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Mitchell, Robb; Pallaris, Kay

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Encouraging new encounters: Digital design patterns to support social wellbeing

Robb Mitchell ([University of Southern Denmark](#)) and Kay Pallaris ([Mapping Futures Ltd](#))

Interpersonal contact can be crucial to subjective wellbeing (Miesen and Schaafsma, 2008) as social isolation can create vicious spirals of self-destructive behaviour that further decreases lonely individuals' social skills and motivations towards sociability (Caccioppo and Patrick, 2009). Lacking social connection has also been argued to have negative impacts on physiological health (ibid).

However, developing new interpersonal connections is an elixir that is easy to prescribe but difficult to supply. Initiating a conversation with strangers is difficult for many people (Crozier, 1990) and successfully approaching strangers in public places necessitates considerable skills (Mondada, 2009). Computer scientists, interaction designers, new media artists and other inventive practitioners and researchers have undertaken a wide variety of experimentation with digital means to support social icebreaking, and reduce inhibitions on initiating new encounters. Formats and media range from responsive architecture, installations and dynamic furniture to handheld gadgets and wearables. But despite the breadth and novelty of design concepts, these efforts seem to have made little headway in reducing social isolation.

Addressing this challenge is hindered by several factors including a) how prior work for sparking new interpersonal contacts is scattered across many different fields and disciplines b) the challenge of articulating the complexity and unpredictability of interpersonal interactions and c) the lack of shared vocabularies for how digital mechanisms, technologies and techniques may influence how people perceive and act towards each other.

In this paper, we present findings from a participatory and iterative review of design examples (Mitchell 2015, Mitchell and Olsson 2017). To support interdisciplinary exchange, we present the results of our review in the accessible format of design patterns. Design patterns are illustrated abstractions capturing re-usable solutions to recurring problems (Alexander, 1977). We conducted an iterative, and participatory design space review that connected clusters of diverse inventions with explanations of specific difficulties with initiating new encounters that they might each support. Expert interviews with diverse practitioners critiqued and fine-tuned our initial results. Furthermore, we will unpack our latest digital design patterns for social wellbeing through comparisons with less novel technologies and insights from social science literature.

Learning Outcomes

Participants will:

- appreciate the potential for novel computing to address social wellbeing, and become familiar with broad range of design strategies for so doing
- increase their awareness of specific obstacles and inhibitors of interpersonal interaction
- become familiar with the design patterns approach for supporting dialogue and engagement between interdisciplinary team members and other stakeholders
- discuss social acceptability of design interventions (cf. Koelle et al. 2018)

Fit With Following Conference themes:

- Wearable Devices and Mobile apps
- Environment(s) - Community Dwelling, Rural, Suburban, City
- Health Prevention (Loneliness)
- Mental Health
- Psychological Behaviour, Health, Society
- Technology in the Future

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