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Online communities are digital spaces where people come together to connect, learn, and share experiences. While these spaces have existed for many years, they have recently seen a surge in adoption among older adults, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. For many, these communities are now lifelines: places to find companionship, engage in civic life, and access trusted information. Among older adults, the growing embrace of online communities reflects their desire to remain socially, creatively, and intellectually engaged, and to secure freedom, self-reliance, and a place in the world. Online events, classes, and discussion spaces continue to thrive, particularly benefiting those who live alone, lack mobility, or reside in rural areas where physical gatherings may be less accessible. Nonprofits have taken notice, with some stepping in to not just facilitate digital spaces but actively create and implement tailored platforms and programs to empower older adults as contributors to online communities. Older

Adults Technology Services (OATS) from AARP is one such organization that has built an intentional online ecosystem tailored specifically to the needs of older adults. Professionals working with older adults can amplify their effectiveness in working with this audience by being knowledgeable about the offerings and recommending them to their clients.

OATS began in 2004 as a simple digital skills training program, but gradually grew into something more: a multi-channel ecosystem where people aged 50+ can take classes, share user content, explore new ideas in articles and podcasts, and attend events in-person and online—all free of charge. OATS launched Senior Planet in 2008 to build programming and branding around digital community for older adults, including technology-themed lectures, workshops, and special in-person events at its flagship centers (located in New York, Miami, and Denver) and at nearly 600 local partner sites in almost 40 states.

The organization also delivers thousands of live

classes per year on SeniorPlanet.org, providing opportunities to build digital skills and create new social bonds, and operates a free hotline and supplemental content on YouTube to ensure ongoing support. The programs are very popular with older adults, who participated more than 650,000 times in 2024. In 2021, OATS joined AARP as a charitable affiliate. By joining forces, OATS complements AARP's existing enterprise-wide digital strategy to help millions of older adults nationwide embrace technology to live their best lives. Building on this momentum, in 2022, OATS launched the Senior Planet Community, an online space where older adults can connect meaningfully, free from the distractions of commercial networking sites. This community is supported by OATS staff and volunteers to maintain community standards and security.

Many Senior Planet programs are about fostering social connections through experiential activities, and the online channel aims to replicate the sense of community and connection that organically develops in person. What makes these communities powerful is also what makes them complex. They dissolve geographic boundaries, allowing people to form deep, lasting bonds around shared interests. Here are some lessons OATS has learned through recent programs related to community-building online.

Programs That Foster Digital Community

Just as real-world communities develop around distinct demographics and activities, online spaces form based on the needs and interests of those who participate. Some of the most successful OATS initiatives have centered on creative expression, fitness, community discussions, and an interactive social platform, all areas where people can share their experiences, build skills, and connect meaningfully. While each program fosters collaboration and learning, the format and structure of engagement vary, ensuring participants find the right fit for their interests and goals. OATS ensures continuous program improvement by collecting participant feedback through structured and open-ended surveys, providing actionable insights that drive adjustments to program content, format, and delivery to better align with participant needs.

Among Senior Planet's creative expression programs, Open Mic Night and its accompanying Singer/Songwriter Night stand out as opportunities for music lovers to perform for, listen to, and connect with one another. Whether a participant sings, plays an instrument, or simply enjoys live music, these events provide a welcoming space to share and support each



other. These events meet on Zoom and are moderated by a subject matter expert and an OATS trainer. Participants take turns performing songs all from the comfort of their homes. During these performances, the audience uses Zoom's chat and feedback functions to encourage the musicians and engage in group dialogue where newcomers and experienced musicians alike can freely express their creativity.

For Stevi, a 68-year-old singer living in rural California, Senior Planet's virtual programs reignited a passion for music. After years of feeling disconnected from her musical journey, she found inspiration in Singer/Songwriter Night, where participants brainstorm and present their own song lyrics. "I hadn't written anything in 25 years," Stevi reflected, "but listening to others inspired me to pull out my old songs and finish them. It gave me a place to sing again." Beyond songwriting, she also took a significant step in her musical journey by playing her ukulele for an audience for the first time. Previously, she'd only played in private settings; Stevi found that Senior Planet's Open Mic Night encouraged her to share her music in a way she hadn't before. "Playing my ukulele for people felt really nice. Learning new songs, connecting with fellow musicians—it was inviting," she explained. Living in an isolated community, Stevi had few opportunities for in-person gatherings, but technology allowed her to connect with fellow musicians



and music lovers from across the country, and even internationally. “We can’t run out to events because they’re too far away. This online community is amazing; it brings people together who might never have had the chance to meet,” she shared. Programs like Open Mic Night illustrate how digital spaces foster meaningful communities, bringing people together through music, conversation, and shared creativity.

Live online fitness programs also have been a hit among seniors. Morning Stretch, which meets every weekday at 10:00am ET, has evolved into a communal exercise experience with hundreds of participants who stay online after their shared workout to socialize, celebrate milestones, and discuss topics of mutual interest. Because many of the participants in this daily get-together are “regulars,” real and lasting friendships have formed. Such online communities also can transform into in-person connections. For example, a group from the Morning Stretch class met recently in Maryland to share a meal with their fitness instructor—and to practice some Ba Duan Jin breathing exercises.

To further empower individuals in fostering connections, Senior Planet offers classes that teach digital skills to those who want to build and sustain communities on their own. For example, one participant took a class on how to use Zoom and then started her own decluttering group that meets on Zoom. When older adults learn how to use different technologies,

participants utilize them to transform their own lives and change the larger community as well.

In addition to the musical, physical activity, and digital skills programs, discussion groups have been pivotal in building communities. Senior Planet’s Lunch & Learn, for example, started as a small group of seniors weathering the pandemic together and has now become a mainstay social program that averages 130 people per daily session. Some groups serve deeply personal needs, such as Senior Planet’s Pride Discussion Group, which remains a vital space for LGBTQ+ older adults to connect and share their stories. Death Cafes is a group designed to provide an open space to discuss beliefs, thoughts, and feelings about death and dying. Solo Aging, another Senior Planet discussion group, formed in response to interest among some Death Cafe participants in exploring the distinct joys and challenges of aging alone. These groups highlight how older adults’ interests and small organic discussions can evolve into structured support systems tailored to specific life experiences that enable connections among people who may live thousands of miles from one another and wouldn’t otherwise have an opportunity to connect.

To provide a more interactive format for people to connect, OATS launched Senior Planet Community in 2022, a non-commercial social media platform with dozens of interest-based groups in which seniors can

explore common themes together. The most popular groups include: Decluttering, Book Club, Recipes & Cooking for Foodies, Fitness Enthusiasts, and Travelers. Enhanced accessibility options are an important aspect of Senior Planet Community, including slightly larger text size, increased text spacing, highlighting links, and options for colorblind members. Unlike more traditional online forums, Senior Planet Community blends asynchronous interaction with live programming. For example, the Book Club group not only hosts text-based discussions but also regularly features live sessions with authors, offering participants a rare opportunity to engage directly with the creators of the works they're reading. This hybrid model of user-generated posts, comments, and real-time events fosters deeper engagement and meaningful connections that extend beyond the virtual classroom.

The older adults who actively contribute to the larger Senior Planet community, whether in person, virtually, or both, are the true essence of its success. Volunteers also play a crucial role in growing the network of future friends. The Recruitment Committee, a group of senior volunteers, uses grassroots efforts to spread the word about Senior Planet locally to other older adults, while additional volunteers lead some programs, including Tuesday Talks, which explores topics like 3D printing, using AI, and more.

Whether performing music, enjoying a book discussion, or learning how to use ChatGPT, OATS allows participants to confidently and safely enter and inhabit spaces for meaningful discussions, fun, and support, both online and in person. Building a community is not solely about engaging participants in relevant high-quality programs, but creating lively destinations for them to put their newfound skills to work and generating real-world outcomes that improve the experience of aging.

The diverse origins and growth of online communities highlight the organic nature of these spaces, reinforcing the idea that communities are shaped by the people who participate in them. Much like traditional "third places" such as cafes, libraries, malls, and parks, digital environments serve as informal gathering hubs where individuals meet, build relationships, exchange ideas, and find social support. OATS has worked in recent years to curate and enhance these digital environments to ensure they meet the unique requirements of older adults, offering a vital means to counteract isolation. In contrast to profit-driven platforms, nonprofited spaces like these prioritize trust and relevance over scale, creating secure environments for authentic engagement. These digital networks are growing, evolving, and continuously proving their resilience in today's

world, and will continue to play a vital role in fostering and supporting these spaces. •CSA



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