



The Matter of Inside and Outside

Redefining the Sense of Home in a Pandemic World

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Home sweet home. Home is where the heart is. There's no place like home. The list of cheesy popular sayings on home seems to go on forever. Walking into a store will reveal many more of them, painted on decorative boxes or mugs. How is it that we devote so much of our lives to our homes, basically building our whole lives around them?

Undeniably, the home is a place of comfort, a place to relax and to feel safe. A home is what many people strive to build during their lifetimes, both externally—the outside, the furniture, the garden—and internally (the feeling of a home, a place to recover from the world outside, raising kids, having friends and family over, throwing social events).

As the Covid-19 virus started spreading, prompting individuals, mainly older adults, to stay inside and moving almost all outside activities inside [1], many struggled with involuntary social isolation within their own homes. This

meant that many aspects of what makes a home a home were not possible for an (at the time) unforeseeable future. The home became a more fragile place, forcibly filled with new elements, one of them being activities mediated by technology.

THE EFFECT ON NONVOLUNTARY ISOLATIONS IN HOMES

Nonvoluntary isolation is a growing problem in the world, affecting both young and old, but mainly individuals over the age of 65 [2]. There is no question that many older adults have highly functional social networks with friends, family, hobbies, and activities, but as many had to isolate themselves during the pandemic, tools to connect in a nonphysical way outside the home became more important.

Insights

- During the Covid-19 pandemic, many aspects that made the home “a home” were transformed.
- Covid-19 restrictions caused Swedish seniors to socially distance; for some, that meant a welcome break in their everyday life where they had the time to explore their home in a new light.
- For others, nonvoluntary isolation for an unforeseeable future created frictions at home. Digital technologies helped with these frictions but couldn't make up for the loss of social connection.

Attempting to implement technology and using HCI to address social isolation, whether voluntary or nonvoluntary, have been well discussed in recent years. This research focuses on many different groups, including young men with HIV, women exposed to domestic violence, chronically ill women, and older adults and seniors [3,4,5,6]. Since isolation among the elderly occurs at a higher rate than in other groups, they become particularly vulnerable when they have to further isolate themselves, sometimes for an unspecified amount of time. Preventing the effects of social isolation can be a complex task, and due to the many reasons for isolation, designing a universal solution has proved to be difficult. The degree to which seniors have the opportunities to use ICT is highly linked with having had previous experiences with technology through work; those who haven't had these experiences often do not have the same capabilities. There is much research pointing to the Internet and computers serving as a positive factor in the lives of older adults who experience isolation and helping them connect with others [7]. Studies suggest that having access to a computer with Internet can allow seniors to feel less socially isolated from friends and family whether they were, as in the situation with Covid, prohibited from interacting outside their homes or live far from relatives.

To foreground insights about older adults' technology use to extend their social activities from their own homes, we draw on an interview study with 15 seniors to map out what they think of their home status, isolation during the pandemic, and technology.

TECHNOLOGY TO BREAK ISOLATION AND REACH SOCIALIZATION

As Covid restrictions started affecting everyday life, many participants in our study turned to a more digital daily life where, for example, meetings, graduations, family gatherings, dinners with friends, and concerts were held online as opposed to in a physical environment. This change was similar to how most societies and countries went about responding to Covid, wherein the government would prompt the population to distance themselves socially and physically. Some participants lived more liberally—going outside, going to the supermarket, taking public transportation—while others took the guidelines put in place by their country (Sweden) very seriously,

avoiding any contact with individuals inside and outside their home.

These changes initially felt okay for the study participants; however, many started to feel frustrated as this “digital life” seemed to become the norm. A male participant who came home from vacation to a smaller apartment in the autumn of 2020 did not enjoy the transition from his summer house, where he had more physical freedom



and could gather his friends and family more safely, to a smaller home with less freedom and fewer opportunities to socialize. A female participant living on her own described her home life as having become more passive than before the pandemic lockdowns. With fewer community activities to attend, she was spending more time on “trivial” activities such as watching TV or using her mobile phone. She would occasionally use her communication technologies to reach out to others, but mostly she spent more alone time on various applications.

Many participants described their lives as much more boring than before, losing a sense of purpose for their home as it had become more of a place that they had to stay in than a place to return to from community and social activities. However, a couple of the participants actually enjoyed this more at-home lifestyle—for them, the pandemic had worked as a welcome break from their otherwise jam-packed lives. But this was not the experience for the majority of participants.

Spending more time at home gave about half of the participants, mostly those who lived with partners or very close to friends, some new time to explore their own home, what they liked, and what gadgets they had or needed. Moreover, it made them realize that otherwise ordinary activities such as celebrating someone's birthday, having cookies with grandchildren, going to a graduation ceremony, having dinner with friends, choir practice, and senior-citizen group activities were essential parts of their lives and that using technology to engage in these same activities from home was not the same.

A woman who described herself as a “lady of culture” felt very strongly about live music concerts changing to

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digital, expressing irritation as to why producers would even bother. The experience could never give her the same feeling; sitting at home would only be depressing for her instead of rewarding. But the more experience that participants had with computers and technology, the less they seemed to suffer from being at home during this more still period in their lives. This correlation also related to how much technology a participant liked to use every day; those who had the most experience with technology and therefore owned and knew how to navigate many communication technologies did not seem to be as bored or filled with anxiety as those without this experience.

For some, then, when the home becomes a place to shield them from outside threats, and when the control over when to come and go starts to dissolve, the home can become a more negative place. This negativity can arise from events such as the Covid pandemic, which forced people to stay isolated and away from community and social activities. For many, those activities are the purpose of life and a home. Despite the potential for using digital technologies to extend previous social activities inside the home, it is not sufficient to make up for what's lost outside the home. Simply switching out previous physical experiences with digital ones is not enough.

To be clear, what makes a home a home varies a lot between people, but having full control over when to stay inside and when to leave, whom to invite in and when, and having the freedom to go outside are for many people vital parts of building a home for life. Digital technologies can give individuals many possibilities to reach outside the

home, but they cannot make up for those key things that make a home a home, whatever that might be for you.

ENDNOTES

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