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# **Connecting and reconnecting: a phenomenological study of the meanings that extra care tenants attribute to using the internet for social contact**

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# **Connecting and reconnecting: a phenomenological study of the meanings that extra care tenants attribute to using the internet for social contact**

## **Abstract**

**Purpose** – This paper explores the perceptions and experiences of a group of extra care tenants, who, as novice internet users, began to maintain their social relationships online. Housing transitions in later life may jeopardise existing social relationships, leading to loneliness and social isolation. More recently, Covid-19 restrictions have limited familial face-to-face contact and wider social interactions. Thus extra care tenants, who are not already online, may benefit from acquiring internet skills. This paper aims to enhance understanding of the participants' transition from novices to experienced internet users and the impact on their social relationships and sense of self.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A longitudinal, hermeneutic phenomenological study was conducted over eight months in two extra care housing schemes in north east England. Ten participants (56-98 years) with age-related physical, sensory and cognitive losses were recruited to the study. A series of semi-structured interviews and participant diaries captured the participants' experience as they developed internet skills and communicated online.

**Findings** - All participants, including a blind individual, learned to communicate online. Personalised adaptive strategies, peer support, training and management involvement facilitated internet uptake. Participants felt their social relationships were supported and they regained biographical continuity, through being and feeling they belonged in the modern digital world.

**Originality/value** – The online experiences of extra care tenants are rarely voiced. Their

perceptions may assist others to engage online, maintaining social connections which could otherwise be lost.

**Keywords** - Extra Care Housing, Older Adults, Social Relationships, Internet, Digital Skills, Online Communications

**Paper type** - Research paper

## ***Introduction***

Social connectedness is a key indicator of quality of life in older age (Fuller-Iglesias, 2008; Victor & Bowling, 2012) and a body of literature indicates the connection between loneliness, ill-health and cognitive decline (Cacioppo et al. 2006; Courtin & Knapp, 2015; Holt-Lunstad et al. 2010). As populations age, some older individuals may experience deteriorating health, sensory losses or the loss of a partner, prompting their transition to supportive housing (Hill & Sutton, 2010). Housing transitions may disrupt social networks, with attendant risks of loneliness and social isolation (Green, 2017). It then becomes important to maintain, re-establish or develop new social connections (Rook & Charles, 2017). This study explores the perceptions of ten extra care tenants, maintaining their social relationships online.

Extra care housing was introduced in the United Kingdom (UK) in the 1990s (Department of Health, 2004). It offers older individuals a self-contained flat within a communal housing environment. The extra care ethos promotes tenants' independence, while providing on-site care, domestic assistance and opportunities to socialise with other tenants (Callaghan et al. 2009). Social engagement between tenants is central to the extra care ethos (Burholt et al. 2013; Evans & Vallelly, 2007). While Evans and Vallelly (2007) found new friendships developed between extra care tenants, Callaghan et al. (2009) asserted that a minority of extra care tenants sometimes or often felt lonely. Burholt et al. (2013) found that tenants' interactions with other tenants could feel superficial, when compared with their long term friendships. Hence the significance of supporting extra care tenants' social relationships online.

Infrastructure for internet access, positive social attitudes and local technical support are preconditions for older adults' successful adoption of the internet (Damodaran & Sandhu, 2016; Hill et al. 2008) but internet training is rarely available in extra care housing schemes (Gray & Worlledge, 2018). To facilitate tenants' online social engagement, there is a need to

provide support and to understand tenants' hopes and experience of communicating online. This study explored extra care tenants' aspirations, experiences and concerns in adopting online social contact.

### *Methodology*

A hermeneutic phenomenological approach (Gadamer, 1975; Heidegger, 1927) was adopted to access the participants' world of online social contact. This methodology was chosen to privilege the participants' voices, with the goal of reaching a shared understanding of the participants' experience. Phenomenological approaches support the acquisition of knowledge through subjective experience and as Lester (1999) contends, are powerful for '*gaining insights into people's motivations and actions and cutting through the clutter of taken-for-granted assumptions and conventional wisdom.*' (p1). This approach was designed to enhance understanding of participants' perspectives. A longitudinal approach was adopted to provide time for participants to become familiar with the research process and to build confidence to share their experience with the researcher. It was anticipated that participants' perceptions of online social contact may evolve over time and would be captured with a longitudinal approach.

### *Participants*

A purposive sampling approach was adopted. The research sites were two extra care housing schemes, located in north east England, and hosting computer learning programmes. The facility manager invited all computer group members to participate in the study and informed consent was obtained. Five extra care tenants were recruited at each site (one male and nine female: 56-98 years). The participants were all of white British ethnic origin and seven had previously lived in the local area (see Table 1). Six participants completed all the data collection activities. Of the remainder, three participants withdrew due to ill-health and one participant

died during the study. This attrition reflected the challenge of retaining frail, older participants in longitudinal research (Mody et al. 2008).

*Insert Table 1 about here.*

### ***Data collection***

In keeping with the phenomenological approach, data collection involved a sequence of three semi-structured interviews, with participant diaries kept between first and second interviews. Jacelon and Imperio (2005) advise that interviews and participant diaries can complement each other, as they differ in focus and detail. Diary data is generally recorded contemporaneously with an event, whereas interview data draws on retrospective recollections. Following Schuman's (1982) approach to phenomenological interviewing, the first interview established the context of the participants' adoption of online social contact. The second interview focused on participants' day-to-day experience of online social contact and explored the diary data. The third interview provided an opportunity for reflection, clarification and participants' visualisation of their future use of online social contact.

Participant diaries were kept for two weeks, with participants recording their use of communications technology. Whilst prolonged engagement with the participants enhanced rigour in the research process (Rossman & Rallis, 2017) data triangulation provided opportunities for the consistency of data to be recognised and any inconsistencies to be explored. Data collection methods were adapted for two participants with sensory and motor difficulties, for whom speaking and writing were problematic. For example, a participant who was blind, dictated his diary to a volunteer. The four participants whose data was incomplete all completed the first interview, one participant also completed the second interview and three



participants who withdrew had already completed diaries. All data collected was included in the analysis.

### *Data analysis*

Transcription of interviews facilitated preliminary explication of the data. Thematic analysis drew on the approaches of Braun and Clarke (2006), Hycner (1985) and Burnard (1991). Transcribed interviews were open coded to delineate units of general meaning. Data were coded firstly at the level of individual interview, then interview and diary data were compared. Following Hycner (1985) a phenomenological analysis of interview data was undertaken. Repeated patterns of meaning were considered in terms of their ability to address the research question. Data were clustered into units of 'relevant meaning', initially at the level of the individual interview or diary and subsequently across the data set of all interviews and diaries, leading to the generation of themes. Data was reviewed across the study duration highlighting the participants' changing perceptions, adaptive strategies and online skills. The chronology is reflected in the findings.

### *Findings*

Six themes were identified from the analysis: diminished social networks, desiring online social contact, challenges to online social contact, self-presentation online, connecting and reconnecting online and reaching out to the wider world.

#### *Diminished social networks*

Participants' social networks varied in size, composition and proximity. All participants experienced change to their social networks and frequency of social interaction following their transition to extra care housing. Most had lost loved ones.

Some had lost contact with family and friends. Teresa explained that she lived in Africa for many years. Returning to the UK, her familial contacts diminished:

I've lost touch with them. One's over in Zimbabwe. I just can't get in touch with them.

Helen's daughter was living in the south of England and the cohesion of her network of local friends was diminishing:

Now my friends are getting older and they have other commitments, ill people that they are looking after, their husbands and so forth... it's different, now.

Helen's opportunities for social interaction were also reducing. Other participants experienced difficulty interacting with others, due to sensory, speech or health problems. Wendy lived with bi-polar disorder, anxiety and involuntary movement. She also had a speech disorder and had lost confidence in her ability to communicate with friends:

Lack of confidence is part of the anxiety which is with me all the time. Part of it is connected with the shaking which gets worse as the anxiety develops.

Anxiety and depression rob me of things to say.

Geographic distance, limited mobility and impaired vision, also affected the frequency of participants' contact with family and friends. Participants with impaired vision spoke of difficulties with communication devices. Two participants remarked that their world 'had shrunk'. The housing scheme provided opportunities for informal social interaction between tenants, yet some participants said they felt lonely and socially isolated. Teresa remarked, 'You can feel very alone here.' They all raised the possibility of maintaining their social relationships online.

### *Desiring online social contact*

With social networks diminishing, participants anticipated that social internet use might enable them to maintain their long-established social relationships. Reflecting on the loss of his familial network, Alan expressed his hope to use the internet to rebuild relationships with his family:

I want to do Facebook and emails, that sort of thing, just to keep in contact, because I've got three, three brothers in Australia and my son's in New Zealand. The other one's in [*the South of England*). I don't see him so much now.

Lisa envisaged that acquiring digital skills would enhance her self-confidence and ensure her inclusion in familial online messaging:

There's five of us. Me, out of it. Everyone else can use one [a computer]. So they talk to each other, you see. They send messages. And I say, "I am here, you know, I'd like to know." I think that's what annoys me, really. My pride's getting crushed. I can't wait [to communicate online].

These individuals were eager to interact with others on-line. As internet access was not provided within their tenancy, participants supported each other to acquire the necessary skills and equipment. Initially, some participants shared a neighbour's internet connection, building their confidence before committing to their own internet services contract. Peer support was also evidenced through a group of participants meeting regularly to practice their digital skills together. Participants also competed with each other for the most favourable contract with an internet service provider, with one participant pleased to achieve 'privileged customer status' with her provider. The development of this collaborative approach was captured by the longitudinal design of the inquiry.

Participants expressed a preference for online interaction with known individuals, rather than seeking to establish new relationships online. When Olga's Facebook account was quickly populated by more than 300 Facebook friends, she remarked:

I've got more Friends than Soft Mick. A minute, two, five minutes of going on it [granddaughter] said "I don't believe this Nana, you've got 300 Friends here." "Oh thanks very much" I said, "I don't know them".

"You don't have to know them".

But I said "What is the point, then? No one's your friend if you don't know them." That's the bit I don't understand.

Olga outlined her preferences:

I would like to get into these Chat Rooms... I'd like to meet up with people I know...A lot of them go to our church.

Olga's comments indicate that norms, needs and expectations brought to online social contact, differed between herself and her granddaughter. Participants realised that the internet could offer new opportunities for social interaction but most preferred to deepen their connections with existing social contacts.

#### *Challenges to online social contact*

The participants all experienced challenges in using digital devices. They reported age-related problems with dexterity, sensory losses and physical health issues including arthritis, cancer, diabetes, epilepsy, respiratory disease and multiple sclerosis. Some also experienced poor mental health. Yet they all developed strategies to overcome these barriers and communicate online. Denise remarked that she was in constant pain with tumours in her back. She described the effect of pain, medication and the strategies she adopted:

Well, pain's distracting. You get the edge taken off things. You lose the thread with things....It's with being on the morphine. It's frustrating.....I haven't got a proper memory problem. I write everything down and I remember it.

Six participants reported problems with dexterity which hindered their use of the keyboard and mouse. Lisa had post-polio syndrome and her left hand closed involuntarily:

As I say, I've always wanted to [use the computer] but there again, as I say, with one hand... it's a bit awkward.

Lisa found that she could type with one hand, occasionally using shortcuts, which she learned from her family. Epilepsy affected her short term memory, making it difficult to remember sequences on the computer:

It's remembering things. I'm not going to say "Oh that's easy" you know. Not for me. I have to concentrate and do things over and over again before it clicks.

Yet with frequent repetition she recalled sequences and navigated the internet. The phenomenological methodology and longitudinal approach captured participants' growing confidence and coping strategies at different time points.

Wendy had difficulty finding the right words to respond to emails and was reassured when a friend told her '*Just short things will do*' as replies. Initially, she used the landline for social contact. Later, she adopted email, finding it useful when anxiety affected her voice and she was unable to speak. Others such as Kathleen and Alan had age-related sight loss which impacted their online communications. Kathleen explained that her sight was impaired by cataracts. She carefully considered the best time to use her computer:

With my cataracts, I can see more clearly at night. There's not much happening here in an evening so I usually send emails in the evening.

Alan had glaucoma, was blind and obtained his computer through a charity:

As I understand it, I pay the first £400 and then I think the computer is still theirs, sort of part ownership. I'm not sure how it works, whether they want it returned to them eventually. If I pay £400, I get £2000's worth of kit...It's brand new so it must be good.

Being blind, Alan needed to become competent at touch typing. He used an online application to develop his typing skills and monitored his progress:

I'm still practicing with the Keyboard Tutor (software). I've replied to an email and in future need to practice writing actual words.

The phenomenological approach provided insight into the personal health, sensory and disability challenges that participants experienced, and addressed in different ways. While Alan was supported by a charity, other participants received familial support and some families were unsupportive. Kathleen recounted a discussion with her granddaughter, concerning her wish to use the internet:

I said, "I want to get the internet" and [granddaughter] said "No, you're not to." I said, "Don't tell me what I can and can't do" and she said, "But you'll always be on the phone wanting help!"

Kathleen established her internet connection with support from the facility manager. Later, she commented that she had surprised her family, by acquiring internet skills without their involvement. Arthritis in her hands made mouse control difficult and cataracts affected her sight but she became a skilled computer user. Kathleen's family had held an incomplete understanding of her potential, underestimating her capacity to communicate online. Similarly, Freda's daughter held limited expectations of older adults' digital skills:

My daughter's amazed. She thinks I'm a wizard for my age!

The phenomenological approach captured the tension between familial assumptions and individual capabilities which were issues that all participants encountered....

### *Self-presentation online*

Participants' self-presentation online was mediated through their unique online identities and the personalised content they created. Email addresses and Skype names were derived from participants' own names and personally meaningful numbers. However, Freda prefixed her first name with 'Techno' as her Skype username, signalling her success with technology. Wendy, who used her full name as her username, remarked that, initially, she found online communication challenging. She was fearful of presenting herself inappropriately.

Researcher's diary:

Wendy was anxious about sending an email to [friend] today. She asked, "What shall I say?" and later "Is it sufficiently interesting?" She seemed to evaluate and mirror her correspondent's style. "I'll use [friend's] word 'lovely'." Another time Wendy commented on a short email from a friend, who had ended the message abruptly, with just her name. Wendy pointed this out, and said, "I'll send love", concluding her reply with more affection than her friend had shown her.

This indicates how Wendy appraised the style and content of the email messages she received, using them as a point of reference for her reply.

Alan chose to share images of events and activities in which he had participated. He commented:

I received photos of my rowing trip by email and forwarded these to my friends.

He explained that being blind, he was unable to select a preferred image of an event, and generally forwarded all the photographs he received, unless a sighted friend was available to guide his choice. He believed that these images enhanced his online presence, adding:

Although I can't see them myself, I hope other people will be interested. Did I tell you about the time I was rowing at [a local] Uni? As we say, it was pretty cool, you would have enjoyed it I'm sure! It could lead to bigger things when we eventually get on the river!

Using humour, he associated himself with higher education, modernity and sporting challenges. He presented his life, as he experienced it, as an older individual with total sight loss, indicating that he was fit, active and socially engaged. All the participants recognised the complexity of sharing information online and generally approached self-disclosure with caution and an awareness of their audience.

### *Connecting and reconnecting online*

Participants indicated that their presence online enabled them to maintain existing social relationships and to restore some lost social connections. They recognised the significance of re-establishing their social networks and thus restoring continuity in their own biography, following their transition to extra care housing. Wendy commented:

[Email] enabled me to contact people that I could not have found by any other means.

She shared her email address with a friend, who reconnected her online with lost friends from school and university. Dormant relationships were rekindled, leading to closer offline connections and face-to-face meetings.



Alan recalled the onset of his blindness and his transition to extra care housing, with the loss of his former self and familial role:

There are situations when, sometimes I look around and think, “How did I get here? Not so long ago I ran a house with three boys and a van. A dog.”

The dog died... before I came in here. The car, you know, my son sold the car, and maybes I’m in a dream...

Alan’s diary entries revealed his use of the internet, to reconstruct familial relationships and establish wider social connections, appropriate to his changed circumstances:

This week I invited ‘John’ [brother] to join my contact list on Skype...Last Tuesday I joined the Skype Group at [the local group for blind people.]

Later, reporting regular Skype calls with his brother, he added:

I am emailing my sister-in-law in Australia. Now that others have joined in, we’ll have a chat room going before long! I still Skype ‘Paul’ [at the local group for blind people] each week and am looking for more people to Skype.

The longitudinal approach captured Alan’s success in using the internet to re-establish family contact and actively build a wider network of online connections. Olga recounted Skype calls between her extended family in England and her daughter’s family in Australia. Though lively, their discussions were also chaotic:

If we got this Skype ...Skype, like we did before’, I said, ‘Where we were all talking’, in a way it was a waste of time because you’ve got a family there and you’ve got three families here, looking over everybody’s shoulder ...it was pure Bedlam. But I said ‘We could have a three way or even a four way chat and all the girls get together that way, even if it’s only once every couple of months’... Yes. Oh, it keeps you alive!

While Olga used Skype to bring her extended family together, she also recognised the need for more private discussions, whereby ‘the girls’ could reconnect online, also meeting their need for intimacy.

Wendy valued the continuity of her long-term friendships. One friendship had lasted for more than sixty years. Her internet use facilitated regular contact and she expressed the pleasure this gave her, in emails to her friends:

I really enjoy your weekly emails with news from [overseas location].

She carefully managed her online communications and used them to remind her friends to make contact again, often closing with the words ‘...until next week’.

Wendy’s first internet searches were a form of virtual reminiscence, reconnecting her with her younger self, as a research student. A tenuous connection still existed with one former tutor:

Researcher’s Diary: ‘Wendy again brought the names of people she has known, to look up on the internet. The tutor she researched today is now an Emeritus Professor.’

Regret for the loss of this contact resonated as Wendy recounted a missed opportunity to maintain the relationship:

He [Emeritus Professor] sent me a Christmas card last year but I did not have his address and could not send one back.

Wendy derived pleasure from her virtual observation of her former tutor and commented:

I feel more like I used to be.

She felt, if only in the moment, a reconnection with her ‘self’, as a young student.

### *Reaching out to the wider world*

While Olga expressed her preference to interact with known individuals in her local community, Teresa, Alan and Pauline voiced an aspiration for connection with the wider world outside their housing scheme. They indicated a feeling that their world had shrunk to encompass only the housing scheme, separating them from the life of the wider community. Alan equated this with a feeling of imprisonment, signing some family emails as *'The Prisoner in Cell Block H'*. Teresa commented that online social contact enabled her to *'keep in touch with the world'*. Similarly, Pauline commented that interacting online enabled her to *'feel part of the modern world'*. Alan explained that using the internet *'gives us a different setting, outside, that I've lost sight of'*. The connection he sought was not with an individual but with the essence of life in the wider community which he felt was slipping beyond his reach.

### ***Discussion***

Ageing individuals around the globe, who wish to maintain their social networks, following a housing transition, may choose to adopt the internet for social contact. Strong social networks can foster resilience in later life (Blane *et al.* 2011; Fuller-Iglesias 2008) and this phenomenological study has accessed the experience of individuals on the cusp of losing their social connections, to understand their perceptions of maintaining their social networks online. The theme, *'Diminished social networks'*, identified that temporal change can usher in the decline of long-established social connections for some older individuals. Wendy, living with high levels of anxiety and impaired speech, lost confidence in her communication skills and her ability to engage socially with others declined. Some participants spoke of more structural challenges to their social networks, such as geographic distance or friends assuming caring responsibilities with little time for social engagement. Sensory losses and lost contact details also foreshadowed communication difficulties.

Participants voiced some feelings of loneliness and embraced online social contact as a means of maintaining or extending opportunities for social engagement. While the connection between loneliness and declining health in older age can be found in the literature (Holt-Lunstad et al. 2010) the contribution of internet use to social connectedness is also indicated (Tsai et al. 2010). The themes, '*Desiring online social contact*' and '*Challenges to online social contact*' highlight the participants' aspirations to develop their social connections online and the structural and personal barriers which they overcame, in pursuit of this goal. Some barriers, such as the lack of digital connectivity in some extra care housing schemes, may be overcome with the support of housing providers. Age-related problems of dexterity, sensory losses, chronic and potentially deteriorating health issues, may be mitigated in online communications by the adoption of accessibility features, specialist software and equipment.

The findings indicate that the participants drew on individual and collective resources to overcome barriers to social internet use creating a supportive learning environment (Damodaran and Sandhu, 2016) within their housing scheme. Coming together to share their skills and equipment to communicate online; installing their own infrastructure for internet access; and overcoming poor vision and dexterity issues; all such endeavours seemed to extend the boundaries of the participants' expectations of themselves and to confound some assumptions by others. Older adults have been depicted in popular culture, as lacking in digital skills (Lam and Lee 2006; McDonough 2016; Swindell 2002). Schreurs et al. (2017) advised that the ubiquity of such narratives may undermine older adults' self-confidence, discouraging online activities which could enhance their quality of life. Yet the participants in this study overcame perceived frailty and age-related losses through their determination to join the digital world. Relatedly the theme '*Self-presentation online*' illustrates that participants found

that by establishing a positive digital presence, they could redress some perceived limitations in their digital skills, facilitate social connection and position themselves, alongside their family and friends, in the digital world.

While extra care housing is designed to bring tenants together (Burholt et al. 2013; Callaghan et al. 2009; Evans and Vallely 2007) the theme, '*Connecting and reconnecting*' highlights the participants' need to restore continuity in their biography. For these participants, it seems that social internet use was not only perceived as a means of maintaining social relationships, but also represented biographical and relational continuity. The significance of biographical continuity is its contribution to wellbeing in older age, with the retention of a coherent sense of self through the challenges which can be inherent in later life. (Muhli and Svensson 2018; Pirhonen et al. 2018). While accepting that some temporal change is inevitable, Kaufman (1986) found that biographical continuity 'is a critical resource for remaining healthy.' (p6. For the participants, online social contact was more than an opportunity for social interaction, 'in the moment'. It affirmed their sense of self, by providing an opportunity to revisit, virtually, old friendships, places and events from their earlier lives, to reclaim elements of their biography otherwise lost to their present-day selves.

The theme, *Reaching out to the wider world* draws on findings that some participants felt their world had become smaller, bounded by their housing scheme. They expressed a need to be and belong in, the modern world. Creating and curating their presence online enabled participants to position themselves in the wider digital world, irrespective of their physical circumstances. While communicating online enhanced their social connectedness, participants also developed and projected themselves as agentic, autonomous beings, with current skills for 'the modern world'.

While the participants valued connecting with others online, some extra care tenants lack the opportunity and skills to use the internet for social contact. Since the advent of Covid-19, media coverage has indicated that people of all ages and abilities could use the internet to maintain their social connections. However, some older adults, living offline in supportive housing, may now be even more vulnerable to social isolation and loneliness. As this study illustrates, older individuals can adopt and take pleasure in online social contact, which, as in Kathleen's case, may be facilitated by onsite support. The need to understand and facilitate older adults' social internet use continues to be urgent and pressing.

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Table 1 Overview of the sample

Location	Male	Female	Age Range (Years)	Digital Device Owner	Previous ICT Training	Prior Internet Use	Close Family / Friends Abroad
1	1	4	64-98	5	3	1	3
2	0	5	56-78	4	3	1	2