phone (2004). This behavior is quite consistent with online social networks in the exchange of correspondence, pictures and personal information.

While Carter's findings indicated that participants in the virtual community of Cybertown seemed to take their membership seriously and the majority were upfront, it clearly speaks to the need for more research in this field. She discussed the need for evaluation of the online friendships in the same way that offline friendships are often evaluated.

Another consideration is how virtual communities and social networks self-regulate and police themselves. Researchers utilized the Cyberworlds virtual community to study these concepts. Through focus group research, they were able to identify the presence of "netizens," or concerned residents of Cyberworlds policing their virtual community. They also demonstrated that the appointed police mechanisms were ineffective in the community (Williams, 2007). Therefore, it could be theorized that

within these communities, members have a low tolerance for regulations and rigidity.

Utilizing Uses and Gratifications as a framework, researchers looked at audiences in Japan and Korea to measure how online communities and physical communities were intertwined. The study compared virtual communities, more popular in Japan, to social networking communities, more popular in Korea, and how both impacted outside relationships.

Through a mixed methods random sample survey and in-person interviews, the researchers found strong connections between behaviors within the two groups. Koreans were far more likely to extend their online relationships into their physical communities. Additionally, the gratifications they received from the social bonding were key drivers of their behaviors. This was consistent with the findings that, as a community, Koreans tend to be generally more socially active. Overall, the study findings seemed to point to online behavior that modeled offline and offline behavior that modeled online (Ishii & Ogasahara, 2007). While this study finds a strong correlation between online and offline gratifications, making cross-cultural generalizations would not be appropriate simply because we have differences in interpersonal customs.

Lin and Lee examined how the online system and its information quality impacted satisfaction, service, intention and loyalty of users in online communities. Through in-depth interviews with online community leaders and a heavy focus on ensuring the clarity of the research questionnaire, researchers carefully refined the survey instrument to focus on precision. In order to measure the level of satisfaction, they asked specific questions related to meeting the participants' social needs. The findings indicated that the quality of the community itself, quality of information and quality of service were strong

predictors of satisfaction with the tool (2006).

While it may not present some limitations due to the fact that the research was conducted in Asia and had potential bias in the participant recruitment process, this study offers applicable data. If researchers were to make global assumptions, their findings point to potential explanations for the mass successes of social networking sites such as Facebook. The site dedicates a great deal of resources to the user experience and to making sure tools are accessible to community members.

In another study from outside the United States, Quan-Haase and Young utilized a uses and gratifications framework to conduct a mixed method of surveys and interviews on a group of Canadian undergraduate students to identify the gratifications users obtained from Facebook as compared to instant messaging. Their factor analysis of categorized the gratifications into six key areas: pastime, affection, fashion, sharing problems, sociability and social information. Their findings indicate that a high percentage of subjects are on Facebook because of peer pressure and because everyone else is on the site (2010).

The psychological and sociological connection to social media has begun to garner more attention from researchers throughout the world. In their recent study that examined Facebook and its psychological connection, Ryan and Xenos studied how psychological traits among Australian subjects contributed to Facebook usage and non-usage. They surveyed 1635 adults aged 18-34 and assessed participant on pre-existing personality assessments including the big-five; extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism and openness; and narcissistic traits, loneliness, and

shyness. Their findings indicated that those who were more extraverted were more apt to utilize Facebook. Additionally, that Facebook facilitates narcissistic tendencies (2011).

There are some predictors for success in online communities including size and level of community involvement. These traits fall under Preece's concepts of usability, the user to technological relationship, and sociability, which describes the interpersonal interactions online (2001).

Additionally, identity and perceptions of identity are key components in social networks and how they grow and evolve online. For racially diverse communities, this is an even larger consideration. In her work, Gasser indicates that social networking sites are especially good for multiracial students to connect with others like them in the absence of on campus support resources (2008). Findings such as this support the hypothesis that online communities can fulfill real-world needs creating an endless array of connection points to others with similar interests and ideologies without the geographic boundary challenges.

As today's Americans age, there is increasing adoption of newer technologies, perhaps due in part to the sophistication and high education levels of the older population. Andrews identified three key reasons that older adults are keen to adopt new technologies: increased productivity, increased access to creativity and fun, and a desire to feel connected via the Internet. She pointed out that the low level of entry barriers makes the Internet a strong tool for community building. She argued that online connection and community can help to combat social isolation and loneliness (2002). Although focused on Baby Boomers and older, Andrews presents information that potentially applies across age barriers.

In a uses and gratifications study on the micro-blogging, social networking site, Twitter, Chen found that the more time a member spent on Twitter posting and interacting with their followers and those they follow, the more connected they felt (2010). She noted that as seen in a number of studies, that users who spent more time on social networking sites were apt to feel more connected and that Twitter users in her study actively sought interaction within the tool to enhance a feeling of connectedness (760).

For women, the Web has a variety of offerings that cater specifically to them. In a study of online women's magazine, iVenus, researchers examined how gender impacted a users' identity within the iVenus community. Members of the community could register and create user profiles. Researchers identified the need to rely on users' self-reported information as a potential weakness in the study.

This study particularly focused on the use of the community message boards and rationale for using the boards. Respondents found value in the bonds they created on the boards; the feeling of being able to post their thoughts and feelings in a safe, anonymous environment; and a true sense of being part of the iVenus community (O'Connor & MacKeogh, 2007). Because this was a study conducted in Ireland, it is unknown whether generalizations could apply to the US audience.

In another examination of college students involvement with social networking, for meeting new friends or connecting with old ones; or, whether they were looking for friends, family, dating and/or like-minded others. They noted the contradictory findings of research to date and set out to do this by conducting a meta-analysis on studies from 1995-2003, they found little correlation between Internet usage and social interactions.

Their conclusion was that the Internet was a better source of “friendship reminders” versus a full-fledged interaction tool.

Their mixed methods approach utilized both surveys and focus groups to analyze participants’ communications. Findings showed that the majority of social networkers used the sites to keep up with friends and for exchanging non-essential messaging. None of the participants reported using social networks to find new friends. They argued that “social networking has not revolutionized communication; rather, it appears – at this time at least- that social networking is simply another form of communication that is evolving over time with the aid of technology (Coyle & Vaughn, 2008, p. 16).” The findings, while valuable, were different from other similar studies which will be discussed here. Additionally, it could be argued that the analysis was conducted on studies that ran prior to the mainstream rise of social networking. In another study, researchers looked at college students and found that in 2004 they were spending more time on in-person interactions versus computer mediated. Findings indicated that even telephone conversations were of lower quality than in-person interactions and email, chat and instant messaging were even lower quality (Baym, Zhang & Lin, 2004). The findings of this study would likely change the perceptions of quality if conducted today given the rise of social media. Many studies focused on college students, but it is important to expand studies such as these to include other age groups in order to gain a better mass market understanding.

For all of the positives that come with technological advances, there are also negatives. Internet addiction has quickly risen to become a clinical disorder that many people suffer from. In a study designed to look at seven potential gratification factors,

Song et. al. examined “virtual community” as one of those factors. By isolating the factors and the gratifications from each one, the researchers were able to look at various aspects of Internet usage. They hypothesized a positive correlation to addiction in regards to process, but not to actual content. Content gratifications are related to what information users are looking for. Process gratifications are related to what types of exciting things users might find, or are afraid to miss, online.

The quantitative study was conducted on midwestern university students at two schools and was a mix of male and female and multiple races. It was designed to examine overall gratifications from Web activities. Researchers acknowledged that virtual community has little precedent from the standpoint of Uses and Gratifications. They deemed this to be process oriented and thus positively correlated to Internet addiction (Song, Larose, Eastin & Lin, 2004). Again, the research was conducted exclusively on college students in a single geographic region.

In an examination of Internet usage motivation, researchers found that what users intended to get from the Web was the primary determinant in Internet dependency. For their study, researchers sought to examine Internet dependency within the uses and gratifications framework in order to identify what motivates Internet users, and what is the delineation between Internet motivation and dependency.

The methodology for this study divided the group into four age groups at a Midwestern university and utilized a survey instrument. Findings indicated that gender was the only statistically significant factor in predicting individuals’ usage motivations, with men more likely to have an interest in Web browsing versus email. Age was a factor in contributing to motivation and involvement as predictors of dependency.

This study looked at two primary uses for the Internet: email and Web browsing. An examination of social networking would likely create additional insights that are unique from the other two usage categories. The researchers identified this as a potential for future research (Sun, Rubin, Haridakis, 2008).

Today community consists not only of traditional, physical relationships, but for those active in online social networks, such as Facebook, community can also be virtual. This calls into question how people are really using this new aspect of emerging technology and the gratifications that they are getting out of it. Overall, the Web has mostly been seen as a positive for socialization and expanding our networks. According to the Pew Centers' "Future of the Internet Study," 85% of the more than 900 respondents believe that the internet will have a positive effect on society's social abilities (Baumann, 2010). However, in a preliminary study, researchers found a direct correlation between heavy Internet usage, depression and social isolation in initial research. As the researchers followed the subjects they found that the negative consequences seemed to improve after several years (Kraut, 2002).

The Internet has given way to new avenues for connection. In a survey conducted on 915 America Online (AOL) users in 2004, researchers found that gratifications for usage of AOL included finding information online, communicating, socializing with others and searching (Stafford & Gonier, 2004). Research such as this calls for the need for more segmented study of the various aspects of online activity.

Because they fall outside of the traditionally studied younger generation, often referred to as Millennials, and the maturing, intensely studied older generation, the Baby

Boomers, Generation X is caught between two heavily researched demographics. Thus, little is known about Generation X's online behaviors.

Generation X

Generation X is uniquely positioned between two very prominent generations. They are a transitional group that has witnessed radical changes in their lifetimes. Over 50 million strong with over 60% holding college degrees (Lyon, 2010), they are critical thinkers who are extremely aware of the media messages that surround them. This generation is highly aware and literate in media, examining the field for the messages that have value to them and dismissing those that have none.

They are one of the fastest growing groups adopting to ever-changing technology. While Gen X makes up about 19% of the general U.S. population, they account for about 21% of Internet users, with 86% of this group active on the Internet. Overall 62% of this population is active in social networking, which has grown rapidly from 2008 when the social network penetration was 36% in this group. 73% of this population has broadband in their homes and about 71% go wirelessly (Zickuhr, 2010).

One study looked at reactions to social media by generation in a medical resident program. Researchers surveyed nearly 1,000 residency program directors to gauge responses to social postings. The subjects were asked about postings on Facebook; the micro-blogging site, Twitter; the professional networking site, LinkedIn; and the once popular predecessor to Facebook, MySpace. Nearly two-thirds, 69%, of the respondents were Gen Xers. What they found was that in hiring practices, social media is fair game to examine for recruitment purposes. So, what people put out there on these sites is open to examination by future employers and the Gen Xers considered these sites to offer a

good idea of the true nature of a candidate (Cain, 2010). With statistics like these, it is clear to see that this generation is well connected and takes social media very seriously. In addition to connectedness, their media savvy has led to an interest in personalization of their media choices and an appetite for interactivity (Abelman, 1996).

However, Generation X has lacked an anthem, theme or true defining moment, leaving the group understudied. In *Reality Bites and Generation X as Spectator*, Oake suggested that cultural anthropologists have demonstrated little interest in Generation X as a community, describing Gen Xers as full of “middle-class, white-boy angst.” He acknowledged the lack of generational definition and stereotypes of Gen Xers as lazy slackers, the portrayal of the generation in film and on television became societal norm and as portrayals have emerged, so have perceptions (2004). Studies such as this demonstrate how closely the demographic is tied to their media. These shifting perceptions have been largely positive; however, the generational definition is still not widely accepted.

Poindexter and Lasorsa conducted a random digit dial in Austin, Texas in 1997 to gain a better understanding of how people perceived the term ‘Generation X’ as a generational descriptor. Findings indicated that nearly one in three respondents did not know what the term referred to. Forty percent of respondents noted that it had a negative association. Additionally, the younger the respondent, the more likely they were to view the term as negative (Poindexter & Lasorsa, 1999). These findings pointed to the need for more education and understanding about the generation that is preparing to take over as the Baby Boomers move into retirement.

Wade Wilson adapted the following from Ken Baugh's, "A Guide to Understanding Generation X Sub-Cultures," to identify the five core values of Generation X:

1. Relationships. Relationships are their greatest fear and their greatest need. They have a deep yearning to know and be known, but they are afraid. They are afraid of letting their real self out for fear of being rejected so they maintain the ideal self, the self that others accept—leading to deadly isolation.
2. Fun. From computer games to bungee jumping, Xers are into fun. One Xer said: "You think money is the basis for our existence when it's really much simpler: fun is." Most Xers work to live. They are waiting for the weekend. (Note: Most ESPN "Extreme Games" feature Xers.)
3. Experience. Subjective experience validates if something is real and good. They want to enjoy life, make a difference, and do something meaningful besides just punching a clock from 9 to 5.
4. Freedom. They don't like to be labeled and put in a box. They want to be seen as unique individuals able to make a valuable contribution to society. They are very creative and independent and struggle with limits and rules. They value flexibility and spontaneity.
5. Family. If Xers have children, they don't want to make the same mistakes their parents did. They will spend time with their kids. Xer parents, especially dads, seem to be incredibly committed to their children (Wilson).

The Social Networking Phenomenon

Online communities, such as Facebook, encourage frequent interaction.

Oftentimes, participants will interact more frequently online than in traditional face-to-face communications. Eberhardt acknowledges that these communities have both strong similarities and differences (2007).

Electronic communications have become the most frequently used means for keeping in touch with physical community members; however, social networking sites open up an entirely new channel for communicating with both current friends and potential new friends. According to Eberhardt, one downside on college campuses is that students are likely to seek out known new peers online based on their names. Oftentimes, these students may pre-form opinions based on their peers' social networking site personalities. Another problem on college campuses is that some students may focus more on maintaining a connection online with old friends than by forming new connections on campus (2007).

These types of networks do allow participants to connect with individuals who may be experiencing similar life circumstances, both good and bad, and thus could be seen as a positive coping tool. One prime example cited was the response on Facebook following the 2007 campus shootings at Virginia Tech. Students used Facebook as a virtual mobilization tool to connect with others for grieving, to share messages and to share events, news and educational resources about the tragedy (Eberhardt, 2007).

Those who are ill can find support in online social networks also. In a content analysis conducted on an online HIV/AIDS support group, researchers measured levels and types of support and assistance through measurement of the group's message boards. By scrubbing through more than 5,000 messages and coding the data, they assessed the frequency of five support indicators: information support, esteem support, network

support, emotional support and tangible assistance. Findings indicated that nearly 20% of the board posts specifically referenced one of the support indicators.

Research such as this point to social network sites as being more than just online destinations and more accurately, true community foundations. The researchers believe that these findings demonstrated a certain level of need for health practitioner participation in these communities (Mo & Coulson, 2008); however, one could argue that this could lead to diminished involvement in the group due to changes in participant perceptions.

In an early study of the community aspect of social networking sites, Raacke and Bonds-Raacke examined college students' usage of MySpace and Facebook in the context of Uses and Gratifications Theory. They sought to identify: why students use these sites, what commonalities existed among the average student users, and what the students gained as a result of using these types of sites (2010).

Acknowledging the lack of studies in this subject area, the researchers recruited 116 primarily freshman participants from a single university. Subjects were given a two-part survey which was customized based on whether or not they had MySpace and/or Facebook accounts. Findings indicated that the majority of participants, 87%, had accounts on one of the two sites. The overwhelming majority indicated that their primary uses for these sites were to keep up with old friends, 96%, and to keep up with new friends, 91%. Looking at pictures, making new friends and locating old friends were key reasons for about half of the subjects who were active in social networking (Bonds-Raacke & Raacke, 2010).

One study found that the more students between the ages of 10 and 19 used a social networking site, the more their social sense of balance was influenced by the information received on those sites. Researchers cited shortcomings of previous studies that treated all online activities in the same way versus examining users' intentions. Additionally they felt that it was necessary to examine the effects on both self-esteem and well-being simultaneously. Through an online survey administered to Dutch youth who were active in online social networking, they considered amount of usage to identify the correlations (Valkenburg, Peter & Schouten, 2006).

When asked about the reasons that some students might not be active in social networking, time and general interest level were the most frequent responses. Barriers to entry, such as Internet access, and stigmatized answers, such as "they are loners" or "they do not want to keep in touch," were cited by 10% or less of participants. For those who did not have accounts, lack of desire, 73%, and lack of time, 46%, were the two most cited responses. Findings also indicated that the younger the study participant, the more likely they were to be active in social networking (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008, p. 171).

While the racial make-up of the subject pool seemed diversified, it is unknown whether or not this was a representative sample from the participating university. Additionally, researchers' findings are potentially unreliable as the study was conducted at a single university on primarily freshman participants; however, it is unknown as to whether or not the groups were traditional aged students. Finally, additional research of this nature is needed to understand how individuals and groups utilize social networking sites. This study provides an excellent foundation for future research and is the most

closely related to the proposed study.

Although Facebook emerged from a site that was exclusively for college students, it has become a primary communication tool for millions of users (Dodge, 2008). Wilson writes about younger individuals being early adapters of sites like Facebook, admitting that they tend to be the ones testing the waters for the older individuals to follow. While some Facebook users might pride themselves on the number of friends that they have, Wilson dismisses this as an easy accomplishment with just a few steps (2008).

One respondent admits to Facebook being a great site to locate individuals who have the same interests and political affiliations. In the same article another student claims to not participate in social networking because to her it is extremely impersonal (Donnelly-Smith, 2008). It's easy to see that Facebook, and other sites like it, have a unique value proposition to individual users.

Generation X falls between the powerful Baby Boomer generation and the Millennials, This is the group that bridged the technological divide in a unique way; however, while much attention has been paid to their sister generations, little research has been done on Generation X. Each day, researchers examine the impact of social media on society, but little attention has been paid to the group that remembers life before the microwave, the VCR, the computer, the Internet and Facebook. Generation X had to adapt to technology in order to remain competitive in society. A review of the literature demonstrates the absence of exploratory research focusing specifically on Generation X in the area of social networking. While this study sets out to examine a specific generation on a specific social networking site, it is being conducted with the idea that it will serve as a building block for future research and analytics of this emerging area.

What constitutes a “friend” online for social networkers? Boyd defines online “friends” as the connections that a social networker “cares about.” She claims that those interested in keeping a handful of close friends in their network they will keep their profile private and that there is usually a great deal of homogeneity in larger, broad audiences, particularly for teens. She claims that for this group, existing friend groups is the main driver of social activity within social networks. Also, she defines social networking sites as ‘mediated publics’ where groups of friends can meet and discuss any topic, share ideas and more. She claims that these mediated publics change the very dynamic of human communication by stripping out some of the non-verbal cues that we would have in face to face interaction.

She defines social media to be “mediated publics,” which are defined by: Persistence. What you say sticks around. This is great for asynchronous communication, but it also means that what you said at 15 is still accessible when you are 30 and have purportedly outgrown those childish days.

1. Searchability. My mother would’ve loved the ability to scream “Find!” into the ether and determine where I was hanging out with my friends. She couldn’t, and I’m thankful. Today’s teens’ parents have found their hangouts with the flick of a few keystrokes.
2. Replicability. Digital bits are copyable; this means that you can copy a conversation from one place and paste it into another place. It also means that it’s difficult to determine if the content was doctored.
3. Invisible audiences. While it is common to face strangers in public life, our eyes provide a good sense of who can overhear our expressions. In mediated publics,

not only are lurkers invisible, but persistence, searchability, and replicability introduce audiences that were never present at the time when the expression was created (Boyd, 2007).

A positive, supportive social community has been found to have big health effects. In England, researchers an increase likelihood of morbidity, stress and disease in those who live more socially isolated. It also demonstrated those with more robust, physical support systems were better able to combat serious illness with loneliness leading to a persistent inflammation that contributes to a number of serious illnesses including Lupus and Diabetes (Sigman, 2009). Understanding whether or not online communities serve to make people feel less isolated can help to treat many mental and physical ailments.

Uses and Gratifications

The foundation for Uses and Gratifications theory grew from early mass communication research. While there were countless studies that examined the basic premises of usage and gratifications, it was not solidified into a single packaged theory until the mid-1970's (Katz et. al., 1973-1974). Under the basic premise that media consumers have specific uses and perceived rewards for the media that they choose, this theory has been used to examine consumer choice for years.

One of the key criticisms of this field of study to date is that researchers usually create their own coding around what is a use and what is a gratification, creating little standardization in the research world. Early studies measured how consumers used media and how they grouped their perceived benefits. However, mass media research to date has not done a consistent job of tying its findings into the realm of psychology and

sociology (Katz et. al., 1973-1974). In an emerging digital environment, this theory has high relevancy, as the Internet and new media technologies are capable of closing the feedback loop electronically. Because of this much of the research has been largely anecdotal and this study will rely on self-reported perceived benefits.

Although studies have examined the Internet within the framework of a Uses and Gratifications approach, research around social networking is in its early stages. Because this is a relatively new area, the examination of the literature seeks to establish an adequate framework for this and future studies of this nature. Additionally, to date, a large percentage of studies have been conducted on college students, thus the usage, gratifications and motivations for the entire online community is not yet defined and given the emerging nature of technology is constantly evolving.

This research seeks to answer the following questions:

RQ1: How do Generation Xers define community?

RQ2: What uses and gratifications Generation Xers seek from their physical communities?

RQ3: What uses and gratifications do Generation Xers seek from their Facebook communities?

RQ4: Do the uses and gratifications that Generation Xers derive from their Facebook communities differ from the uses and gratifications that they derive from their physical communities?

RQ5: Where do Generation Xers interact with their communities most frequently?

METHODOLOGY

A total of thirteen interviews were completed between October 10, 2011 and October 20, 2011. The data were collected via telephone interviews and one interview was completed in person at the request of the subject. All responses were recorded and later transcribed. The researcher followed a qualitative methodology, utilizing direct questioning and had a maximum subject pool size of 15.

A recruitment ad ran on Facebook for two days during the study. While there were five clicks to the advertisement, only one person signed up. Despite targeting the advertisement to the United States only, the potential subject was outside of the United States. Of the remaining sources, eight reached out directly and came from the Facebook post and shared status update and five signed up directly on the event page.

The selected subjects ranged in ages that fit within the defined range for Generation X. Six were aged 31-35, three were aged 36-40 and four were aged 41-46. No key trends or themes emerged within each age range. Because this study is intended to guide future research, qualitative methodology was chosen to provide a look into subjects' attitudes, beliefs, motivations and lifestyles (Davis, 1997, p. 195).” This qualitative study examined raw, baseline thoughts on community and allowed the researcher to identify trends and refine definitions of community found in the review of existing literature.

As outlined by Davis, qualitative research meets five key objectives. First it provides rich information and a variety of insights. Second, it gives respondents the

opportunity to express their feelings in their own language. Third, it allows the freeform ability to express their feelings.

Fourth, it is more efficient and cost effective than quantitative. Lastly, a qualitative structure allows for greater flexibility when conducting, coding and discussing the data (1997, p. 196-197). According to Davis, qualitative methodology also allows for understanding the meaning, context and process for research subjects along with identifying themes that were completely unexpected and influences that were not foreseen (1997).

Getting close to the subjects' definitions and allowing them to express their thoughts in their own language created a wider base of knowledge, allowed the researcher to "draw insights and explanations from the respondents themselves (Davis, 1997, p. 196)."

If the researcher found a strong correlation in the responses, it would have been completed at ten completed surveys. Prior to launching the live research phase, the questionnaire design was tested with a panel of two reviewers and two test subjects to ensure that the questions were clear, concise and easily understood.

The study used a standardized set of questions and although there were times where the respondents' answers steered the research off course, the intent was to stay on target and gather as much information as possible through the brief questioning. Additionally, while the purpose of the research was not deliberately shared with the participants, as questions arose, there was no need to disguise the topic of the study and the researcher addressed them.

The questionnaires were not tied back to the individual study participants and no personally identifiable information was gathered; however no guarantee of anonymity was issued. The interviews, as expected, garnered feedback and information. The instrument was broken into two sections: 1) demographic information and 2) questions to assess the individuals' experiences with their communities. Only necessary questions were asked and the estimated completion time, which was assessed in pretesting, was less than 30 minutes per subject.

Subjects were solicited via Facebook ads, Facebook events and through the researcher's Facebook network. Sampling was non-random, not controlled and participants opted-in. Originating source of the respondents was tracked and included in the data collection and analysis. Study participants self-identified and were pre-screened to ensure that each fit the Generation X demographic. There was no monetary incentive for participation to ensure each subject's anonymity.

The two treatments for the study were Facebook community and physical community. The study was a within-group design of the interviews, which asked each study participant about both types of community.

Urista, Dawn and Day's study utilized a grounded theory framework (2009). However, that approach was determined not to be effective for the purpose of this study. While the researcher predicted that several key themes would arise, examining on a case-by-case basis allowed for less potential coding bias and recognized the personal nature of community and lack of standard definition. Each theme and respondent had equal weighting and was measured separately and apart from other responses during the analysis phase, versus comparing to previous responses.

McMillan and Chavis identified membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs as key benefits of community (1986). For the purpose of this study, the researcher recognized that each of these benefits can also be mapped to the five gratifications: escape, social interaction, identity, inform and educate and entertain (Blumler & Katz, 1974). The study coded responses to community-specific questioning based on these uses and gratifications.

While there have been numerous social media studies conducted utilizing this framework, including a similar structure utilizing six different gratifications by Quan-Haase and Young; the researcher deemed Blumler and Katz's gratifications to cast the broadest net to categorize specific gratifications into fewer key themes. Additionally a large majority of existing research around social media is quantitative or mixed methods; therefore, the researcher chose Blumler and Katz's gratifications to assess key thematic areas utilizing a qualitative methodology.

Because of the emerging nature of qualitative studies in this area to date, the researcher assessed the methods and learnings and chose categories from McMillan and Chavis and Blumler and Katz because of their broad-nature; however, this study utilized custom coding for each research question and analyzed the data to look for trends.

Once the study was complete, each questionnaire was reviewed, demographic information was stored, interviews were transcribed, data was coded, and the findings were assessed, shared and discussed. Themes were identified as a means of data organization (Davis, 1997). Additionally, there will be a deeper future discussion of the findings and themes. As part of the analysis process and to examine areas where there

could be improvements in future qualitative studies of this nature, a second evaluator also examined the data to discuss findings and limitations of the data.

The researcher identified themes in the data to draw general conclusions from the group in order to lay the groundwork for further future examination. Any identified patterns have been noted for future consideration and research possibilities.

Additionally, the results indicated whether participants spoke about the benefits of their Facebook and physical communities in a similar manner. This helped determine whether participating Generation Xers are getting some of the same needs met from their Facebook communities as they are from their physical communities. Lastly, as discussed, the study identified areas for future research in the communication, psychology and sociology disciplines.

The interview instrument is as follows:

Demographic/Sourcing Questions:

1. Referral Source (where the subject opted in).
2. Gen X-Age Range

Research Questions and Specific Related Questions:

RQ1: How do Generation Xers define community? This question will be addressed by two questions as follows:

R1.1. When you think of your community, what is the first thing that comes to your mind?

R1.2. How do you describe and define your community?

RQ2: What uses and gratifications Generation Xers seek from their physical communities?

R2.1. What needs and wants do you seek to fulfill through your physical community?

R2.2. What needs and wants do your physical community satisfy?

RQ3: What uses and gratifications do Generation Xers seek from their Facebook communities?

R3.1. What needs and wants do you seek to fulfill through your Facebook community?

R3.2. What needs and wants do your Facebook community satisfy?

RQ4: Do the uses and gratifications that Generation Xers derive from their Facebook communities differ from the uses and gratifications that they derive from their physical communities?

RQ5: Where do Generation Xers interact with their communities most frequently?

R5.1. When you think about where and how you keep in touch with your community, what are your main methods of communicating with those people?

RESULTS

Themes were identified when six or more respondents referenced a certain category. The responses were coded by both the researcher and a second, independent evaluator for the purpose of examining the selected categories and identifying areas for future research. The coding revealed a high level of subjectivity between the coder and evaluator. Where discrepancies were identified that impacted an identified theme, the two discussed the coding criteria until an agreed upon conclusion could be reached. In four instances coding differences impacted theme measurement as outlined herein. Additionally, subjects revealed a number of questions that lacked clarity. Those areas are also discussed herein.

When asked about the first thing that came to subjects' minds regarding community, a number of the subjects felt that this question was not as clear as it could be. Some participants were surprised by the question and a number of the participants asked for further clarification on the question.

The key theme that emerged was centered on location. Seven of the participants first focused on location as their initial thought around community. Three subjects had relocated out of state within the past year and cited location as their first thought. Two subjects also noted their previous hometowns upon initial reaction.

A number of the respondents noted cultural, ethnic and lifestyle diversity as one of the first things that came to mind and one of the relocated respondents focused on the hyper-local collaborative nature of her prior community. The respondents in these

interviews also noted that these were very important aspects to them when considering community.

When asked to describe and define community, there was not a single key theme; however, once subjects began thinking about it, there were strong responses. A number of respondents described their communities by examining their likenesses to themselves and for several of those with children, the children's school and outside activity communities were incorporated into their definition.

One of the respondents described and defined his community visually as the rings of Saturn with individuals either closer or farther out and him at the center. While there were two questions asking for clarification, one respondent felt that she did not have enough direction to answer the question despite the researcher's attempt to clarify.

Another respondent who had recently relocated from metropolitan Atlanta back to the small town in Minnesota where he was from, noted that he felt like an ideal subject for this research since he had moved specifically for community, describing his hometown as "small, close-knit, caring, aware and friendly." He was particularly proud that his family even lived "right across the street from the community center."

Other respondents spoke of their community activities and how important those are. One participant noted that in her area they were "working on making the bike routes in the neighborhoods connect better to the greenways." She went on to boast about the public arts, sculptures, fountains and how those all lent to a sense of culture and community in her town. Another pointed out that her community was active and tried to "instill a more close-knit community environment by holding potlucks, parties and things like that" in an effort to keep people engaged.

However, not all subjects had the same positive response in their consideration of community. One subject defined her community as apathetic and not interested in civic participation at all, which she found frustrating.

RQ1 is: How do Generation Xers define community? Much like prior research centered around community, there are some challenges with a single, standardized definition. However, there are common threads that run through subjects' responses. For Generation Xers in this research, community is described as: people around them, similar people, friends, neighbors and neighborhoods, online connections, local, lifestyle and interests, children's school and activities connections, a tight-knit support group, military, family, hometown, small, caring, aware and above all, important. In addition to examining what subjects identified as their physical community, the researcher examined both what each subject seeks from their community and what is actually satisfied. Social interaction was the only unifying theme in the current coding structure for what subjects were seeking with ten subjects indicating this. For the purpose of coding, social interaction was seen as things such as conversation, chat, updates on individuals and more. One respondent stated that for her community was "having somebody to interact with so that I'm not always by myself." Another noted, that her community was very much about having a "social life" outside of her children. In terms of what needs and wants were actually satisfied, ten of the subjects also noted that their physical communities did satisfy their need for social interaction.

The second pattern that emerged centered around a want and need that was not only sought, but also satisfied. Nine of the respondents found that their physical communities satisfied their need for identity. For the purpose of coding, identity was

coded based on discussions of membership or feeling a part of something. As one subject pointed out, he both seeks and finds that his community actually helps him satisfy his sense of self-worth, stating “that feeling of being validated and connected” was something that he gleaned from his community.

When discussing their communities, relationships, civic involvement and emotional connection emerged as key patterns. A number of discussions centered on community activities such as building gardens and greenways, volunteer opportunities and connecting cross-cultural and cross generational community members.

Additionally, some subjects spoke about the residents of their physical communities and two noted the need to build bridges between older and newer residents. One commented that her physical community and the level of involvement of residents makes her life, and the lives of others around her, “more well-rounded.”

The majority of the subjects discussed people of their communities and noted that it provided help and guidance. One subject noted that her physical community motivated her to get healthier both emotionally and physically by encouraging her to participate in events.

Additionally, the desire for community to provide safety emerged in two of the interviews. One subject noted that safety was a key desire for her from her community; however, when examining what her physical community satisfies, she stated that she “didn’t feel very connected” to her community.

RQ2 is: What uses and gratifications Generation Xers seek from their physical communities? While again, individual to each subject, Generation Xers interviewed in this study seek social interaction. These individuals have personal priorities, but

collectively it is important for them to connect with others in their physical communities in order to meet their individual wants and needs. Additionally, these individuals do feel that their physical communities are largely meeting their needs for social interaction.

While there may be opportunities to improve within each individual's community, many have also looked to their communities to help establish their own identity.

When it comes to uses and gratifications, these Generation X subjects are looking to their physical community for safety, help, to build friendships, companionship, bonding, people to talk to, find volunteer work, looking out for each other, cooperation, creating with one another, supporting each other, fulfilling their needs, being there for them, feeling a part of something, feeling wanted, happiness, validation, appreciation, socialization, activism, to be less passive and for information.

Social interaction also emerged as the key trend when subjects were asked about the uses and gratifications sought through their Facebook communities, with ten of the subjects identifying it as a main desire. Additionally, Facebook also satisfies this need for ten of the thirteen subjects.

Several participants noted that Facebook was more ego-driven and attention-seeking for a lot of members of the site, including themselves. They noted that it was a way to seek and garner approval, support, interaction and dialogue.

Another common theme that emerged is that subjects see Facebook as more of a communication medium or tool and less of a community, with eight of the thirteen subjects using Facebook as one of their main methods of keeping in touch with people in their physical, Facebook and other communities. Additionally, subjects frequently noted that it allowed them to both collect and disseminate information easily and efficiently. In

the majority of the interviews “connection” was identified as a theme of the wants and needs that were both desired and satisfied by Facebook for subjects.

Two noted that it allows them to stay in touch with people and places from both their past and present, but that it gave them a distance that they are comfortable with. These subjects noted that they can maintain contact without having to be in the midst of interpersonal relationships.

The subject that visualized his physical community as similar to the rings of Saturn noted that Facebook is a communication tool that he finds beneficial for those who are part of his community, that rest on the farthest bands. This same subject confirmed that Facebook was a way for him to achieve personal validation and positive self-worth as well as express gratitude to those around him quickly and easily.

Two of the participants strongly disliked Facebook and found it to be a hindrance to communication, noting that they were on it because it was just something that they felt they had to do because of work and because the physical community uses it as a tool to disseminate information.

RQ3 is: What uses and gratifications do Generation Xers seek from their Facebook communities? As with physical community, Generation Xers seek and get social interaction from their Facebook communities. They have very distinct things that they seek from Facebook and often did not view their Facebook networks as communities. While they both seek and get their wants and needs met, they view Facebook as a tool that allows that interaction rather than a community unto itself. It is more of the medium that allows communication to happen.

When it comes to uses and gratifications, Generation X is looking to their Facebook community for keeping in touch, keeping a safe distance, staying connected, friendship, connection, keeping up with, getting support and supporting, seeking knowledge, recognition, sharing, getting gossip and awareness.

RQ4 is: Do the uses and gratifications that Generation Xers derive from their Facebook communities differ from the uses and gratifications that they derive from their physical communities? When examining the patterns in the coded data, physical communities and Facebook communities provide Generation Xers with the social interaction they seek from each community. However, a deeper dive into the responses reveals that Facebook is the tool that allows these interactions to happen and does not replace the need for social interaction with individuals in the subjects' physical communities.

Ten of the subjects named digital methods such as email, Twitter and texting as their main methods of keeping in touch with their communities. Eight of the subjects named Facebook. Only five named voice contact and three mentioned face-to-face interaction despite the fact that the majority of the subjects asked for clarification of whether they should consider physical community in this question. Finally, one subject specified that he preferred hand-written letters.

A number of subjects noted that Facebook was the main source for learning about events in their physical communities via neighborhood, community and civic pages. One participant notes that her neighborhood has a Facebook page and her singles group has a page. Another noted that it is a way for her to hit the "key players" to show up for important community events such as board meetings and town hall meetings.

Two subjects specified how much they dislike the telephone and find Facebook to be a good tool to stay in touch. Another subject reminisced about a group of girlfriends that used to get together a number of years before and that due to moving and busy schedules, Facebook had been the tool that kept the group intact.

RQ5 is: Where do Generation Xers interact with their communities most frequently? While it appears that the Generation X'ers who participated in this study identify physical community as the ideal, they also indicate that Facebook and other electronic communication strategies are preferred for keeping connected to that physical community. Regardless of whether interacting with their physical communities or their Facebook communities, Generation Xers are using digital technologies such as email, Twitter and texting to keep in touch. Additionally, Facebook has emerged as a key tool for maintaining interaction and getting and sharing information about the communities.

Despite the fact that this study did not find it to be a replacement for physical community, in two of the interviews where the subjects felt very disconnected from their physical communities, those two subjects noted that Facebook did a better job fulfilling their need for connectedness. Additionally, Facebook seems to have also replaced the town gossip, with a number of subjects noting that the site was great for getting gossip about others.

DISCUSSION

An exploration of the uses and gratifications derived from Generation Xers' physical and Facebook communities gives future researchers a glimpse into the mindset of a generation. Community and connection appear to continue to be highly individualized as seen in earlier studies, but the research revealed some common threads, which will be discussed herein. The field is ripe for future, ongoing exploration.

Generation X and Community

While looking at the simplified, coded data, it could be concluded that Generation X obtains many of the same uses and gratifications from both their physical communities and their Facebook communities. However, in further analysis of the interviews, it becomes quickly apparent that there are varying degrees of and attitudes about social interaction. For this reason, there is a great deal of opportunity for future qualitative analysis around this and other similar issues of community and technology, particularly as it relates to Generation X. Facebook meets the needs of Generation Xers to interact socially; however, it does not replace the want or need for actual connection with the physical communities.

While, in Putnam's view, in the late 1980's time in front of the TV had replaced conversation and human connection in a large way (2000), it is not clear from this study whether or not Facebook interferes with real conversation and connection. What we do know is that Generation X is very interested in community and connection.

One of the most interesting findings of this study is just how little subjects really think about the concept of community. During the interviews, nearly all of the subjects

were briefly taken aback by one or more of the questions. Many were not certain what community was and one could not answer one of the questions at all. The majority of subjects rarely think about their social circles in a framework of “community.” Despite the presence of community centers, resources, etc... and a lot of societal discussion about community, the concept of community seemed somewhat abstract to the majority of the subjects. After the initial pause from each respondent during the interviews, the research revealed that study participants each had their own definition of community, which the researcher has woven into an updated definition of community for these Generation X subjects.

These findings are consistent with earlier research on community. Looking back on the existing literature, community has historically been difficult to describe. As indicated in Cohen’s, “The Symbolic Construction of Community (1985, p. 7-8)” and by Reich, communities are difficult to define and measure (2010, p. 688). Scientists, researchers and theorists struggle with whether community research should center on geographical, bordered concept or a series of connections through organizations and sense of membership. The findings in this study reveal that for Generation X, community research should take into account all of these variables. Community remains an individualized concept; however, common themes run throughout the individual definitions. Community is important, it is about connection to others, friends, neighbors and neighborhoods. It is about that common thread that runs between us and among us finding the connection points that link us to one another.

Fernback said it best, “we group ourselves in aggregated physical villages that we call communities – urban, rural, suburban or even walled; we similarly group ourselves

into symbolic subdivisions based on lifestyle, identity or character that we call communities – religious, leisurely, philosophical, or even virtual (1999, p. 203-204).”

Andrews indicated that community once required a physical community, as it was largely shaped by geographic ties to one another (2002). Both concepts seem to reign true for the Generation X subjects in this study.

While civic activities and volunteer work came up in several of the interviews, one of the respondents discussed her perception of Generation X to be “in-between.” She felt that both the generation before and the generation after have both been more civic-minded and activist in nature. This was somewhat consistent with the fact that a number of subjects felt a very closed-off feeling from their physical communities. Civic participation and a feeling of being closed-off are in-line with the trends Putnam discussed in “Bowling Alone.” Based on his own observations, Putnam indicated that civic involvement had been on the decline and this was another indication of our further detachment from one another. However, civic involvement came up in a number of interviews. This could indicate that Generation Xers are becoming more aware and perhaps we may see an increase in civic involvement in the future, which could reverse the trend of declining involvement that began in the 1960’s.

One interesting finding was the way interview subjects focused on geographical location as a definition of community, consistent with Fernback’s discussion of “aggregated physical villages (1999, p. 203-204).” While it was not a question in the study, geographic location came up in during the course of a number of interviews. Two of the participants indicated that they were from Roanoke, Virginia. One recently relocated from the area and the second recently relocated to the area. Both Roanoke

subjects noted the cultural diversity and their positive perceptions about the people of Roanoke.

An additional interesting finding centered around military subjects. Those subjects with military backgrounds identified their military connections as “family” and discussed a strong community bond that is focused heavily on their connections with the Air Force and the Army. This finding strongly supports Almgren’s concept of “Gemeinschaft: that is, associations that are intimate, familiar, sympathetic, mutually independent and reflective of shared social consciousness (2001, p. 362).” Both of those subjects noted the unique life that military families face and that the only people who truly understand are other military families, stating that this creates a very strong bond.

Generation X is far from apathetic, but as one of the subjects noted, it is “in-between.” These individuals have bridged the technology divide and perhaps this is why attitudes and adoption are so unique to the individual. Because of the rapid changes that Generation X has witnessed in technology, it could be that the definition of community is even more unique to these individuals than to previous or later generations.

With all of this information in mind, Generation X definitely wants to connect. Based on the findings of this study alone, subjects tend to feel most connected to their community based on single, narrow issues rather than organizational clubs or activities. This is precisely what Putnam claimed was an emerging trend (2000).

As we cross the bridge from physical community to Facebook and the Internet, when considering community and technology, Fernbeck promoted the concept of computer mediated communication, which lent to cybercommunities, what Fernbeck identified as building the value systems, norms, rules and sense of identity, commitment

and association (1999). While we may have expected that Facebook might fit into Fernbeck's framework, that concept does not appear to be supported by this study as Facebook community was found to be highly individualized. For the subjects in this study, Facebook is more of a sharing tool for existing communities. Facebook itself does not appear to set the norms, rather those are set by each participant's existing Facebook community and reflected by the individual.

Additionally, while Blanchard's 'sense of virtual community (2007)' may not be fully supported by this study, there is support for the idea that online community and physical community should be studied separate and apart from each other and that the two are very distinct types of communities. This study demonstrates that Generation Xers have wants and needs that they seek and that are fulfilled by both their Facebook and their physical communities and those needs and wants are structured to the type of community.

For example, one of the subjects was very politically active. Within her physical community, she looks for face-to-face interaction at town hall meetings, board meetings and in-person debates. Within her Facebook community, she is able to disseminate information about the political events and issues at hand rather than interact about them. Both communities support her wants and needs; however they do so in very different ways.

Just as with Putnam's assessment of the New York City phone outage in the 1970's that found the telephone to merely foster existing community, not replace physical community (2000, p. 168), the same seems to hold true for Generation X and their Facebook communities.

This study begins to answer Putnam's questions of whether the Internet would become a "niftier telephone" and whether it would become a "means of active, social communication or a means of passive, private entertainment (2000, p. 170)." For Generation X, it does appear that the Internet has become an active communication tool that has replaced the telephone based on the responses around how subjects were keeping in touch with members of their communities.

While Putnam's research and conclusions have been criticized, his discussion about community has raised important questions for studies of this nature. His observations about emerging media give researchers an interesting lens from which to explore the connections between new media and society's physical communities.

Facebook has changed the way people communicate and how Generation X connects. Understanding this type of media and community relationship will become increasingly important as technology continues to evolve. Examining this through the eyes of the generation that bridged the changes, will be key to understanding the evolution of 'social' and 'media.' In the future, it will give individuals, researchers, businesses, doctors, teachers and more insights into how to best use emerging technology to build connections.

Facebook

While we often talk about "social networking" around sites such as Facebook, the Generation Xers who participated in this study discussed Facebook as more of a communication tool rather than a community or a network. This demonstrates that Facebook, and sites that are similar, really should be looked at in the framework of the media first and foremost.

With buzzwords and trend-spotting, it may be easy to forget that the Internet and sites, such as Facebook, truly are a form of media. However, as we look at the medium itself and how it is reshaping our society and the very way we connect, there may be some opportunity to study both the tool, Facebook, from a communications perspective and the connections that it provides from a sociological perspective.

Three of the subjects noted that Facebook had a tendency to pull users in and waste time. One noted that she had actively worked on moving away from being on the site and getting back in touch with her physical community more. Another noted that he has seen it adversely affect work performance for his staff. The fact that subjects brought this up seemed to indicate that Facebook has some very strong negative powers when it comes to productivity and connection. Productivity can be affected positively by social networks; however, it clearly can also be affected negatively as some subjects noted about Facebook.

This study supports Reich's findings (2010) that there was no discussion around membership being one of the benefits of Facebook. Additionally, Facebook does not seem to offer a "psychological" sense of community as outlined in the review of the literature. As mentioned previously, no one described Facebook as a virtual community; however, when asked how subjects keep in touch with their community, eight of the subjects named Facebook as a primary means of communication. While it may not be their community, it is a tool to connect them to their community. Additionally, even when there is angst or frustration or a need to "get away from Facebook," when it comes down to it, whether out of necessity or convenience, the majority of subjects rely on Facebook for interaction with their communities.

Perhaps the language of Facebook: status updates, likes, friends and more, supports Anderson's concepts around the language that evolves within groups (1983). This lends to the idea that Facebook is a medium, a communication tool that also has its own language.

Andrews' argument that online community can potentially help combat isolation and loneliness is partially supported (2002). Based on some of the responses, subjects use Facebook to help them feel connected. However, as some noted, they do find the need to pull away from it and connect with their physical communities to truly feel connected. Perhaps future research can look at perceived connectedness in both online communities and physical communities simultaneously.

Contrary to Coyle and Vaughn's findings which found the Internet to be a better source of reminders for friends versus an interaction tool (2008), both this and Quan-Haase and Young's studies found that Facebook is truly an interaction tool that has taken the place of other forms of connection. In addition, Quan-Haase and Young's study also found that instant messaging was also deemed a valuable communication tool for the undergraduates in their study. However, not one of the Generation X subjects named instant messaging as a communication tool.

Finally, when examining the wants and needs sought and the wants and needs satisfied from both physical and Facebook communities, there was a stronger correlation sought for and satisfied for Facebook. Subjects seemed to feel that Facebook better delivered on expectations than their physical communities.

While a number of subjects indicated that Facebook was a time-waster and that they didn't have time to deal with it, when asked where they interacted with their

communities most, the majority said Facebook was one of their top tools and one of the best ways to stay connected.

Limitations

While it is not clear whether a larger sample size would have yielded different results, one weakness of this research was the somewhat homogeneous sample. A number of the participants were from the researcher's personal Facebook network. Additionally, the recruitment vehicle for non-random participants did not draw any qualified participants.

A third limitation existed around the questions themselves. Asking about "wants and needs" did not garner a great deal of insight about uses, although it did adequately address gratifications.

Lastly, while this study used a Uses and Gratifications framework, future studies can expand on these findings by conducting similar studies within a different framework and looking at the data through a different lens.

For future research, it would be beneficial to expand the coding to allow for more adjective descriptions around community, wants and needs. Additionally, the coding manual should be more in-depth to eliminate some of the potential for subjectivity when coding. For example, an updated coding manual should have clearer and broader definitions for what falls within each category. Some of this could be resolved during pre-interview focus groups.

Although the instruments were pre-tested, upon coding of all the data, the categories for community definitions and needs and wants; escape, social interaction, identity, inform and educate and entertain, seemed to be somewhat limiting. Given that

there was a lack of clarification around some of the questions and that the concept of community was unique to the individual, future studies would benefit from expanded coding options. These could be created by utilizing categories from other studies or by conducting pre-interview focus groups to assess the categories or holding focus groups in lieu of interviews.

An initial pattern around organization was identified by the researcher, but then reevaluated following discussion with a second evaluator. Because of different interpretations of how to code for organization, this finding was discarded.

While gender was not part of the initial data collected, it was noted on the interview notes. The majority of participants, ten, were female. While most of the female participants initially thought organizationally about their community, none of the male participants did.

A second discrepancy was identified when describing and defining community, friends was identified as a key pattern by the researcher. Applying the second coder's assessment revealed a moderate level of subjectivity around what fit the definition of 'friend,' which revealed a difference in the way the coders defined friendship.

Third, the researcher found that identity was a pattern in the data that was satisfied by physical community; however, when applying the second coder's assessment, identity was no longer a trend. Despite this coding discrepancy, the number of subjects that did measure their identity in partnership with their community raised a flag and could be an area for further exploration.

Lastly, the coders disagreed over what constituted ‘inform and educate’ when assessing the needs and wants for the subjects on Facebook. Future research could eliminate this discrepancy by better defining this within the coding manual.

Future Research Opportunities

As previously noted, there are countless opportunities for more exploration in this evolving media. In analysis of the interviews, it becomes quickly apparent that there are varying degrees of and attitudes about social interaction. For this reason, there is a great deal of opportunity for future qualitative analysis around this and other similar issues of community and technology, particularly as it relates to Generation X. Facebook meets the needs of Generation Xers to interact socially; however, it does not replace the want or need for actual connection with the physical communities.

While two of the subjects noted that they had made efforts to actually back away, it is not clear whether Facebook is deemed to be a hindrance to face-to-face interaction. This area is ripe for future exploration.

The field is wide open and should be farmed for future researchers to examine social media and emerging technologies on a generational level. Additionally, just as this research has done, a focus of crossing the lines of media and communication research with sociological research can help expand our knowledgebase and understand the impact that technology is having and will have on our interpersonal relationship.

There are countless ways that continued exploration in these areas can benefit society. Understanding connectedness and the quality of those connections can someday help practitioners better treat depression and personality disorders. Facebook comes up frequently in casual conversation. Perhaps these discussions can be harnessed to identify

new ways for individuals and groups to connect and share. Examining what type of benefits users want from their technology will help developers craft tools to make our lives easier. Digging into the concept of community and what creates human bonds can help make the world a better place.

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