

“Seniors Surfing” - Case Study on a New Type of Welfare Service in Finland

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Abstract

There are several practical projects aiming to help the elderly to use ICT in order to promote their well-being. This case study focuses on a service in Finland that provides services to help the elderly use ICT. The data were collected by participatory observation, focus group interviews as well as the project's documents. The data have been analysed by data-led content analysis. This study describes how the service is offered, how it is functioning and how it meets the needs of the elderly. The study discovers a multi-sectoral service model and the discussions focus on what could be improved.

Key words: Elderly, Social services, Participation, Multi-sectoral service model

1. Introduction

The ageing of the population is a worldwide phenomenon. In 2050, one in every five people will be aged 60 years or over, and Asia and Europe will have the highest ratio of aged population (UN, 2015). Due to the changing structure of the family, health and work status, most people in their old age meet changes in their connections to society and social networks. Although some elderly people prefer to live an independent life with less contact with the outside world, many elderly people experience loneliness and depression in their old age. This can be either as a result of living alone or due to a lack of close family ties and reduced connections with their culture of origin, which results in an inability to participate actively in community activities (Singh & Misra, 2009). Increasing geographic distances between the generations and difficulties for the elderly to maintain contact with the younger generation

are evident especially in the rural areas (Markkola, 2014).

According to World Population Aging report (UN, 2015), Finland has the fourth most aged population in the world. As of 2015, 27% of its population is aged 60 years or over. The findings from a survey in Finland show that 39% of the respondents older than 74 years of age suffer from loneliness (Tilvis et al, 2011).

Lin (2012) suggests that elderly people would like to use ICT but lack the necessary skills and prefer peer group support. Numerous ICT-based solutions have been developed, often from physiological and nursing perspective in the services, for the elderly to counter these ageing-related challenges.

The usage of ICT can provide an alternative method for communication to enrich social interaction, which in turn significantly improves and enhances the quality of life among older adults (see for example, Bobillier et al., 2013; Niehaves, 2013).

Since 2016 in Finland a reform has been ongoing of healthcare, social welfare and regional government with a focus on the centralisation and marketization of service provision. The Finnish Government's aim is that the future freedom of choice model should support opportunities for micro, small and medium-sized enterprises operating in the market as well as new digital and other innovative service models (The Council of State, 2016). Meanwhile, ICT is considered to be an important tool for participation and self-determination in Finnish society (Granholm, 2016). Finland has the highest Networked Readiness Index in the world, which measures the propensity for countries to exploit the opportunities offered by information and communications technology. (Global information technology report, 2016). Several digital social welfare services have been innovated for elderly people, such as a platform for a distance medicine service (for example, VideoVisit), a video call application (for example, Pienipiiri) and software for analysing health (for example, Anvia Akkuna). Meanwhile, NGOs have organised practical projects to help the elderly to learn how to use

ICT.

However, empirical research about the concrete merits and experiences of these welfare services from the participatory perspective is lacking. For this reason, the activities of a local branch of an established national wide project have been selected for this empirical research in Finland. This project is called “Senior Surf” and aims at promoting the well-being of the aged through the use of ICT. It is run by a national association, the Finnish Association for the Welfare of Older People. The project aims to create a national approach to promote older people's ICT skills based on voluntary peer support. Finland's Slot Machine Association (RAY) funded the 3-year (2014–2016) project.

The aim of this case study is to research in detail the practical perspective of the usage of ICT in order to enhance communication and prevent loneliness in the elderly. This is to be done by especially focusing on the very particular challenges of communication of the elderly in rural areas. Further, my research will apply a participatory perspective (Matthies & Uggerhøj, 2014) from the point of view of the elderly themselves in regard to their needs and possibilities for participation and communication via ICT. Based on this background, the main research question is asking, how social services can support elderly people on using ICT to prevent loneliness in Finland.

2. Theoretical background

My research does not aim to promote services that connect everyone together via ICT, and instead it considers how ICT can act as a supplement to the social services for elderly people in preventing loneliness.

Loneliness is a multi-faceted concept that is related to several characteristics that impair the quality of life of the elderly (Masi et al, 2011). Due to its psychometric properties, loneliness can be measured by the 20-item UCLA loneliness scale (Russell, 1996). The

nursing and medical research identified loneliness as a risk which may cause several physical and mental diseases and even a mortality risk (Tilvis et al., 2011). Social science studies pay attention to the social or cultural factors which may cause loneliness (Holdsworth, 2016; Singh & Misra, 2009), and some studies consider the demographic or statistical analysis of the description of loneliness (Masi et al, 2011). In regard to the social aspect, Zhou et al (2016) has defined loneliness as a negative subjective emotional experience produced in situations where the individual's interpersonal relationships fail to meet their social needs in quantity and/or quality. This definition is applied to my research since the research question focuses on the social aspects of the causes of loneliness.

Here ICT refers to the technology which aims to transfer information and communication. For example, the online call software and social media applications are an alternative option to enable the social needs of elderly people. The usage of ICT can significantly improve and enhance the quality of life among older adults and provide an alternative method for communication to enrich social interaction (Fan, 2016). Research indicates that many elderly people have the willingness to use ICT as a way to communicate (Fokkema & Knipscheer, 2007; Lin et al., 2012; Näsi et al, 2012), but some of them, especially those who did not use ICT during they work life, are facing challenges on learning how to use it. Welfare services may have the social function of supporting people in their struggle for participation. Participatory approaches could be implied in order to create practicable models for social services (Matthies et al, 2011). The participation of service users and their power of influence are considerable alternative options to improve the quality and face the challenges of the welfare service (Matthies, 2014). In this context, a theoretical framework has been formulated for the investigation of the current case using a participatory approach.

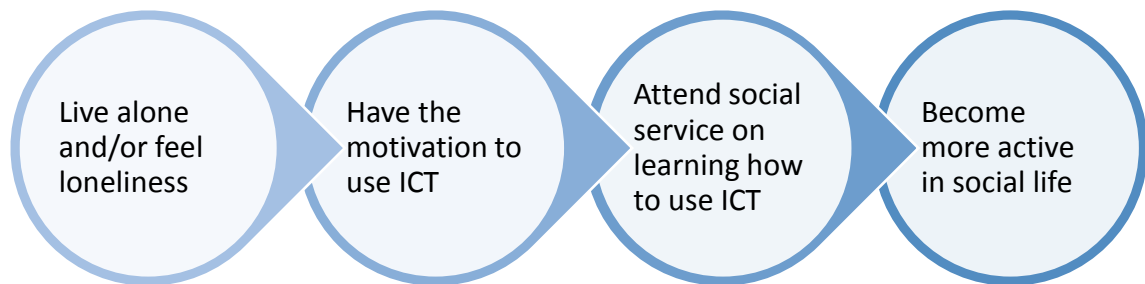


Figure 1 Theoretical framework of the elderly attending welfare service for learning ICT

3. Method

Because this research discussed the experiences of service users, a phenomenological approach has been used. A case-study approach has been adopted to gain a detailed understanding of the experiences of service users, which accordingly provided knowledge about how to provide the service. A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2009). The local association provided the research permission where the project meeting was held, and all the participants of focus group signed an acceptance letter that explained the ethical issues on participating in this research.

Data collection combined three methods. The first consisted of my participatory observation as a volunteer in this project. I participated in the project as a volunteer with two other volunteers to help service users solve and clarify their questions related to the use of ICT. I kept a field work diary about my observations during my voluntary work. I attended the project for 20 sessions. The participatory observation lasted 6 months, until the end of

March in 2016. My observations focused on the use of ICT by the elderly. My fieldwork diary described a) how the service is provided, b) the content of the session and the participation of the service users and c) how the service users experienced the service and how the service supplied their needs.

The second method used to collect data consisted of interviewing the participants. The interviewees consisted of three different types: the service users, the organisers and the volunteers. Five service users took part in a semi-structured focus group interview performed in May 2016. Besides the five service users, three volunteers were present in the focus group to support me, moderate the interview, help me take notes and translate Finnish to English. Retired seniors made up all the service users participating in the focus groups. They mostly had lower middle class vocational backgrounds: an administrator in a university (male), train conductor (male), manager in a trade agency (male), language teacher (female) and nurse (female). The focus group interview focused on general information about the project such as a) how the service users came to know about the service, b) why they started attending the service, c) what kind of tools they would like to use on their ICT devices, d) their opinions about loneliness in Finland and e) their expectations of these kinds of services. Following the focus group interview, the national level project manager had an expert interview. The expert interview focused on the strategy of providing knowledge on using ICT to elderly people to influence their social interaction. Furthermore, the documents concerning this project also made up the data of this study: the data of the project at a national level, whole project reports and so on.

Being a non-Finnish language speaking international student proved to be a challenge during the data collection as many of the service users spoke little English. One volunteer, who took the role of the moderator, helped perform the focus group interview conducted in Finnish. Another volunteer performed the language transcription during the interview, then a

professional language service translated the transcription into English. For the same reason, I only used documents and other materials written in English.

I analysed the data using qualitative content analysis to systematically capture the complexities of the phenomenon. According to Schreier (2012), when using qualitative content analysis the angle from which data is examined is specified by the research question. As such, my research question served as the basis for the themes for coding, and the coding frame developed after repeated reading of the transcriptions (see Table 1). The basis of the coding of the focus group discussion rested on their motivation to use ICT, their need for welfare services regarding the use of ICT, their forms of participation in this project, their response to attending the project and their expectations of further social services in relation to preventing the loneliness of the elderly.

Table 1

The coding frame

Themes	Subcategories
Motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Using online service for getting information - Communicate with family and friends - Participate in a social life
Needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ICT knowledge - Easy to understand instruction - Patience and respect - Senior-friendly ICT
Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Seeking potential service - Attend the service frequently - Try to help others
Response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conquer fear - Happy to be more connected to family members living at a distance - Easy to reach to online service - More opportunities to be active in social life
Expectation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Innovations for people with mental health problems or disabilities - Distance delivery of service - Multi-sectorial service model

The researcher formulated thematically the coding of the expert interview with the aim to understand the function of this project in the context of local welfare services. The local welfare system (Mingione & Oberti, 2003) takes form through a process that is shaped by specific historical, cultural and social circumstances and is steered by the combination of national control and local governance (Rantamaki & Kattilakoski, 2016). Examining how this

project proceeded at the local level proved to be of great importance: what challenges and successes could be observed and how the strategy of providing knowledge to use ICT for elderly people influenced their social interaction. The researcher analysed the expert interview based on the role of different sectors in the service.

4. Results

4.1. What happens here?

The weekly project session took place in a local community club, a low-threshold meeting place in a shopping mall, where everyone is welcome. Each session lasted for about 2 hours with varying numbers of service users. This community club could be considered an organisation; “the hotel of organisations”. The club collected and shared organisational activities in the area. It offered working places for other national organisations when they hold activities in the local area. It also served as a volunteer and peer support centre. Elderly people came to this meeting point to talk with people while enjoying a cup of coffee. The visitors to Senior Surf were mostly between 65 to 75 years and had a normal memory and cognition. They always walked to the meeting point, especially in good weather. A few of them still drove a car. Most of them did not have the latest model of ICT-device, and some of them had used laptops given by their children after purchasing new ones for themselves. But they bought mobile phone for themselves; everybody had a mobile phone.

4.2. The experiences of service users

...I was surprised when she carried a printer while entering the room. (...) She was asking how to connect her printer to her iPad. Last time I taught her how to write with an app on her iPad. She, like other seniors, has a smart way of making notes. They use

visual methods to help themselves remember. Now she would like to print her “article”. She told me about one of her daughters who lives in Spain and gave birth to a baby last week and she received the photos of the baby via Facebook...

(Participatory observation diary, 27 October 2015)

It’s my 13th session in Senior Surf. We have three visitors today. The man who always has a hard disk with him bought a selfie stick today on the way here. It’s nice to see the seniors still have curiosity about new products...

(Participatory observation diary, 22 March 2016)

“Everything is online” (Service user 3)

During the data analysis, the data indicated that the service users used the internet as a “have to” choice, because “everything is online” (Service user 3). One service user often travelled to meet her partner who lives in another city 500 km away. They have often had to book the tickets on-line because the opening hours of the ticket office at the railway station are inconvenient. On one occasion, she attended the service session for learning how to book tickets on-line by using the smart phone application from the national rail way company. Similar needs also emerged for using on-line banking. This proved to be one of the biggest challenges also for the volunteers since the demonstration always required logging into an account. The demonstration could have therefore affected the privacy of the owner of the account. The service users mentioned the “search for information” as a reason for using ICT and visiting the search engine GOOGLE. They believed they could “find it” by “asking Google”. They sometimes read on-line newspapers if they did not order printed newspapers to be delivered.

Communicating acted as the second motivation to use ICT. The service users lived far away from the younger generations in their family; most children lived far away but still in

Finland. One woman had two daughters, who live in Spain and Italy. She received photos of her grandchild via Facebook Messenger or WhatsApp. She would have liked to save the photos, but she did not know how. Her iPhone did not have a manual, which could have provided an answer. Another service user asked how to transfer photos from a camera to a laptop; these photos were always group photos taken with his friends. The volunteers showed him how to transfer the photos and how to add attachments to an email. He wrote down notes carefully during our demonstration and always visualised his notes to help him to remember.

Another motivation for using ICT turned out to be the want to have a social life. A service user asked for help on how to use Twitter. Although he had learned how to use a computer during his working life, he had no skills for using social media. He wanted to learn to use these tools; for example, to make contact with YLE (national broadcasting company in Finland) and to comment on the misuse of the Finnish word “niinku”.

“We don’t want to be left behind, we want to learn.” (Service user 2).

How to send an email turned out to be the most frequently asked question during the service session, something which seems quite easy for people who currently study or work. Sending emails might be easy for most people, but setting up the email system is a challenge for many. Some of the service users lived alone without any help from other family members. However, those who lived close to their children did not always benefit from the children as they did not want to trouble them:

My son works in a big company, his work is related to computers. But he is so busy, I don’t want to disturb him...it’s not easy to understand when we are talking on the phone (about the problem I am facing with using the computer). (Service user 1)

Even worse, some children did not know how to explain the function of this “modern machine” to the seniors and the youngsters always lost patience when helping the elderly. Besides support for learning, they expressed their interest in new innovations which are

targeted at the need of seniors. They were not satisfied with the smart phones on the market, because these phones had too many features that were not necessary for them. They did not like the so-called elderly phone either, because they are too basic to use properly the online world. Updating the operation system confused them a lot; they did not understand the need to accept so many legal notices when they had to update the device, and they felt anxiety about every such update of the operation system and its applications.

[“I want to come not only for learning.”](#) (Service user 4).

How they participated in this project proved to be another significant aspect of their experience. I asked service users how they had learnt about this service when they came for the first time. Most of them had found information about this service in newspapers, whereas some just noticed the poster advertising the service sessions when they passed by the community club. They sought a resource and potential service when they faced difficulties in their daily life. Some of them would even like to have attended the project session more frequently although they may not have had any question concerning the use of ICT. Especially when the weather was nice, we had more visitors; they had coffee and could talk together. The most important aspect could be considered to be the fact that they always helped each other during the learning. The service users had different backgrounds of working experience and educational level; some were quicker at learning and did not easily forget and wanted to support other service users. The volunteers in my case were much younger than the service users, and we realised that the elderly had their own language to describe something and would like to be a volunteer themselves. One service user claimed to have been the first owner of a personal computer in the city. He had a high degree of skill at using ICT and attended the project session mainly to support the learning of others.

“I am happy and not afraid to try, but it is still challenging.” (Service user 1).

Having analysed what are the actions of their participation, I looked at their responses to attending the Senior Surf project. Emotional reflections were collected during my participatory observation. One service user seemed absolutely delighted after I showed her how to save photos from social media and how to send her photos to her family. She said:

I didn't know how to do, thank you for helping me. I like to see them (the grandchild) everyday, this makes me so happy! I have the pictures and I can talk to them! Very good! (Service user 1)

The service users had conquered their fears of using ICT after participating in this service. Before attending this project, they used to be worried about “breaking the device” when trying new operations and hesitated a lot when the device “asked me to pick a choice”. Now they felt much more confident to simply click “agree” or “continue” and were not afraid to close or log out of a program. All the service users were satisfied with learning how to use online services such as banking, booking tickets and so on. They also found attending this service provided a chance to socialise with people of their own age. One volunteer always collected information of activities for seniors in the town and shared the information during the project session. Some of the service users intended to join a senior dancing course.

“Personal device and service is needed” (Service user 5).

The participants were asked about their expectations for further social services in relation to preventing loneliness in the elderly. Two of the participants took care of their family members who needed extra care but did not need to live in specific institutions. The caregivers supported the idea of providing ICT devices for those who need care in order to meet their needs of communication. As these elderly people were “too unfamiliar with these kinds (ICT) of things to manage here”, the device should be designed to fit to their health condition and their basic needs. They expected that innovations for people with mental health

problems or disabilities would be developed in the future. Meanwhile, one of the service users suggested that the service for learning how to use ICT should be provided in a distance area for people who are limited to travelling from their own place. They were in favour of the current service model with multi-sectors as they could receive services which the market failed to provide. They preferred the current service model as it is more convenient and economical.

Although we mostly received positive feedback, critical voices could be heard that considered this kind of service unnecessary and even a waste of time.

That's a bit how my other brother is as well – he's 80 and lively, but he doesn't come to these kinds of activities (Senior Surf) ... He doesn't want to sacrifice much of his time on something like that (social media). (Service user 5)

I've got two older sisters, and one...lives in a care home and is in poor health. She can't use the computer. I keep in touch with her by telephone. And then this other sister lives in another city and is also in rather poor health. We email each other, and she can use it better than me (laughing). (Service user 2)

4.3. A multi-sectorial service model

The data from the expert interview illustrated how different sectors played their roles and participated in a mixed structure of welfare services that utilise ICT to prevent loneliness in the elderly. I analysed these sectors separately to discover how this project has been organised and what the challenges and successes are during this process. In this case, the public sector could be considered the municipality. The municipality had the advantage when gathering and allocating resources and organising activities, but the municipality did not have enough experience of providing services for the elderly to learn ICT:

The government does not know how to get the elderly people to use the services, how to help them. We are trying to tell them and help them, but the road is still very long.

(Expert 1)

Although the major challenge for the public sector could be seen as its lack of experience of how to organise such a service, they succeeded in this project by offering a meeting point and information broadcasting channels. The municipality offered the city library as well as the local association for this project as meeting points. And the local association had free access to a local newspaper where the volunteers could inform the local seniors of the schedule of this project.

The third sector took most responsibility in the process of this project. The Finnish Association for the Welfare of Older People represented the third sector in the multi-sectorial service model. The national association succeeded in coordinating limited resources to support elderly people as there were a lot of motivated volunteers, but other resources were insufficient. They had published a very detailed and easy to understand model (manual) for the local association on how to organise this kind of a service:

In this model, we teach the local association how to find volunteers, we have a lot of people want to do voluntary work ...I hope we get more money so we can get this project to continue. (Expert)

This manual provided guidelines for local associations to create self-organised activities and promoted peer support on dealing with the insufficient national service. More importantly, the manual provided a local-based social service structure suitable for the culture and economic situation of the local region. Although the third sector got funding from private support, focus had been placed on how to involve the municipality to participate in the service.

The informal support network also took part in the multi-sectorial service model, too. The informal support network played a role as a volunteer or peer-supporter in this project. One of the volunteers shared her feelings with me by saying that spending time with the elderly made her happy and the elderly had been very nice to her. The volunteers in this case were all unemployed. Although the voluntary work did not provide income, this experience would help them to participate in society and enhance social skills. The volunteers helped both the service users and themselves. The importance of peer support could be considered as one of the interesting findings of this project as people understood that it would be better to be taught by people of their own age rather than partners or family members. As some of the service users said, “spouses cannot teach each other, we easily lose our temper”:

I just mentioned the main purpose that people can be part of their own life and be part of the society and bigger surroundings. They can do what other people do, and they want to live like other people... they can be part of their lives is the main theme...

They want to do something, want to be meaningful, for them and for the society. They want to be part of it. This is a new kind of thing they can do... being ICT volunteers.

(Expert)

Sometimes, the informal support network faced challenges when helping the service users as they were not specialists in this field, and they also needed to learn new knowledge before teaching others. One volunteer found a book that provided knowledge for seniors on how to use the internet: “Even though I have a degree in computer science, I need to study before I teach the elderly”.

In the service for the elderly on how to use ICT, the market could be considered as an indispensable sector because the after-sales service should include the service of teaching the customers. However, the market failed to provide regular services in regard to this. Our service users complained that some products did no longer had manuals. If a manual still

existed, it had almost certainly become unreadable, which forced the user to find out by themselves all the features of the gadget. The service users also worried that the service fee would be unaffordable if they asked for help from services on the market. The market has already developed a lot of ICT based innovations concerning the needs of the elderly, which are the basis of this project.

5. Conclusion and discussion

This case study asks how social services can support elderly people to use ICT to prevent loneliness in Finland. The main goal of the current study is to determine how the services that offers support in using ICT are provided in Finland. This research extends knowledge of the motivation and expectation of elderly people using ICT and specifically their need for learning ICT. Although the current study is based on a small sample of participants, the findings suggest that the service for helping elderly people to learn ICT can be provided as a solution for distance communication which enhance their social interaction. After taking part in this project, they are more skilful in using computers and smart phones. They enjoy visiting the meeting point to attend the service even if they do not have any questions concerning the use of ICT. The volunteers' teaching is helpful and useful; they always solve the seniors' questions. However, in the focus group interview they address the problem that those elderly people who cannot attend this project may need other kind of support. Additional devices and services that target the elderly are needed. However, there is still a large group been excluded since they have some limitations to take part in the service. A similar service should be provided following a survey in order to get a clear understanding of the needs of users.

The most important finding is that a multi-sectorial service model lies at the foundation of this service. It consists of the third sector, an informal caring network, the public sector

and the market. In Finland, several services are organised for seniors to supply the need of learning to use ICT, which aims at increasing the mobility of communication to prevent loneliness. In addition to the customer service supplied by the market, these services are provided by the public sector, the third sector and informal caring networks. As the relevant research discussions over the past few decades make clear, a mixed social welfare service model is emerging that includes the private, third and public sector as well as stronger integration of the informal care of family members that are still participating into the entire system of services (Matthies, 2006). In Table 2 I summarise what role different sectors play in providing support to seniors for the use of ICT as well as the limitations of different sectors.

Table 2

The different roles of the various sectors in Senior Surf

Sector	Roles	Limitation
Third sector	Forms the national organisation plan and provides the services based on the interests of seniors using ICT, organises people's participation in the services and the local organisation provides the meeting place for the Senior Surf activities.	Funding limited to certain project period; not a constant service.
Informal sector	Supports each other in learning ICT.	Discontinuous and temporary support.
Public sector	Offers the city library to the organisation as a meeting point.	Mainly focuses on professional services, not experienced in organising or networking with services based on volunteers.

Market sector	Offers charged customer services after selling the devices, sponsors the project, the local newspaper offers free access to the organisation for posting service information.	Lacks a service targeting senior customers, the service fee may not be affordable for some the seniors.
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The need of social interaction for elderly people has always existed. Supporting elderly people to use ICT is a long-term process, and the need for supporting seniors using ICT is also continuous. Although the younger generation of seniors are used to using ICT in their work, they still face the challenges of the rapid updating of technology and the limitations caused by age. The multi-sectoral service model used in this case provides a successful experience for similar services to involve elderly people and different sectors for participation. Meanwhile, the study contributes knowledge to social work research concerning local services and elderly services. In addition, a researcher or developer working on innovations for the elderly in regard to social interaction can benefit from the expectations of the service user. In future studies it will be important to study how the service could be developed in similar circumstances and which other countries could learn from the case in Finland and apply it to their own society.

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