60+ ONLINE

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ENGAGING SENIORS THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA & DIGITAL STORIES

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60+ Online: Engaging Seniors through Social Media & Digital Stories

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report has two aims. The first is to establish the elements of an interests-participation model for developing sustainable digital media skills and literacies among seniors aged 60 and over. To do this we describe and evaluate the 60+ Online program, a series of co-designed workshops that target creative and social interaction skills. The second aim is to present a rich qualitative account of the digital technology and social media environment that surrounds our project participants. Without accounting for the everyday contexts in which seniors engage with digital technologies, digital literacy programs are unlikely to succeed in a meaningful and sustained way.

The interests-participation learning model encourages seniors to use digital storytelling and engage critically with social media. Building on an extensive research base, 60+ Online aims to ignite interest and skills for digital participation by shifting the focus from operational internet skills to strategic and creative skills as well as social interaction. The model also moves from a didactic tutorial format to one oriented around creative digital and social media tasks situated in real personal, local and community contexts. 60+ Online aims to:

1. **Empower** seniors to connect with each other and participate in local community and services using digital devices and social media platforms, and
2. **Embed and sustain** digital engagement practices through everyday activities and existing localised training contexts to improve digital participation outcomes.

The 60+ Online project piloted workshops co-designed with seniors in Melbourne, Australia through Knox City Council and City of Boroondara Council in partnership with Telstra.

Key Findings

The methods used to evaluate the project in this report include social media analysis, semi-structured interviews and focus groups held with participants both during and after the workshop series. The evaluation found that:

- Many seniors already have a rich social life interconnected with digital media technologies, but they feel like there is more to know and a need to ‘keep up’ with developments
- An interests-participation model for digital skills and literacies development works by shifting the focus from technologies to participants’ personal lives and social contexts
- The success of the 60+ Online model was confirmed through interview and focus group feedback, and by the quality of digital story outputs and regular social media use during and beyond the program
- Meaningful content creation and managed social media sharing proved to be the impetus for developing new digital skills, addressing internet safety, security and privacy concerns, and interacting with others online
• **A task-based workshop format based in participants’ own social lives and histories** provides an effective context for everyday and ongoing use of a wider range of digital media technologies

• **Peer mentoring and support, facilitated by a closed social media group** created an environment and attitude of shared skills development and problem solving

In both interviews and focus group discussions, participants relayed some of the ongoing barriers to active digital participation. Many of the difficulties raised, however, surfaced in relation to new creative goals, and critical or strategic probing of social media interaction and safety:

• **Access and operational skills** regarding software systems, applications and device functionality continue to cause frustration; but with these now seen as impediments to overcome rather than the focus of digital skills development work (new strategies for finding solutions through search were explored)

• **Wariness regarding social interactions online** remained, but became points of discussion and guided experimentation through the interests-participation workshop model

**Impact and outcomes for participants**

Although further research is required to comprehensively evidence the effectiveness of the interests-participation model, the program design and our evaluation highlights four main outcomes for participants:

• **Increased problem solving capacity and improved self-efficacy** (confidence and motivation) with interactive digital technologies

• **Improved strategic digital skills** (safety, creative content skills and social interaction); i.e., including but moving beyond operational digital skills

• **Enhanced social connectedness**, reduction of isolation

• **Supported social interaction** with community organisations and groups, and public and health services through digital channels

Our findings demonstrate the value of the interest-participation model, and point to ways it can be further developed into a broader based and adaptable program that engages seniors to learn digital skills and literacies through digital storytelling and social media use.
INTRODUCTION

While many older Australians are embracing digital life through online engagement, there is a disproportionate number who do not have an understanding of, access to, or experience with, newer digital and online technologies.¹ A digital inclusion and participation gap has been identified for older Australians in particular.² This can affect participation in the education, health, social and economic benefits of the emerging digital society. While we increasingly understand the challenges of digital inclusion at the population level, there is a need for further research to understand the experiences, challenges and potential opportunities for seniors navigating digital technologies in their everyday lives. By focusing on social media activities and digital storytelling, 60+ Online sought to build a model to overcome many of the key barriers to effective and sustained social and digital participation for seniors.

Partnering with Telstra and two local Victorian Councils, the project team developed a workshop series and skills development model involving seniors in digital storytelling and social media activities. The ‘interests-participation’ model has dual aims: a) to empower seniors to connect with each other, participate in local community and services using digital devices and social media platforms, and b) to embed sustainable digital engagement practices into everyday activities and existing localised training contexts to improve digital participation outcomes.

The 60+ Online project focused on sustaining seniors’ use of digital technologies by drawing on personal interests to produce digital stories, as well as address uncertainties regarding online security, privacy and sharing by engaging with social media platforms. The interests-participation model was co-designed with seniors and Council staff working in Active Aging, and was put into practice and tested through a series of three skills development workshops, with an additional introductory workshop to secure buy-in and address concerns about social media, online safety and privacy. This report outlines the project design, resourcing and workshop activities, and discusses the findings of the program evaluation. In-depth interviews with program participants generated detailed personal accounts of the challenges they face while online and managing digital communication tools, and the different modes of learning and forms of digital and social participation achieved through the program.

BACKGROUND

With the rapid integration of digital information and communication technologies into all parts of society, a significant research literature has traced the implications and unevenness of access, use and skills, and digital literacies. For around two decades, ‘digital divide’ research has had the goal of monitoring and understanding increases in social stratification as a result of uneven access to digital communication and internet technologies. This work has led to a wide range of social programs, policy initiatives, research projects and community-based enterprises that aim to address not only a divide, but also a skills, digital literacies and participation gap. The Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII), offers a comprehensive and deep monitoring instrument, and highlights ongoing gaps in access, affordability and ability that characterise the contemporary digital inclusion challenges some Australians face.³
The ADII highlights that Australians 65 and over experience the lowest levels of digital inclusion, and as digital technologies evolve, and services, information and communication applications continue to move online, this gap remains a pressing social issue. This is qualified in a recent PEW Internet research report that states: ‘Roughly two-thirds of those aged 65 and over go online, and a record share now own a smartphone – although many seniors remain relatively divorced from digital life’. This issue can be best understood as moving from a binary digital divide, to a set of complex personal and social factors contributing to digital and social exclusion – a ‘participation divide’. That is, while seniors are increasingly gaining access to digital technologies through personal computer use and WiFi- or data-enabled mobile devices, uneven digital participation persists generally, especially in the use of internet technologies for content creation and sharing. While access remains an issue to be addressed, it is the participation gap that has become more pressing for seniors as a factor of digital exclusion.

Digital literacy programs have sought to address these issues, often with a focus on local institutions and community spaces like libraries or community houses. Techniques for developing digital literacies vary greatly, but mostly apply tutorial models building instrumental and operational skills with the aid of step-by-step online materials (see for example the Tech Savvy Seniors program). 60+ Online applies an alternative approach focusing on two tools of interests-based participation and engagement: digital stories and social media. This approach addresses the difference that persists in the way older people perceive and use digital technologies, targeting their preference for functional or instrumental uses to ignite interest in creative and social interaction capabilities and other strategic uses. By targeting creative digital content production and social interaction, the 60+ Online model engages explicitly with seniors’ personal lives and community contexts.

Digital stories have been used in numerous contexts for engaging people in community, empowering individual voices and stories for those who might be less visible in the community, and for improving wellbeing. Digital storytelling can be defined loosely as ‘the whole range of personal stories now being told in potentially public form using digital media’, and it encompasses ‘the ability to represent the world around us – using a shared infrastructure’. Digital stories are a useful target for developing digital literacies because they open up possibilities for moving beyond the process driven focus of device and operational internet skills. Creating and sharing images or other digital media content brings personal motivations and interests to the fore and can help to place greater emphasis on social interaction. A number of studies have shown that digital literacy training is most likely to be successful when tied to the interests and existing skills of participants. Interests-based learning has previously been successfully modelled and tested with seniors, demonstrating potential for a deeper, longer term engagement with technologies.

Specific applications have been designed to aid seniors’ content creation and digital story sharing, and hence digital participation, but we contend that the pathway from digital skills to participation and inclusion is best addressed through already entrenched social media platforms and digital storytelling tools. 60+ Online builds an interests-participation model that brings together what we know about the empowering use of digital storytelling and content creation with social media participation. There are a wide range of reasons why older adults avoid using social media technologies. However, there is evidence to suggest that engaging strategically with social platforms can help to embed a wider range
of digital skills into seniors’ everyday lives and improve social connections. The 60+ Online project explores these connections in new detail and offers a model for addressing the digital participation gap that can be adapted and tested in other sites and contexts.

60+ ONLINE WORKSHOP DESIGN & RESOURCING

Recruitment and participants

Recruitment strategies were based on specific age criteria (60+, with a mix of 60-70 and 70+), as well as self-reported range of digital skills, socio-economic range where possible, and cultural variation (though with English language capability). Recruitment of participants was coordinated by Teresa Donegan, Coordinator Age Friendly Planning at Knox City Council, and Wendy Smith, Coordinator Strategy and Development, and Jacqui Storey, Active Ageing Project Officer at City of Boroondara Council.

In total, 22 people signed up to the project, with 13 participants at Knox, and 9 participants at Boroondara. The average age of participants was 73; the youngest was 64, and the oldest 86.

Figure 1. Age of participants

Equipment

Telstra provided participants with iPads, but the workshop design allowed for participants to use their own devices, including phones, if they were more comfortable with that. Thirteen participants received iPads, 9 used their own devices, which consisted of a mix of phones (Android and Apple, tablets, or their own iPad). Tutorials and workshops were delivered mainly in relation to an Apple operating system and app environment, but with some translation into Android for 2 participants who preferred to use their own Android phones.
Workshops co-design and participation

A co-design workshop was conducted on July 17, 2017, where the broad aims of the project were discussed with staff from the two Councils, and members of each Council’s Active Aging Advisory Groups – seniors who have volunteered to advise council on programs and initiatives in the design or post implementation phase. Input was sought particularly in relation to three key issues feeding into project design: boundaries around online sharing and social media use, interests around which participants would be motivated to create social media content and digital stories that also encouraged social participation, and skills, issues and concerns around device and app use.

One of the main outcomes of the co-design workshop, was broad agreement in the interests-participation approach to developing digital skills and social participation through social media and digital stories, in relation to personal and local area social interests. Three themes were nominated to guide production of digital stories and social media engagement: a) personal or local histories, b) social groups or clubs, and c) a walk in the local neighbourhood. These themes were not deemed essential or necessarily fixed, but were nominated to give participants in the program guidance and direction for their social media and digital story production.

Figure 2. 60+ Online Workshop Series, process and evaluation methods

Following the co-design workshop, it was felt that participants would benefit from an additional discussion-based workshop that introduced the project aims of improving digital skills and social participation through social media and digital stories. This introductory workshop allowed participants to raise and address concerns with using social media and sharing or communicating online, and included a broad discussion about social media and digital storytelling and what these might offer participants.
Three skill-building workshops were then delivered with the two groups in meeting rooms at Knox City Council and City of Boroondara Council. Workshops ran for 2.5 hours, including a half hour break, and were generally divided by focus on social media skills in the first hour and digital story making skills in the second. Workshops ran between August and October, roughly two weeks apart to allow participants time for between-workshop activities.

Social media

The workshops were structured to introduce participants to two social media platforms – Facebook and Instagram. The workshops focused mostly on Facebook as a tool for connecting and engaging with peers, local services or organisations based on personal interests. The workshops assumed no basic knowledge of either platform. Approximately half of the participants already had a Facebook account, but only a few actively used it. No participants had an Instagram account.

The first workshop was thus designed to encompass an unstructured discussion firstly, about seniors’ concerns about using social and digital media tools, and secondly, finding links between seniors’ individual interests and how these might be extended through use of social and digital media tools.

Facebook was chosen as the main social media platform for learning and participation because it offers the greatest potential for connecting socially with services, organisations, resources and groups that might benefit or interest participants. As the most popular platform in Australia it is also most likely to facilitate connections with family and friends and introduce mechanisms for social participation.

Instagram was also introduced to the workshops in order to allow participants to have an alternative venue for creative output and exchange. However, it was not used directly as part of the exercises and group exchange in the way that Facebook was, and there was little use of Instagram by participants throughout the workshop period, as we discuss below.

Participants were initially quite wary about the use of social media in everyday life; indeed, seniors were quite sceptical of many of the features of social media, such as creating diverse friendship groups, or sharing personal information and images. The discussion held in the introductory workshop, and activities in subsequent workshops was an important part of overcoming this particular barrier to use. For example, workshop activities such as the ‘Selfie exercise’, where participants were encouraged to use their phone to take a photo of themselves and post to Facebook, not only encouraged participants to use digital and social media tools for the first time, but also encouraged discussion and understanding of specific social media cultures and behaviours, and how these might be limited or expanded using particular settings or behaviours.

A closed Facebook Group was also set up at the end of Workshop 1 and participants were invited to participate. The 60+ Online Facebook Group was designated as a space for learning, experimenting, sharing, and practicing among a supportive cohort. Participants were aware that the Group consisted of only those in the combined two Council areas. This maintained a safe environment, but participants retained some uncertainty about the audience for interaction with the Group because of the two groups’ involvement.
Throughout the workshops participants were encouraged to engage with particular exercises such as finding a Facebook Page relevant to their interests or social needs and re-posting to the 60+ Online Group. Participants were also encouraged to post both in and outside of the workshop setting to practice skills or ask questions.

**60+ ONLINE FACEBOOK GROUP**

Analysis of participants’ use of social media during the workshop period, and their digital story outputs, provides valuable insights into the application of digital skills gained or reinforced through the workshops.

Figure 3: 60+ Online Closed Facebook Group: Engagement activity

An important aspect of the Facebook closed group was the facilitators’ consistent modelling of typical social media behaviours by posting content and commenting on, or ‘liking’ other posts. This augmented the workshop approach, where facilitators actively illustrated their own everyday use and problem-solving techniques on social media. This approach was successful firstly because it demystified the tools and practices that seniors were not accustomed to, and secondly, it easily illustrated the different ways communication on social media could be sustainably incorporated into their everyday lives.

Lastly, interactions on the Facebook closed group between group members and facilitators encouraged learning through discovery and independent problem solving. For example, a participant might post a question about an issue they were having to the group page, which would encourage other group members to answer, ask further questions or even encourage the participant to discover the answer themselves and post about it. Rather than looking to the facilitator as the only authority, or the classes as the only source of knowledge, the Facebook closed group created possibilities for extending independent discovery and learning.
Building sustainability into social media use thus requires a flexible approach in workshop delivery. Future workshop facilitators will need to be able to discuss both social media use and seniors’ interests broadly (perhaps along particular themes) and change or add content to the workshops as necessary. Facilitators also need to be wary that they not fall into the trap of simply being ‘tech support’, but instead focus on creating a workshop environment that encourages independent and sustainable development of skills, as well as peer support. The enthusiastic use of the Facebook closed group indicated that while most participants wanted individual attention, they were more comfortable and adept with social and digital media technologies than they actually perceived themselves to be. Indeed, our analysis indicated that many of the participants developed their skills using interest-based learning much more rapidly and to a much more advanced standard, than initially expected.

**Digital Stories**

The concept of making simple, two to three-minute digital stories with mobile devices was discussed in the Introductory Workshop, and participants were enthusiastic about learning to make videos within the three guiding themes (discussed above). Workshop 1 introduced basic techniques for facilitating mobile video making using either an iPad or smartphone. This included the structure of the digital story (e.g. introduction, progression, conclusion); what types of data might be used for the story, and technical tips (e.g how to hold the technology, focus in, pan out, take clear photographs) best suited to recording audio and or video using mobile technologies.

Workshop participants developed a ‘storybook’ (i.e, dividing the story into small manageable pieces of data which shaped the story) using the metaphor of creating a video ‘shopping list’. Participants discussed the general topic or theme they wanted to explore, and then work-shopped the ‘ingredients’ needed to turn the idea into a 2-minute video. This was achieved with a pen and paper
template and facilitated by the workshop leaders. Some data for digital stories and Storyboards were shared with peers in workshops or online on the Facebook page.

Figure 4: Storyboard posted to Facebook for comment

Between workshops 1, 2 and 3, participants were asked to undertake activities and tasks to begin building their digital stories. This involved local outings, attending events, doing some research or obtaining old photos or artefacts to film. At workshop 2, participants were introduced to simple editing skills through the Adobe Premiere Clip app and were assisted to begin putting together a video project from the short clips and images they had gathered.

Figure 5: A participant editing their digital story using Adobe Premiere Clip and iPad
Voiceover was introduced in workshop three, and participants were aided in finishing their videos through a practiced two-minute voiceover narrative conducted in a quiet room. Step by step guides were provided for each stage. While researchers provided some additional support to perform final edits on videos before and after workshops, many attendees exceeded researcher expectations and were able to use their newly acquired digital skills to edit both video and audio independently. It is important to note that workshop attendees who attended all three workshops and engaged with the process completed a digital story. This was a considerable source of pride and satisfaction for workshop participants and was celebrated with a video viewing at a ‘graduation ceremony’ held at Knox Council and attended by the Mayor of Knox, who gave the participants achievement certificates.

Figure 6: A screenshot from a participant’s digital story hosted on YouTube.
EVALUATION & ANALYSIS

The relatively small cohort size for the pilot suited a predominantly qualitative design for project evaluation and participant research. The research methods chosen for the evaluation and exploration of seniors’ digital lives were:

- In-depth interviews (n=19) in participants’ homes (n=16), with a home technology tour, and digital skills self-efficacy survey
- Two focus group interviews with the groups at the conclusion of the workshop series
- Descriptive social media analysis

In the interviews, participants were encouraged to tell their stories and provide insights into their everyday social lives and experiences with digital technologies. Not all workshop participants were able to complete an interview or attend a focus group.

The overall research question guiding the evaluation and research component of the project was:

To what extent does group social media use and digital story production generate relevant and sustainable improvements in digital inclusion and community participation for seniors?

In this report, all participants have been designated with a pseudonym they chose themselves, and ethical consent was obtained through Swinburne’s Human Ethics Research Committee (2017/187). Most participants nominated a pseudonym that resembled a social media username as a gesture toward their enrolment in a social media-oriented digital skills program.

Data collected through interviews and focus groups was thematically analysed through an open coding process to establish broad themes. Narrative analysis was used to bring these themes together around the personal contexts of the participants, with a selection of focus case studies presented. This reflected one of our central observations: many seniors experience a rich social life integrated with digital technologies. How this is augmented, developed, and the particular frustrations and barriers to digital participation, is particular to each.

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS: DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY & EVERYDAY LIFE

Nineteen participants completed interviews. Sixteen of these took place in the participants’ home, and three at another venue that was more convenient. Following interviews, a ‘technology tour’ was conducted to provide some further domestic contextual information about participants’ internet access, use and capacity.

The in-depth interviews included a simple survey to capture participant demographics, internet technology and device ownership and access, and self-reported confidence rating on ‘Operational internet skills’, ‘Formal internet skills’, ‘Communication skills’, and ‘Content creation skills’, following the digital inclusion and participation research work of van Deursen, Helsper and Eynon.17
Figure 7: Self-reported digital skills, all participants, (N = 22)

While the responses are not broadly representative at a population level, they were informative of the project participants’ digital skills and confidence. The overall pattern for the groups indicated in Figure 7, was that only a small minority felt themselves to be at the expert level for operational and formal skills, and only one for communication skills. All rated themselves as less confident or competent with content creation skills – and this aligned with larger more representative studies. Communication skills were understood to include email and text messaging; in relation to social media specifically, participants were far less confident.

Interview questions focused on:

- Most common uses of internet technologies
- Whether it was difficult to learn new digital skills
- Previous experiences with social media
- Experiences of making digital content such as digital video, photos or text
- Personal interests and participation in clubs and groups
- The value of engaging with people through social media in relation to these interests and social groups

Our narrative analysis, drawing on interviews with 19 of the project participants reveals a picture of varied, but often quite sophisticated and sometimes very reluctant internet and digital media use. About two thirds of the participants used social media; all used email and/or mobile messaging. But the analysis also highlights the gaps in knowledge and skills, difficulties negotiating processes of learning new devices, applications or tasks, and some of the frustrations and barriers to learning – many of which only surfaced when attempting new things with digital technologies through the project-focussed workshops.

Digital technology use and environments

In each group participants varied in their personal use of digital technology. For some, digital technologies offer a means of fulfilling banal administrative tasks, while for others, it offers the possibility of fulfilling gaps left by physical services, and the pursuit of individual interests. A range of digital experiences and expertise was noted among the cohort. For Harry (Boroondara), digital technologies and skills were not something that he found difficult, and so, when questioned about
what he might like to do with digital in the future, he emphasised more advanced skills such as “integrating video clips... adding arrows to maps... making [presentations] more interesting and user friendly”.

Similarly, other participants indicated sophisticated strategic and critical internet skills, citing instances where they had used the internet to make sure that information they had seen elsewhere was legitimate. Rose (Knox), for instance, was sent some information about a health issue from an individual that she trusted, but she wasn’t sure about the source that the information had come from. Upon receiving this, Rose thought “okay, I want to check it out somewhere else where there’s a site that I do trust and know”. Only two participants spoke about using digital technologies as a means for generating income. Mavis, in Knox, reported regularly filling out surveys that rewarded her with vouchers at Coles, while Indiginata (in Boroondara), uses eBay to sell his camera collection.

Digital technologies were linked to banal administrative tasks and, as such, were associated with domesticity. Grant (Boroondara) describes his use of digital technologies as a means of increasing his efficiency:

I start with post and say, what could I do on the internet to eliminate post? I do not want anything through the letterbox. If I can do it by the internet, by email, or by websites – [like] medical stuff [such as] histories or access to records – I will do all of that via the internet.

This association with domesticity was common amongst the cohort. Digital technologies are often used for what Jane (Knox) describes as “home business”: banking, online shopping, and paying bills. Mocn (Knox), takes this a step further, using YouTube to learn “handy skills” as and when required:

Well, the other day, I needed to change a self-inking stamp, and I didn’t think I was doing it properly so I just went back into YouTube and had a look, that sort of thing. It’s more skills, I think, that I need to learn or need to develop that I would use YouTube [for].

This ties in with the way digital technologies are used by participants to fill gaps that are left by missing physical services. Darcy’s (Boroondara) husband, for instance, is interested in Nano Blocks, but there aren’t “many shops around that handle the ones he hasn’t got”, so Darcy now purchases them online.

INDIGINATA
Indiginata’s background as a former film student meant that he was the most accomplished of the 60+ digital storytellers, despite being the oldest participant.

A Swinburne film school alumnus, the 86-year-old was excited about the possibilities for filming using his phone or iPad and sharing his videos on Facebook.

Though he had some initial concerns about privacy on social media, once he understood how to change his privacy settings, Indiginata immediately began posting incredible videos about his adventures in the local community and with the Deepdene U3A. He was excited about the possibility of starting his own Vimeo channel to create content about his family history and local community.
Internet technologies also support and broaden personal interests. For Harry (Boroondara), a self-confessed news junkie, the internet is central to how he keeps “up to date with news and research”. Ruby (Knox) does “a lot of craftwork” and spends “a lot of time in Pinterest… [and] Ravelry”, while Rose (Knox) and Jane (Knox) (similarly, but separately) study online courses and webinars, such as “genealogical programs you can do online, that are free, and are just offered by various universities and organisations and associations in different things” (Jane, Knox). Each of the homes visited had some fairly central computer set-up, whether this was a desk with a PC and printer, or a space for a laptop and tablet devices to be used, indicating a degree of everyday access and use.

Internet, social media and everyday communication

Digital technologies were consistently mentioned as a means for maintaining social ties (whether individual and personal, or within and across groups). Mavis (Knox) uses Facebook to update her walking group, while Paddy (Boroondara) suggests communication with particular family members would not have been possible without digital technologies. Ruby (Boroondara) uses emails to coordinate activities within the U3A membership (ranging from “synopsis of what the presentation’s going to be the following Friday” to a once-per-term newsletter), and sends photos to family and friends to keep in touch.

For Keisha (Knox), email is a way of keeping in touch with friends and family while overseas, due largely to the immediacy of the platform. “Like, if you write a letter to overseas it takes a week. Whereas, if you do an email, it’s instant.” But Keisha was quick to point out that this did not mean that email had replaced letter writing: “I still think you should combine it”. When asked whether social media might be introduced to this practice of connectivity, Keisha said: “I guess I could, like my cousins… Instead of writing, is that what you mean? Instead of writing one, I can write to all of them. Is that right? …But I don’t know how to do that.” Notably, Keisha remains hesitant in applying her current communication practices to social platforms, and this was representative of some of the fears and uncertainties of many in the group.

For some of the participants it seems somewhat age-inappropriate to be using social media. Darcy (Boroondara) relays a time when her grandchildren caught her looking at their social media pages:

I tend to be almost a spy in terms of the Facebook and Instagram. You probably heard me saying that one of the grandchildren said to me, "You’ve been on Instagram. You’ve been on my Instagram." He was laughing, and then the other three said "Yes, you’ve been on ours too," and I had. So obviously I hadn’t realised they could see that I’d been there. …I did a like thing there, but that’s the only thing I’d done. They’re working out that their poor old grandmother is starting to spy on them. So I said, "Anybody that de-friends me, that’s it." (Darcy, Boroondara)

Participants varied in their levels and processes of engagement on digital and social media. For some, digital technologies are part of their daily routine. Grant (Boroondara) told us how, in the morning, he takes a cup of tea back to bed, opens up his phone, and:

Does all the flags that it’s got, wherever they are, whether they’re update flags or whatever. Then [I] deal with messages and see what’s happening on Facebook. Usually before breakfast.
Then looking at the electronic diary: what are we doing today? Where are we going? Who are we seeing? All of that stuff. It’s all done, over a cup of tea, in bed, before breakfast.

Similar behaviours were mentioned by Paddy (Boroondara), Grainne (Boroondara), and Albert (Knox).

For others, social media was considered less important, and so less often checked. Harry (Boroondara), for instance, checks the news online each morning, but looks at Facebook “probably only about once a week”. This is qualified, however, by receipt of notifications, where attention to a platform is “probably... in response to the messages that I get... notifications saying, so and so’s put a post up. That type of thing”. But the subsequent attention that Harry pays is filtered further still by who has caused the notification. Harry’s sister, for example, is currently overseas with her husband, so “when messages come in... I’ll have a look. [But] if I haven’t been in contact with someone for a while, [I might respond] another way”.

Other participants (such as Jane, Knox) said they were also motivated by notifications, and that marking each as read or clearing these was part of their daily administrative task. Others, like Jane, approached this in a formal manner, sitting up at the desktop computer each morning to “do the emails first and then the Facebook”.

RELATIONSHIPS, SOCIAL CONNECTIONS AND SOCIAL PARTICIPATION
Despite some reservations about online privacy, social media appears to play a strong role for many participants in maintaining and developing relationships, enhancing social connectedness and enabling social participation. Participants reported regularly engaging with the internet and social media platforms more broadly to communicate with family members.

LYNDEN

Lynden was one of the most enthusiastic participants in the 60+ workshops. The semi-retired Knox resident said she wanted to understand how to use social media for telling stories and fuelling her passion for lifelong learning.

“It’s sharing our knowledge, sharing our skills and just learning. Not necessarily just learning this one thing but learning lots of different things and that’s what I think we all enjoy.”

Using her new digital skills, Lynden created a digital video about her garden and she also found that social media added an important aspect to engaging with her family:

“I’d been on Facebook...and I had really stopped using it for quite some time. But then I restarted with this group and what I’ve really found is it’s gorgeous because I found how to save images of my grandson...I’ve taken those and saved those images on Facebook and of course, I did beautiful hearts and all those sorts of things.”
For Paddy (Boroondara), since losing his wife, digital tools have provided an avenue for staying connected to his family: “Well I have eight grandchildren, I’ve lost my wife a long time ago and eight wonderful grandchildren. And they all use digital communication and I participate in it with them.”

Similarly, Grant (Boroondara) reported that although his grandchildren typically didn’t “communicate that well [generally]... they [do] communicate pretty well through social media”. For Mavis (Knox), maintaining family connections is why she is online in the first place: “I suppose when I learned to go on Facebook was because my grandson went overseas, so I’ve been on there forever”. Grainne (Boroondara), established a Facebook profile because she didn’t want to keep learning about her children’s activities from other people.

For Rose (Knox), the benefits of social media are similar in that it enables her to keep in touch with her brother (“it’s like sending a text, but if you want to put something else in... a photo of something that’s happened”), but it also allows her to be more budget conscious. Guru uses Facebook as well as WhatsApp to keep in touch of family and friends in Melbourne, as well as elsewhere in the world, including his country of origin where he maintains many contacts.

We use WhatsApp to contact people here, at home or the children, or whatever it is, and to find out what is happening. And, of course, our relatives and people, friends are in different parts of the world and we keep groups, at the moment, so there are several groups... Before the WhatsApp came, we had to use the phone call, you know, to get some information so it was a bit difficult so WhatsApp has been cheaper and very easy to use, also. (Guru, Knox)

For Mavis (Knox), Facebook Messenger affords the ability to quickly catch up on her children’s lives – even though her son had told her that he hated “messenger, [and would] prefer a phone call”. Unlike those participants mentioned above, who feel that social media is a time waster, for Mavis, Facebook Messenger offers a means of saving time because you can share “little things, back and forth, and know what’s happening... rather than get on the phone and you’re there for half an hour or something”.

Finally, digital engagement has offered Jane (Knox) a way to mitigate social isolation:

Well you find things out. It stops being lonely. You extend yourself a little bit... You extend yourself a little bit don’t you because you’ve got different interests and things... I don’t feel lonely, because I’m talking to people on Facebook and you’re doing things all the time.

PLATFORMS + PLATFORM SPECIFIC BEHAVIOURS
Participants in both cohorts identified particular behaviours across a variety of web-based platforms. Key to differentiation in use appeared to be concern about privacy settings. Harry (Boroondara) wondered whether this had “something to do with our age group?”, noting that he had previously preferred to use WhatsApp or Viber because he felt that Facebook was too public: “more open”. Since realising that Facebook Messenger offered private messaging, Harry has shifted some of his communication away from the more public space of Facebook, onto Messenger.

Despite this new awareness, Harry retains private email groups that are designed and utilised for each of the four book clubs he belongs to. This involves processes of managing online boundaries based on
interest-specific inclusion criteria and privacy. Harry suggests that there are possibilities for more public engagement, however, when he mentions that he has recently discovered “a website called goodreads-dot-com”, which he describes as “a good way of keeping a record of the books that you’re reading, and what you think of them, and see what other people think of them”. But it is likely that Harry is interested in Good Reads because it allows him to retain the boundaries that he has previously established: “there’s a common element there [i.e. reading, books], and you can restrict [your involvement] just to that element”. Similar practices of boundary work are mentioned by Rose (Knox) who, following the 60+ workshops, established a secret Facebook group with friends to discuss future communal housing plans.

I’ve started – there’s a group of friends and we’re exploring the possibility, tentatively exploring the possibility of having a cohousing arrangement together in a few years. What I’ve done is set up a secret group, which I learned from...the program. Set up a secret group just for us to share things that I come across and that they come across. I’m really comfortable doing that and it’s something that we share. And I thought that was a fantastic platform. So rather than me having to send them an email with links all over the place, or to document it somewhere else I’m just doing it in that site and I know everything that we collectively find will be there. I thought that was useful. And it’s really easy to share to everybody. (Rose, Knox)

WhatsApp was cited by some participants as a particularly useful platform. Guru (Knox) described it as being: “easy to use... we can put pictures, photographs, download them, add notes to that ... so, we don’t have any problem”.

While a number of participants were already on Facebook, Guru (Knox) started using it “only after going for this project... Before that, I didn’t use it much, but people always try to contact me through Facebook”. Usage practices on social media platforms such as Facebook appear to be linked to digital familiarity and confidence. Albert (Knox), for example, suggested that although he had Facebook prior to the project, he was:

more a recipient rather than a sender of information. I very rarely send out things, maybe because I don’t quite know the ethics of it, like if someone shares with me, should I just share it to everybody else or not?

For others, familiarity with Facebook was a matter of time and circumstance. Ruby (Boroondara) had “joined [Facebook] years ago” but not used it until last year when she went on holidays with a friend who was on Facebook to keep in touch with her family while they were away. Ruby, encouraged by this, “decided... perhaps I’ll do a bit more. So, we were playing around and I copied a couple of photos that I’d taken and put those on my web page – my Facebook page”. This type of use tends not to result in sustained engagement. As Ruby said, after that trip, “I didn’t do anything else really until last Tuesday [during the 60+ workshop]”. Additionally, these discontinuous processes of engagement can result in further confusion:

I think it might have been you who said to go through the Facebook app, which I did, and then it offered me the invitation to write a comment on one of my photos so I did that. Then this friend that I was away with emailed me or sent me a message back saying, “Have you been to
Lord Howe Island again?” because I went there with her four or five years ago. And, of course I haven’t. It was just I put this photo up because I liked it and then I was offered the option of writing a comment so I did. (Ruby, Boroondara)

Keisha (Knox) expressed similar sentiments, linking these moments of digital uncertainty to fears around privacy (explored further below):

I’ve probably been on [Facebook] a while. I don’t really ever put anything about me on it. I never do anything about me on it, I just like to see my friends on it. And I do make contact with them very occasionally. I’m not really a hundred percent sure about Facebook, how to do a personal message that nobody else can read over what the world can see. So I’m very cautious. (Keisha, Knox)

Although a minority, some participants, such as Rumbles (Knox), felt that social media offered them no “meaningful issues” whether positive, or negative. And so, rather than being online himself, Rumbles’ experience of Facebook is mediated by those around him:

My wife will wave the iPad in front of me, and say, ‘look at this picture here!’ . And that keeps me in touch that way. But it’s not the sort of thing I’d go and open up and say, ‘well, what are they up to today?’

Similar behaviours were reiterated by Grant (Boroondara) who accesses Facebook via his wife’s account:

I’m snooping on my wife’s account. No snooping is the wrong word. She knows. She, in fact, gets annoyed about me looking at it and knowing things on it before she does. That’s because I’m a bit more meticulous in my routine each day. (Grant, Boroondara)

**Digital skills and social participation: Opportunities plus challenges**

For Rose (Knox), learning new digital skills is motivated by having a distinct reason to do so: “it’s the reasoning and the motivation that that provides that then determines how consistent and persistent I’ll be”. This is reiterated by Grant (Boroondara), who links his relatively advanced digital skills to his interest in researching internet and technology more broadly, while Paddy (Boroondara) was motivated to engage with an online forum (a platform that he hadn’t used before) because he wanted to learn more about his upcoming road trip through the Kimberley. The oldest participant, Indiginata,
has a longstanding interest in film making and this was extended through the workshops by providing new digital video skills, and an outlet for sharing and discussing his videos with others.

We were able to understand more about the opportunities for digital participation by exploring the way participants learnt and integrated new digital skills and processes into their everyday lives, as well as through the challenges or negotiations they undertook.

PERSONAL LEARNING
There was a spectrum of comfort and ability to learn new digital skills. And, when questioned further, it appears that those who find learning digital skills relatively stress free, are also those who are willing and comfortable with ‘playing’ with the platform until it works. As Paddy (Boroondara) says:

Well, they’re all difficult to learn, but what I try and teach people is that you’ve got to throw out the door the old-fashioned method of learning by steps written down... You’ve got to learn just by using the screen and tapping.

Frustrations were often linked to a feeling that they should be developing the required skills faster than they currently were. Grainne (Boroondara) describes herself as having not a “skerrick of intuition when it comes to [digital]. Gardening... I’m intuitive... but when it comes to the internet... Just watching you press buttons before was a mystery to me”. Learning digital skills was also likened to learning a new language: ‘Maybe I’m wrong, but it seems to me to be a new language... It’s a different way of thinking’ (Darcy, Boroondara). Grainne (Boroondara) agreed, describing digital skills as being based on a logic that she didn’t yet understand.

Participants were broadly divided into two groups depending on whether they found learning new digital skills frustrating. Indiginata (Boroondara) reported that although he was “slower than [he] used to be... if you stick at it, I find you can cope”. But, at the same time, Indiginata reporting finding using the Apple iPads provided as part of the program as “maddening”, attributing this to being “used to Windows”. Darcy

Ruby was very excited about improving her digital skills and social media participation – indeed, she was instrumental in convincing a number of other members of the U3A to join the 60+ Online workshops. Ruby wanted to understand how making and sharing videos could improve the reach and community engagement with the Deepdene U3A.

While she found the process of learning to use the different technologies and applications difficult and even frustrating at times, Ruby was determined to try and learn how to do create and share videos for herself. She persevered and made a video about her walking group and she quickly realised how sharing her own stories might encourage others to participate in local community activities. She has now gone on to make another video:

“I’ve made a little video of a dear little place that I love ...called Fryerstown. It’s near Castlemaine and I just was up there a few weeks ago and I put a little video together. I’d quite like to put that out more generally because I’d be interested in catching up with other people who are interested in Fryerstown and its history”. 

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(Boroondara), a less experienced participant, described negotiating new skills as feeling like “stepping outside the familiar... into a... it’s almost like diving into a big pool of something that’s glue, not water”. Rumbles (Knox) and Rose (Knox) pointed out that engaging with digital platforms was not just a matter of learning the skills required for a particular platform; the device they used also requires negotiating.

I went to a workshop about social media a few years ago... and I found that my iPad ... didn’t have the same page layout that the computer had... I’m thinking where the hell is this? I can’t find it. I find that frustrating. And later on she said okay, so this is on your computer. When you go home look at your computer screen and you’ll find it there. So those sorts of things do frustrate me. (Rose, Knox).

And, as pointed out by Mavis (Knox), this is a process that requires ongoing learning: ‘Everything changes. You know, they change their programs, and bring out a new one, and we all sort of say, ‘oh no, we’ve got to learn something new!’ ...You get sick of change after a while; you just want everything to stay nice and calm.’ Ruby had a similar perspective, and was critical of technology companies’ part in pushing constant change

As you get older you really get comfortable with what you know. And when there’s nothing wrong with it, you think why change it. Whereas Mr Microsoft, they have this need to bring out new stuff all the time. [Ruby, Knox]

One related frustration was with accessing accounts and remembering or managing passwords. Lynden explains that the “problem” is that she has numerous different passwords because “we were told not to have the same password – that was a dangerous thing to do.” She continues with her own workaround: “But now I realise that you know if we had of stuck with one password, and perhaps just changed the number at the end of it, then that would have been a more appropriate way to do it. And some of the places I’ve worked with, they require you to change your password every three months, and it’s like, “What am I up to now?” So that’s been a problem. [Lynden, Knox]

FINDING HELP
Participants identified three strategies or outlets for finding help with digital technologies: using the tool itself to answer questions, asking proximate digital natives, and passing new found skills on to others less savvy. For Indiginata, Harry, and Paddy (all Boroondara), Google was often used as a means for answering basic questions:

I mean, the World Wide Web is on the iPad, so there’s not much information not available to you. It’s just [a matter of figuring out the right] question (Paddy, Boroondara).

If Google didn’t provide the answer, other platforms such as forums, Siri (Apple) or Cortana (Android) or online instructional manuals were often useful.

Having a ‘digital helper’ close by (such as a partner or neighbour) helped immensely, and there were mixed experiences with having a mentor or support person to turn to. It could also impede on their own digital development. Kanda (Boroondara) described her difficulties with learning new digital skills or following processes, and referring to her more skilled husband emphasised that this is “probably because I rely on him too much, you see”. Ruby (Boroondara), Rumbles (Knox), Rose (Knox), and Jane
(Knox) each describe a ‘digital expert’ that they have in their lives who will assist them with any problems they come up against. For some, this person is a family member (whether a particularly digitally savvy partner, child or grandchild), while for others, this might be an ex-colleague, or simply whoever is around at the time. Each, however, mentioned concerns about taking up too much time, and try not to call on these people too often.

Yeah, my son. He’s a programmer. [He helps me] if I make an appointment... Yeah, look he’s helped me when we rebuilt computers and things like that. And I got stuck in them at work. And I’d say, "Listen mate, what are you doing this afternoon, like in half an hour would be handy?" (Rumbles, Knox)

Some participants could recall times that they had assisted others in learning new digital skills – despite not thinking of themselves as digital experts. Lynden (Knox), for instance, says that she will occasionally help her Mother: “download some games and things like that”, but her ability to help is sometimes hindered by her own digital literacies. Where she can no longer advise on specific skills, Lynden helps her mother “go to the Telstra shop or make an appointment with the Apple shop”.

But both Mystic and Mavis (Knox) were quick to remind us that digital skills (or lack thereof) are not a reflection of worth. According to Mystic, a couple of her friends aren’t as “au-fait” as she is with digital technologies, but “I just let people be. If they want to ask me something they will” (Mystic). And for Mavis, “other friends... think I’m pretty brilliant because they don’t use as many things as I do and I just think, ‘okay, everyone’s different’” (Mavis).

**Socio-technical negotiations on the path to digital participation**

For each participant, engaging with digital technologies required (socio-technical) processes of negotiation. They are socio-technical because they involve both the technical aspects of devices, internet access, settings or notifications and so on, alongside social issues involving publicness, threats and scams, or learning in relation to others. These negotiations ranged from privacy concerns, access requirements, platform-based complexities, to who you allow to be a ‘digital friend’, and what happens to your digital presence when you pass on. We also emphasise here the issue of sustaining digital skills beyond support mechanisms.

One consistent theme to emerge was a fear of wasting time online. Rumbles (Knox), for instance, suggested that he didn’t want to become addicted to Facebook in the same ways that he thought his wife was: ‘It’s a time thing, and time, to me, is valuable... I don’t want to get bogged down with something that’s going to be addictive... Look at my wife, two hours a day, breakfast time... checks the Facebook.’ Lynden (Knox) explored this further, saying that she was afraid that she might waste her time online, but that this ran counter to her general personality, which she describes as being “a networking person, you know, staying in contact, and knowing and sharing things and that sort of thing, and Facebook is a brilliant platform for that”. Mavis (Knox), similarly, describes Facebook as a “time waster”, and Rumbles (Knox) says that this is one of the reasons he accesses Facebook through his wife’s account – he’s frightened that he “won’t have time for anything else” if he becomes too heavily involved. But these concerns were weighed against a more persistent fear of falling behind in relation to the skills and functional uses of internet technologies.
NEGOTIATING PRIVACY

Issues of privacy were reiterated throughout participant interviews. Many reported being unsure of “what to put up and what not to put up” (Kanda, Boroondara). While Kanda had been told previously that “you shouldn’t post very personal stuff”, what that meant in practice remained unclear: “I’m not exactly sure what constitutes very personal, I suppose”. For Grainne (Boroondara), this uncertainty regarding what is public/private meant that her online interactions were stymied:

> Look, I’m not that competent using Facebook… [I’m] a bit worried about actually who I [am] making that available to. So, until I’ve absolutely got my head around what the access to this is, then I won’t be putting too much there.

Many participants linked issues of privacy to questions of safety, stating that they wouldn’t post anything in ‘real time’ that could be used to construe their whereabouts, and that they were nervous about posting anything that could provide “hackers” with access to further personal details:

> I didn’t think enough when I opened the Facebook account. I put my correct date of birth. Twenty-four hours later, [I realised] I shouldn’t have done that. I changed my date of birth. It’s the wrong date of birth now. I’m that suspicious, because that sort of basic information is security information for test questions on so many accounts. (Grant, Boroondara).

NEGOTIATING WHAT TO SHARE, AND WHO TO SHARE IT WITH

Linked to the privacy concerns detailed above, participants were typically cautious about what they share online. For some, this was about being guarded about personal details:

> Well just trying to – what did I do with the bill – took a photo of it, I suppose and I had to do it in two bits because it was a long one. So I just took the amount and the how to pay thing and sent it thinking it was on Messenger. Yes, that’s right - she told me I can put a photo on Messenger and that’s what I thought I was doing and it ended up on Facebook and I go ‘well maybe I didn’t learn that bit properly’. [Mavis, Knox]

Public sharing online also prompted anxiety about appropriate behaviours with others and how to communicate when “you can’t anticipate the body language or read the faces” (Guru). Guru said the immediacy of platforms sometimes cause anxiety about appropriate behaviour: “There isn’t a recall button… Sometimes I kick myself when I shout out a comment too fast. I kind of have my own motto… ‘if you don’t have to respond now, don’t respond’.”
His concerns echo Rumbles’, who worried about the lack of control “over what other people may want to repeat... That I might say, ‘Oh that fellow over there is a dope. I reckon he’s a dope.’ But you know, that’s only my opinion. But it could come out as something different. But once it’s on social media...” (Rumbles, Knox).

Most participants had personal boundaries around who they would or wouldn’t accept as online contacts. For Keisha (Knox), digital platforms raised questions around whether acquaintances, or ‘friends of friends’ should also be digital friends:

I’ve got one friend who lives in Brentwood in England and... friends of hers want to be friends. And, I’m thinking, but I don’t know them? Should I be friends with them, do they have my interests? I’m never sure... Do you take a friend of a friend?

Both Mystic (Knox) and Mavis (Knox) shared experiences of having to ‘remove’ an online friend due to the content that was shared online:

It just annoys me because I don’t want to be seeing all these little things... She used to do it on email to me. You know, she would find some cutesy things and she would send me a link to it. If I wanted to look for things like that, I would do it myself. I don’t need... I am getting to the point where I will ring her and say, it’s not necessary... I won’t be on Facebook [because of it]. I’ll be on Instagram, but I won’t tell her that I am on Instagram. (Mystic, Knox)

Although Mystic is getting to the point where she might remove the friend entirely, Mavis has figured out how to avoid the issue: “[I] just hide them all. Yes, I’m good at that now. I didn’t know [how] for a long while, [but] my daughter told me to do that, and that’s how I... get rid of [them]”. Others were concerned that their online behaviours might accidentally transgress other peoples’ boundaries, due to their uncertainty about norms of use on social media. Pansy (Knox) for example, said that she herself didn’t have any concerns, but that her daughters were concerned about their children’s privacy, and as a result, she would never post a picture of her grandchildren on Facebook without permission.

Well, a big concern is ignorance because I really don’t know what I’m doing... I’m nervous that I’ll do something that’s – I’ll either offend somebody or you know I’ve said the wrong thing because I’ve sent it to this person instead of that person, you
know. I’m sure that I can easily get another notch of knowledge that would improve that. Then I suppose, I’m not really a creative thinker, and so I’m limited in my capacity to know what it will do or what I can do, or what can be done, is probably the words I’m looking for, what can be done, and how it can be used. [Darcy, Boroondara]

Other participants linked their low levels of digital participation to circumstances where people they were most likely to engage with online weren’t online, or they were close enough that they didn’t feel a need to communicate in ways other than face to face:

Well we all live within 10 minutes of each other. So I don’t really have a need. It’s different if they lived overseas, they lived in another State, yes it would be. It’d be nice to be able to share things. But they probably use the email for that rather than the social media. My daughter’s a doctor and she’s got a really important job, and she does everything manually. She only uses a phone when she has to. She won’t put anything on Facebook. She’s dead set against it. (Pansy, Knox)

SUSTAINING NEW DIGITAL SKILLS:
There were a number of challenges noted by participants in sustaining new digital skills and knowledge beyond the different courses, workshops or online tutorials they had encountered. For Grainne (Boroondara), U3A classes had been useful as a starting point, but that it was difficult to recall the skills that had been learnt upon leaving:

I went to a PowerPoint class and I sort of came out of that like this, knowing what you could do and sort of being able to do it there but then not being able to do it when I went away and then a friend helped me. Yeah, so sometimes if you go to the classes, you come out totally unable to do it but it’s not actually that hard for someone to then help. (Grainne, Boroondara)

A related factor was the amount of information needed to learn new skills:

We’re given so much information that you only really take in about 50% of it. And then of course you go home and try to practise those skills and you get to a certain point and you know that you know how to do it, but you can’t remember how to do it. So that can be frustrating as far as that’s concerned. Yes. It’s when you know what you want to do, and you know that it can be done, but you’re just not sure what that one little step is that will get you to the next stage. (Lynden, Knox)

Indiginata talked about being “ahead of the game” in the 1980s, when he studied IT, photography and video production in a postgraduate degree. He “used to help at U3A – in the early days we ran beginners’ classes for computers and photography on the computer, and the internet and stuff.” But with so much change since then, he felt somewhat stuck on the basics. Nonetheless, Indiginata was able to quickly pick up the digital editing app used in the 60+ Online workshops, and completed an additional digital story documenting an outing on the Tall Ship Enterprise with a U3A group, which he posted to the Facebook Group.
FOCUS GROUPS: WORKSHOP EVALUATIONS

Focus group interviews were conducted one week after the final workshop at the two Council venues. Questions were oriented around three themes:

- Feedback on the workshops in relation to workshop aims, learning, methods, equipment and outcomes.
- Participants’ everyday use of social media and content production skills, including whether they engaged social media outside of the workshops, or made connections with family, friends, groups, organisations or services through social media.
- Sustainability of digital media and social media use, in terms of ongoing barriers and hurdles to using digital media, plans or actual examples of continuing to use social media or make content for social media, and other intended digital media use, and ongoing concerns and learning needs.

The feedback emerging from the focus group interviews provided valuable insights into the range and qualities of sustained engagement with digital communication technologies, emphasising participants’ learning experiences, the learning design, challenges they continue to face, and their experiences throughout the program with creating digital stories and engaging with social media. The two groups expressed an overall high level of satisfaction with the program, and this matched a high participation rate. Participants who were unable to attend a workshop sought alternative ways of catching up such as attending the other council area workshop, or following and contributing online through the Facebook Group.

Several successful aspects of the program were highlighted. These included:

- The workshop format – learning by doing – and a predominant preference for group learning and inter-group sharing throughout the program.
- The development of new digital skills and abilities to create, and share, video content, especially as a way of engaging with the world around them or their personal and local histories. Several additional independent video stories were produced by participants and shared with the group and this was seen as a tangible success for the program.
- Broadening social connections and modes of digital engagement and participation, particularly through social media and use of Facebook. Social media was discussed as a valuable form of communication nuanced and socially connective, but with some reluctance or caution still expressed.

Overall, there was a predominant sense of new understanding of the value of social media for social participation and connectedness, and the potential for creative uses of digital technologies as they connect with personal contexts and social lives. Nonetheless, many participants spoke about ongoing concerns, difficulties and learning roadblocks as well as areas in which the workshop program could be improved or adjusted. Some details from participants’ perspectives are presented below. These concerns and difficulties point to the ongoing need for dedicated responses and resources for seniors’ digital inclusion and participation.
Workshop model: Learning by doing

The learning and instruction model featured a lot in the focus group discussions, along with personal learning processes or preferences. Feedback on these aspects of the program was primarily positive. Distinctions were made between other forms of learning; for example, classroom-based learning that involved listening, watching and then doing, or the role younger family members or friends play in assisting, showing or ‘fixing’ problems with digital technologies. Workshop participants were nominally self-motivated for ongoing learning, and while this is perhaps not universal for the age group, for many the program affirmed the “...need to constantly practice so you’re familiar with it” (Knox) as one member of the Knox group put it. The active learning model was appreciated as motivating and effective:

That’s what we’re all about, lifelong learning and it’s not the sitting in a classroom, being taught by someone who believes that they know everything. It’s sharing our knowledge, sharing our skills and just learning. (Knox).

Because the workshop design revolved around content creation, do it yourself (DIY) learning was understood as part of the process, and appreciated as such: “what I’ve also found out from this course is don’t give up if you can’t get some help from someone else because Google is fantastic. Just keep going and ask Google how to do it that certainly has taken me a lot further forward.” (Boroondara). And this had good outcomes in relation to self-confidence: “I think this also gives us a degree of self-confidence to look into something new, develop new skills and also searching for information. [...] Just more confidence to try more things” (Knox).

The participation model of learning, and mobile devices played a big part for participants in both groups. For one participant, “There’s nothing worse than just sit and show and tell it’s better to do and tell.” (Boroondara). Two others agreed, one noting that “You learn a lot more if you do it.” (Boroondara), and the other adding: “Yes, and that’s the beauty of the iPad; it’s so much more transportable than having to set up a whole room of laptops.” (Boroondara). The feedback from the Knox group was similar: “I think learning in a group is better than the one on one” (Female, Knox); another participant agreed simply noting that “It’s easier” (Knox). Another elaborated, emphasising the group dynamic to learning: “Because if we sit here and we try to do it and we have issues, you’ve got other people to talk to it about or to help you out” (Knox). This helps with dealing with the unknown: “And other people ask the question that you are thinking of in a different way that makes a lot more sense” (Knox).

A contrast was made by several participants from the Boroondara group between the group and hands on learning of the workshops, and the kind of one-on-one assistance they received from others, particularly children and grandchildren. One participant explained the problem with relying on friends and family: “a lot of seniors will ask their children or their grandchildren. The grandchildren take the device from them and say, “You do this, this, this, this” and hand it back and they’re none the wiser” (Boroondara). Problems may be resolved, but the participants stressed that this didn’t help in the medium or long-term. “It’s so important to find out by doing because if I’m shown I find it extremely difficult to repeat what I’ve been shown. I will get something wrong so the only way I can learn is by doing it myself.” (Female, Boroondara). In this vein, a promising addition to the model, as a member of
the Knox group explained, would be the inclusion of a “teach-back” session: “A teach-back session, a return demonstration to make sure that – because it’s okay when you’re doing it now then you go home and you sometimes forget...” (Knox).

**New digital skills and social participation: Toward sustained engagement**

Pathways from skills to social participation are not straightforward, and there are numerous contextual factors contributing to participation barriers. There are a lot of unknowns for participants: “I think it’s that you don’t know what you don’t know until you know” (Knox). Learning new digital tools, let alone using them for engaging with family and friends, can be like learning a new language, as one participant eloquently put it: “I’m following you. I’m using the terminology. I have no idea what I’m talking about but I’m using the terminology.” (Female, Boroondara). The participants presented a clear understanding of the connections being made in the workshops between the creative-digital skills activities and the extended use of social media as a method for improving social participation.

**DIGITAL STORIES**

Discussion of new digital skills focused on making digital stories, along with new abilities in the use of Facebook, Instagram, Messenger or other social platforms. One participant had a particular use in mind and was planning her new project:

> I definitely want to try and do a digital storytelling about my sister who’s turning a ‘0’ very soon. So that’s one of the reasons why I want to be able to put that audio into the visual. I could see this replacing the storybooks, this is your lifetime book type of thing. To be able to give this on a USB and say to her, “Here you go. Here’s your life and what I thought about your life.” (Knox).

Another had already undertaken a new project, making a special trip to a small town of interest to her to make a new digital story. Interestingly, this also involved thinking about how to share her story and make connections with others with similar interests and connection to the town:

> I’ve made a little video of a dear little place that I love, not many other people love it, but I do. It’s called Fryerstown. It’s near Castlemaine and I just was up there a few weeks ago and I put a little video together. I’d quite like to put that out more generally because I’d be interested in catching up with other people who are interested in Fryerstown and its history. Some of my family members in the past lived there and that’s why I feel an attachment and I’d like to be in touch with other people who might feel the same way. I might do that. What I’d really like to do is just put that out generally and keep all the others to my friends. (Boroondara)

In response, another participant commented on this independent learning outcome: “I think that’s absolutely fantastic. That would, to me, if I was teaching would really give me a buzz to say that she’s flown with it really.” (Boroondara)
MAKING NEW CONNECTIONS
New uses of social media provoked improved or extended connections with others and this was a common theme of discussion. For example: “I’ve got a son in the UK who’s been there for 30 years or so and I caught up with him on Facebook” (Boroondara). One participant at the Knox focus group commented on a simple benefit in relation to connecting with distant family through Facebook, and engaging in ways she hadn’t considered before:

I had really stopped using [Facebook] for quite some time, but then I restarted again with this group and what I found is, it’s gorgeous, because I found how to save images of my grandson…. And of course, I did ‘like’, and add beautiful hearts and emojis. (Knox)

New ways of communicating with family members and close friends featured consistently in discussions. Typically, this involved staying in touch with family living elsewhere, sometimes through new channels that overcame communication barriers. For example:

I’ve got a daughter who’s overseas at the moment travelling around and a message came back that she wanted to contact me through Messenger. It took me about three or four days to get it installed. I got there in the end and it was really good. She’s in South America and there’s no phone contact much but we sent a couple of messages to her. (Boroondara)

For another participant, keeping informed about a friend’s illness saved what she thought to be more intrusive ways of communicating: “One of the good things I found about Facebook, one of my friends is going through medical issues at the moment and she just puts up on Facebook - a little post for all her friends. ...that I think helps us to know, okay, we know where she’s at, at this stage. We don’t need to be ringing and finding out and all of that sort of thing.” (Knox).

ONLINE GROUPS
Most of the participants were both surprised and enthusiastic about the Group feature on Facebook. As one participant explained, the Group feature of the workshop extended communication networks, and introduced the potential for meeting others face-to-face: “I just enjoyed in particular the whole communication aspect of the group and also the involvement of Knox, albeit just through Facebook. I would have liked to go that next stage and physically meet the Knox people.” (Boroondara). The Group functions of Facebook were new to all participants, even those who had been using the platform for
some time. One participant emphasised her new understanding of “…the technical aspects of Facebook and the way in which groups can work. I like the notion of this closed group and I didn’t realise that that was possible. We can create a closed group for example with people in a book group.” (Boroondara). Another had made use of this new knowledge and skill set and in her own social context and for her own needs: “I started a secret group. I knew nothing about secret groups and I’ve got - There’s a particular project I’m working on with a particular group of friends and it’s been a really useful way of gathering all the information together. I knew nothing about that.” (Knox).

One Knox participant noted that they used the 60+ Online Facebook Group to post a question about dealing with spam email. A fellow participant replied and explained blocking processes, drawing on knowledge gained from his son who “works in IT”. A Boroondara participant posted images about her quilting work, and another participant raised this in the focus group discussion: “I got blown away when Kanda put up her quilts because I’ve got a great interest in quilts rather than quilting because I don’t know how to do it” (Boroondara). Another participant encouraged her to “make a little video of them” (Boroondara). These experiences and interactions were hoped for outcomes of the workshop design, where ongoing contact among participants, especially in relation to personal interests, was encouraged and given a platform through the Facebook Group. A Boroondara participant explained the benefit of this process: “I think it’s lovely that it’s beyond just whatever might be a designated topic and instantly as soon as you know interests of different people and something more about them there’s a personal bonding.” (Boroondara)

The interests and participatory aspect learning process also brought out new knowledge and understandings that were less predictable from the outset and formed a secondary outcome of the process. About half of the participants spoke about self-directed application of social media tools outside of the workshops, or experimentation in relation to their own interests. While Instagram was not a major focus of the workshops, one participant adapted her new knowledge of the app, and skills for public health advocacy: “I used Instagram in Being Seniors’ week. I took a photo and put it up on Instagram about reminding people who fall into the AIDS group about getting their shingles vaccine… I’m going to use Instagram as a way of reinforcing health teachings… I think that’s what I’m going to use it mainly for” (Knox). Several others talked about downloading and playing around with Pinterest. Another participant reported learning to use Facebook Messenger for more one-on-one interaction with friends and family.

**Workshop learning: Concerns and roadblocks**

We spent some time discussing with participants their ongoing concerns, roadblocks and any issues with the format or activities undertaken through the workshops. As discussed throughout the individual interviews, and described in the previous section, positive experiences were not universal among the groups. In the focus groups, some participants stressed the way particular activities do not always transfer beyond the workshop. As one member put it: “I posted my photo on Instagram when we were here. Now I don’t have a clue what to do. I haven’t done any more. I just look at it” (Knox). While this experience of just looking at Instagram was seen as non-use by this participant, we would understand it as a basic form of social media participation. Seeing and monitoring the activities of others within social networks also contributes to the maintenance of those networks.
Many difficulties revolved around basic “button skills” and device use or compatibility issues. For example: “One of the things I think is important, I’ve got a Samsung that’s Android so I’ve had a lot more problems than probably a lot of you, so I’m not even up to you. I’m not even finished.” (Knox). In one instance this meant that time was lost between the first and second workshops: “I just found that a bit – I had trouble at first because the first cord I had wouldn’t charge. [...] It seemed to be a comedy of errors” (Knox). The device did make a difference in some participants’ ability to undertake the workshop activities: “I started off with the phone but once you gave me the iPad I found it much easier” (Knox).

There were some difficulties with the specific skills involved in producing digital videos, and particularly with the more complicated part of adding voiceover to the edited final cut of the video. One Knox participant laughed at her own slip-ups when videoing: “I videoed a lot of my feet walking.” (Female, Knox). Many participants in both groups noted that adding a voiceover was a difficult skill to master, and most talked about needing more time and practice.

As with the individual interviews, participants talked about their own learning difficulties in the focus groups. As one participant puts it, “it just frustrates the life out of me” (Boroondara). She continues:

“It’s the process that gets me in the end. That I’ll go along so far and then I get stuck. I think when you come from living a low entry level you’ve got nothing really to fall back on because the logic is not there whereas anything else that I’ve worked on or studied in the past it’s built up. It’s really maddening. It just kills me that I can be so incompetent, being reasonably competent in a whole lot of other things.”  

(Boroondara)

In the group discussion, the issue of motivation as to why they needed to learn new digital skills came up:

My difficulty was trying to work out why I should do it. I will do things if there is a benefit or a reason just because I can do it is not sufficient reason for me to do it. That was at the start of the workshops and to post something on Facebook - why? What do I want to say? Why are other people interested in what I’m - so it’s why, why, why that gave me the greatest difficulty.

Mystic began the 60+ workshops with a degree of apprehension. While she thought “Mr Google” was a useful tool, Mystic viewed social media and digital technologies as difficult for seniors to use and an unnecessary intervention into her private life. Nonetheless, Mystic is still an active social participant in her local area of Boronia and is passionate about indigenous rights and environmental conservation.

While Mystic said she found it difficult to use digital technologies and would still prefer to read a book than engage with others on social media, she also considers herself a “lifelong student” and saw opportunities to use social media to fuel her curiosity about her existing social interests: “something’s triggered in something I’m reading ... and then I’ll go and I’ll do my search and I’ll build on that on a particular aspect that’s interesting to me.”
I think I’m slowly coming to it. I haven’t embraced the concept completely if I’m honest. (Boroondara)

Use of social media caused some concerns for a minority of participants in both groups. One member of the Knox group remained reluctant to interact through social media: “I can do that quite happily with email and I have no intention of going any further with Facebook or Instagram... I’d rather personally interact” (Knox).

The publicness of social media raised anxieties and uncertainties about how to act: “I personally was very, very nervous about going public. To be able to go private reassured me a lot that was very important.” (Boroondara). As did making new connections through Facebook: “I’m a bit wary about taking on unknown friends, as Henry was mentioning before, you might like to meet this friend or what have you but if their name isn’t someone I know or the connection I know I’m wary” (Boroondara). Others agreed, but there was some and change in perspective also: “I haven’t got over that, but I think...I’ve got over the notion of privacy a lot more” (Boroondara). Another asked whether many people use Facebook for people they don’t know. A discussion then followed this line of concern as one member of the group said he’d “hit a wrong button in Words with Friends and I’m now playing a game with someone who I don’t know at all” (Boroondara).

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The evaluation of the 60+ Online project demonstrated that the interests-participation and co-design model of teaching digital and social media skills to seniors was successful. Analysis of the interview and focus group data showed that seniors were largely interested and enthusiastic about sharing content that they had created and that this focus on individual content creation and online sharing may help to overcome some of the barriers that typically limit seniors’ participation online.

Some of the key successes of this project included:

- Interest based learning was a successful approach to teaching digital and social media skills to seniors, mainly because it established a context for using technologies that were not already embedded in seniors’ everyday lives
- Individual content creation through sharing of digital stories was highly valued by senior participants as a method of learning digital skills because it empowered seniors to both to use digital technologies and to choose how to represent their identity to peers online
- Peer mentoring in online environments, particularly with the closed Facebook group encouraged seniors to continue to develop sustainable online skills, and to create an online culture of helping others based on their own learning
- Teaching digital and online skills in a workshop environment, rather than a traditional classroom, encouraged both group discussion and individual skills development
- Links to individual interests, personal connections and useful services and organisations were key to encouraging use of digital and social media skills over time
Some of the areas that emerged as potential barriers to sustained use of newly acquired digital and social media skills over time were:

- Lack of access to relevant technology and devices to enable use of digital, online and social media tools would limit their ongoing use
- Technological change was seen as frustrating to some participants who already felt like outsiders to the ‘digital age’; emphasis should be placed on understanding personal needs and uses of digital media
- Participants remained wary of aspects of digital culture that others might take for granted, for instance: sharing aspects of their personal lives online, privacy settings and choices, the complexity of choice around ‘friendships’ and ‘groups’ online, and data security

**Recommendations**

We recommend that future application of the interests-participation model take into consideration a number of key factors including:

- Working with existing community organisations that have developed relationships with seniors
- Maintaining the link between creative and social interaction skills (digital stories and social media engagement) to adhere to the interests-participation model
- Further develop flexibility regarding device use and applications to best integrate with participants’ own digital contexts in a bring your own device (BYOD) format
- Account for socio-economic and geographical, or regional, urban location dynamics, as these play a significant part in driving interests and capabilities
- Disabilities, along with learning preferences, should be central to the structuring, pacing and support provided through workshops (e.g. consider mobility, vision, hand coordination issues)

Future iterations of the program should explore and evaluate the program more explicitly in the context of specific barriers to online participation, including language ability, geographic location, disability and chronic illness and socio-economic status. Throughout the workshops, some participants explored personal stories about difficult current or past life experiences. While creating and sharing personal stories has been an effective strategy for addressing the needs of marginalised populations for some time, the combination of giving voice to personal life experiences through digital video, and new modes of social engagement and participation through social platforms can better build confidence and sustainability into digital inclusion programs.
ENDNOTES


3 Thomas, J. et al., *Measuring Australia’s Digital Divide*.


