"But it’s only online!” - Inclusion in exchange platforms

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Abstract  
We are designing an exchange platform especially geared towards senior citizens to support them in their every day lives. During the initial design process, we noticed that even though we are trying to create an open and inclusive platform with the help of the target group, there will still be some people whose needs and wants will not be fully met, partly because of our decision in the first place (due to the funding source) to create a digital platform. To find out how other exchange projects deal with inclusion in their systems, we reviewed interviews we had previously conducted with people from such projects to understand their issues and working strategies. We found that inclusion is a common challenge in most existing platforms and suggest that new ideas and strategies need to be explored that can embrace both digital and non-digital participation in an exchange community.

Author Keywords  
Share economy, user participation, peer-to-peer services, co-design, collaborative design

Position Statement  
Share economies, such as AirBnB (www.airbnb.com) or CarSharing (www.carsharing.net), are currently thriving and offer goods and services to a wide, international audience. Each sharing platform fills a niche to satisfy the
needs of its particular user group and many of these groups show a certain homogeneity and similar interests and expertise - sometimes on purpose, sometimes by chance. This homogeneity can arise out of the nature of the exchange platform at hand, e.g., if it focuses on a very narrow field of exchanges, and raises questions about inclusive processes during development and while it is running.

With this position paper, we want to point to the potential that results from integrating diverse groups in the design process and the common issues designers and developers are facing in doing so. We want to spark a discussion on what prevents teams from including a wider range of users into their work flow and talk about how to simplify the process and yield better results.

Give&Take is an international project that intends to create a share platform for older adults to be used in their close neighbourhood. The platform aims at promoting the exchange of goods and services among older adults, but consciously targets an inter-generational audience to provide a wider spectrum of possible exchange goods and services.

To find out more about the needs and wants of older adults and include them into the design process, we approached senior centers and public service providers to contact senior citizens and involve them in a co-design process (Figure 1). We found the organisers of those facilities to be highly interested in introducing a sharing platform into their daily work environment and they were also a vital source of information about their respective senior communities. Seniors too were very interested in the project and happily willing to participate in workshops and give interviews. However, despite the workshops being very successful, we sometimes experienced a lower number of participants than expected.

Figure 1: Dynamic discussions during a workshop with senior citizens in a senior center.

We try to make a point in including future users in the creation of our system and hence felt the need to fathom the problem with the sometimes limited participation. What we found was, that we were running into the same common issues that a lot of projects face. On the one hand, the workshop dates had to be aligned with the project’s schedule, which did not suit the participant’s schedule and sometimes led to a lower number of participants in the workshops, or to seniors having to leave before the end of a workshop. On the other hand, when asked directly, participants mentioned that they were already involved in informal exchange networks and didn’t need an additional one; that they had a busy schedule and were already booked in advance; that the workshop and project seemed too scientific; and that they thought that the exchange platform would only happen online and they didn’t use the Internet in their daily lives.
Realisation
Especially this last remark made us wonder how inclusive our online platform approach actually was. Even though we regularly discussed the barriers and difficulties senior people face in online environments, we assumed that designing a platform with their needs and requirements in mind would be enough to include them in sharing communities. But what if that is not the case? In the project, we had already looked into some existing online and offline, monetised and non-monetised platforms in our close vicinity and talked to their managers and organisers to get a better feeling of platforms and their communities. Now, with this slightly different issue in mind, we re-visited the data to look for ideas and experiences about possible inclusion strategies and how they built up their networks.

Observed current Practices
Simplified, there are three main phases in which inclusion could be considered, namely in the 'outset and development', 'start up', and while 'running' an exchange platform.

Outset and Development
The 'outset and development' phase marks the start of a project, including the process in which the idea is refined and the platform’s goals are set. Inclusion of diverse groups is not always a topic for exchange platforms. Most address a certain niche community and profit from marketing their platform to exactly these kind of people. We found that platforms that work with a non-monetised system often have a more ‘social character’ and are more likely to consider how they deal with openness and inclusion. However, mostly these considerations are not a main focus and often occur more as an afterthought rather than a main design choice. This is not to say, that the issue of inclusion is ignored, or not intensely discussed in the initial phase, but it is pushed to the background to first create a working platform that then could be changed and adapted according to future needs.

Start Up
‘Start up’ is the main community building phase when a new exchange platform goes online. Here we observed very different approaches depending on the platform. Some platforms choose to go big, are instantly open for any and all interested participants and aim for a high media coverage, while others rely on word-of-mouth or are restricted to a certain user group. Concerning inclusion, each of these strategies has advantages and disadvantages. An open approach is inviting and does not put conscious restrictions on participants. On the other hand, it usually does not especially target an audience that has special needs or is restricted by constraints that would keep them from using an online tool. A restricted approach however, can easily target a certain diverse group, since the strategy builds upon first building up a core user group, before opening up to a broader audience. This restriction however can exclude interested parties from the platform that might otherwise greatly advance the community building. The ‘word-of-mouth’ strategy works as a very low-level means of attaining new members but has the disadvantage, that it often reinforces a very homogeneous community and tends to keep this community rather small.

While running
We observed the most active means of involving and including different user groups in the ‘running’ phase. Successfully running platforms usually have an active user base that works well together and communicates their experiences to friends and family, often involving other
generations of their social circle into the project. In this phase, also other means of communicating and broadening the platform’s reach are contemplated. Some organisations work with flyers, regular community meetings, stickers that can be put up on letterboxes and entrance doors to indicate a certain openness and willingness to exchange goods and services to neighbours. Events and festivals are organised with the purpose to also include people that are not reached by the traditional digital media. Some organisers also proposed to put up public screens and provide easily printable PDFs to be put up on notice boards in apartment buildings to include all neighbours in the exchange project, not just those that coincidentally learned about it online.

**Insights and future considerations**

Concluding, we see the need to find more viable strategies to create an inclusive exchange service while not only addressing inclusion methods as an afterthought. We think that diverse groups should not be ignored and should be considered as future users right from the start. Exchange platforms profit from diversity among the participants. Including all ages, genders, ethnicities, and generations creates a broader, more multifaceted and more colourful offering and can enrich exchange platforms for all participants.

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