



**Incidental
connections:**
an analysis of platforms
for community building

Luke Price
Community **Links**
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Community Links
105 Barking Road
Canning Town
London
E16 4HQ

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Contents

Summary	5
1. Introduction	7
2. Literature Review	8
3. Methodology.....	18
4. What characteristics do the platforms share?	19
5. Why and how are the platforms valuable?	21
6. What are the facilitators and barriers to the platforms' value?.....	25
7. Conclusion	31
8. Bibliography	32

Summary

Connecting with others is a fundamental part of human existence; from a friendly nod to someone you barely know, to lifelong friendships formed in our earlier years. Without social connection we can end up feeling isolated, resulting in a range of negative effects on our lives. Social connections are therefore vitally important to us all, but far too often we don't take the time to explore the situations that can help create and sustain them.

There are many highly effective formal services and projects seeking to bring people together and create social networks. This paper is primarily interested in those 'platforms' - events, groups, activities and/or spaces - at the other end of the spectrum: those that are not explicitly aimed at connecting people but do so anyway. Community Links often use the school gates to illustrate this idea. People primarily use this space to drop-off or pick-up their children, but the connections that occur can result in lasting and valuable friendships. The paper seeks to answer the following questions:

- ▶ What, if any, characteristics do these platforms share?
- ▶ Why and how are they valuable to those who participate in them?
- ▶ How can we encourage them to flourish without negating their incidental nature?

The paper is set out in the following sections:

Literature review

This chapter brings together evidence on the relevant theoretical concepts of social capital, social support and mutual aid, and discusses some concrete examples to illustrate them.

There are three types of **social capital**, but it is fundamentally a resource that is embedded in networks and *realised*, rather than possessed, by individuals. It is therefore not necessarily the existence of social connections that matters, but what benefits each of us may derive from them.

One such benefit is **social support**, an exchange between two or more individuals that either helps them cope with adversity or promotes opportunities to thrive. This can range from small physical exchanges to more intangible things like kindness, empathy and love. Such exchanges can be founded on a sense of **mutual aid**; reciprocal, win-win exchanges in which people help others *and* serve a self-interest, even if the expectation of 'pay-back' is subconscious. The boundary between who is supporting whom is therefore not as distinct as often assumed.

A range of factors influence the strengths of relationships and therefore also the type of support on offer. These include intimacy, contact frequency, and personal characteristics. Different types of platforms might attract certain people and allow for different levels of intimacy and contact frequency.

Research Findings & Discussion

The following three sections discuss the research findings based on fieldwork conducted with ten different social platforms, including coffee shops, hobby clubs and markets

What characteristics do the platforms share?

Functionality was the primary reason that people engaged with their platforms, whether that was to pick-up or drop-off their children, sing in a choir, or buy a cup of coffee. Each platform was also **fulfilling** in one way or another, allowing participants to reap benefits from involvement such as learning a new skill or feeling as if they had contributed to something. Finally, it was the **friendliness** of each platform that cemented participant's motivation to engage.

Why and how are the platforms valuable?

Each platform created and sustained a **range of different strengths of relationships**, from casual acquaintance to long-lasting friendships. Many of these relationships were supportive, albeit to differing degrees, and support ranged from helping someone deal with an acute problem to lending a set of tools and providing useful information. Individuals drew on a range of different ideas when talking about reciprocity and **mutual aid**, but it was largely seen as **an implicit, win-win exchange** in which people invested time and effort to create a sense of the 'good community'.

What are the facilitators and barriers to the platforms' value*?

We found that there were seven factors that encouraged the creation and maintenance of socially supportive relationships. It was important that platforms allowed participants to build a level of understanding and **trust**. This was premised on some sort of catalyst for engagement or the **permission to connect**, and a **commonality** of values and/or experience. **Regular and sustained engagement** allowed people to develop relationships, as did **collaboration and co-operation**. This was achieved through a mixture of **physical and online spaces**. The **personal characteristics** of individuals were also important in the types of relationships created.

However, personal characteristics could also be a barrier to relationships. The other two barriers were a **lack of resources** and a **lack of trust**.

Introduction

At an Early Action Task Force meeting last year we were told two contrasting stories. The first was about an elderly woman whose failure to eat properly and take her medication led to a series of problems, eventually resulting in her being admitted to a nursing home. The second woman, a long standing member of an allotment group, fell ill but was looked after by other group members. They took turns sharing their meals with her, checking on her daily for a chat and running other errands wherever necessary. The arrangements remained in place for nine months until they were no longer needed.

One was unhappy, remains unhappy, and now depends on expensive care services. The other was happy, is happy, and costs nothing. She managed to cope with the stress of illness and was enabled to come out the other side stronger than ever. No-one was ever asked, trained, or paid to support the second woman. No-one would even call themselves a volunteer; they were just doing 'what anyone would do'. The strong community, 'doing what anyone would do', is in the interest of us all and, given current trajectories, increasingly urgent.

Is it just a matter of chance, or can such communities be built? How, as a society, do we best nurture the conditions for care and support to happen 'incidentally', just as in the allotment group, without the structures and systems and the artificiality that would negate its essence?

Allotments, the Big Lunch, and GoodGym, to name but a few, are all to varying degrees examples of light-touch and indirect approaches to the building of social connection. They provide platforms for developing peer networks, for relating to each other, and for building communities that are mutually supportive. They are fun activities to participate in, but do they really create anything of lasting value?

This is the primary question that this small piece of research aims to answer. It takes a qualitative, case study approach and consists of a short literature review, ten interviews with individuals involved in these platforms, and four field visits. The other questions it seeks to answer are:

- ▶ What, if any, characteristics do these platforms share?
- ▶ How can we encourage them to flourish without negating their incidental nature?

This project is intended as a provocation rather than a robust comparison of the multitude of platforms out there. As such, further research is needed to build on the preliminary findings detailed in this report. Ideas as to how this could be achieved are included in the conclusion.

Literature Review

“People’s capabilities for co-operation are greater and more complex than institutions allow them to be” (Sennett, 2012: 29)

This literature review broadly focuses on social interaction, social support, and a range of platforms that encourage connection and support - some of which do so more explicitly than others.

Research suggests that connecting with other people is one of the five fundamental ‘pathways’ to wellbeing (Aked et al, 2008). Indeed, the links between isolation and worse psychological wellbeing are well established: smaller social networks often lead to fewer close relationships and a lower perceived adequacy of support (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001). Furthermore, several longitudinal studies have been used to statistically determine the strongest influences on wellbeing over the life course. A key finding has been that supportive relationships are integral to promoting a healthy and fulfilling life (Taggart, 2013). The primary researcher of the longitudinal Grant study which was conducted over 68 years concluded *“that the only thing that really matters in life are your relationships to other people”* (Shenk, 2009). Another study that began in 1921 found that connecting to, and perhaps more importantly actually helping, others was more important in predicting a longer life than a rigorous exercise programme (Taggart, 2013).

Broadly speaking there are three levels of social connection: intimate personal and familial relationships, broader friend networks, and casual connections with acquaintances (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008 in: Kelly, 2012). These exist along a continuum from strong to weak: closer, more intimate relationships are ‘strong’, and relationships with acquaintances tend to be ‘weak’. Different types of relationships yield different benefits, and potentially also certain drawbacks; for example, tightly-knit networks of friends and family are broadly supportive but may also impose sanctions on behaviour and exclude ‘outsiders’. Loosely knit networks of acquaintances are less likely to be exclusive, but might also offer less support than you would expect to receive from friends and family (Wellman & Wortley, 1990).

What’s in a community?

The context of social interaction is important. How do we define what is, and what is not, a community? Is it primarily a geographical phenomenon? Perhaps it’s related to a common identity, a common interest, or a shared experience? Many of us are part of several different communities; individuals may move around to varying degrees in their day to day life, but most of us engage with a range of people in a set of different contexts.

Neighbourhoods have traditionally been seen as the key place for social interaction and the fostering of community. Whilst the importance of the neighbourhood may have diminished for some, positive relationships with our neighbours is arguably still very important for health and wellbeing, social efficacy and a sense of belonging (Buonfino & Hilder, 2006). This is

particularly the case for those who generally have to spend a lot of time in their local area, such as young families, the elderly, or the unemployed.

However, just because a 'community' is bounded by certain geographical limits - a neighbourhood for example - does not necessarily mean that a common identity (or even interest) is shared between those who live within that area (Gaffikin & Morrissey, 2011). Furthermore, technology now allows us to connect with people who are geographically distant on a regular basis.

The concept of community is therefore contested. It can be place-based, interest-based and/or value-based. Regardless, fundamental to any community are those personal, collective, and organisational networks that most of us participate in everyday (albeit to varying degrees). In this sense membership in a social network, however small or loosely knit that network may be, is one of the most important factors. 'Third places' - beyond work and home - are likely to be crucial in creating and sustaining social networks and offer a range of other personal benefits to those who engage with them (Oldenburg, 1989). However, as explored in previous work by Community Links, "coming together can also involve shutting out" (Robinson, 2014: 16). Therefore communities and third places must have permeable – not solid - boundaries to promote inclusivity. They should also recognise that difference exists, but attempt to open hearts and minds to positive relationships and opportunities outside of individual's normal experience.

Two concepts that are likely to be of use here are social capital and social support.

Social capital has received much attention in policy-making circles, often with reference to Robert Putnam's (2000) work (although he did not coin the term). A complete discussion of social capital is beyond the scope of this report, but suffice to say this research treats it as a resource that is embedded in networks and *realised*, rather than possessed, by individuals (DeFilippis, 2001). In this sense it is not so much whether networks exist, or whether people are involved in voluntary groups, but whether people can secure benefits by virtue of being part of these networks (Portes, 2000). Civil society and social capital are therefore not the same thing, although one can certainly facilitate the other.

This is important as social capital is often measured by the levels of formal involvement in civil society, sometimes leading to the conclusion that 'deprived' communities lack social capital. However, there are often strong informal networks that are not taken into account and that may offer access to certain benefits (Amin, 2005). Such informal networks are likely to be apparent in the more incidental platforms that this research aims to explore.

Social capital is therefore only given importance by what one does with it (Forrest & Kearns, 2001), and it certainly is not a replacement for financial resources (Afridi, 2011).

There are three types of social capital: bonding, bridging, and linking. **Bonding social capital** tends to be based on narrow parameters of similarity and thus can lead to exclusion, inadvertent or otherwise (Taylor, 2007). One example of this would be a very close-knit neighbourhood community in which generations of the same families have lived locally for many years. Bonding social capital tends to create cohesive communities based

on mutuality, but to overcome the potential for exclusion it must be augmented by bridges between different individuals and communities (Gilchrist, 2009).

Bridging social capital is about connecting across difference (Holland, 2008). This can either be between individuals or groups, and is a fundamental way in which we are exposed to different ideas and information. An example might include a link between the multi-generational community mentioned above and an incoming migrant community brought into contact through proximity but encouraged to form relationships via a community centre.

Linking social capital denotes the vertical links that allow individuals or groups to access various resources from formal institutions (Woolcock, 1998 in: Cheong et al, 2007). To use the previous example, the local community centre may allow connections to be made between the people who use it and local professionals who have access to funding that can be used to host events or provide training. This highlights one limit to the benefits of bonding and bridging social capital; certain kinds of resources, particularly financial, are likely to be far scarcer in informal networks as opposed to institutional ones. Furthermore, the question of whether links between informal networks and institutions can negate the incidental nature of certain platforms still remains to be answered.

As previously mentioned, social capital is often measured by levels of trust (between individuals or individuals and institutions), participation in civil society and social networks. Putnam (2000) largely focussed on formal interactions and aggregated up individual data to draw his conclusions. This report departs from that understanding by focussing on informal relationships and analysing social capital at the micro-scale; understanding how individuals and groups interact in specific contexts.

Thriving through relationships

The benefits derived from social capital are apparently wide-ranging, from reducing the prevalence of mental health problems (Silva et al, 2005) to assisting young people to find job opportunities (Holland, 2008; Granovetter, 1983).

The Big Lunch started in 2009 after receiving approximately £10 million funding from BIG. It is primarily about encouraging people to have lunch with their neighbours, some of whom may be from very different backgrounds, once a year. According to research conducted by the Local Government Innovation Unit, it was quite successful in terms of reaching a range of different communities, bringing neighbours together, and having a lasting effect (Carr-West & Wilkes, 2013).

In fact, 50 percent of participants did further activities with people they had met at the event. In some areas, after four years of having the annual Big Lunch, 82 percent felt closer to neighbours, 88 percent met new people, and 81 percent felt like there was a positive impact on the community. In this sense it can be seen as having encouraged both bridging and bonding social capital, although it does reside at the more purposeful end of the social connection scale.

Of particular interest here is the concept of **social support**. Generally speaking social support consists of an exchange between two or more individuals (Brossoie, 2007), it can be broadly split into four specific types: instrumental, informational, emotional, and companionship (House, 1981). Instrumental support includes physical exchanges such as goods, services, and financial aid. Informational support is about providing knowledge, opinions, and insight. Emotional support is more intangible, and includes kindness, empathy, and love. Companionship is also intangible and revolves around a sense of belonging and not feeling lonely.

In the two stories that were introduced at the start of this report the focus was on coping with adversity. This is undoubtedly important, but we are also interested in how social support can act earlier; how we can create platforms that promote opportunities for growth in the *absence* of adversity (Feeney & Collins, 2014).

This is a far more positive vision of social support than the traditional models, which largely focus on how it can reduce stress following crisis (Cohen & Wills, 1985). It also has parallels with the Early Action Task Force's concept of **readiness**; we believe that we should focus on assets and strengths rather than 'deficits', and enable people to not only be ready to deal with setbacks, but be ready to seize opportunities too (Early Action Task Force, 2011).

As such we need to evaluate how people can take pleasure in and benefit from informal sociability. A fundamental part of this is co-operation and what we might call mutual aid.

Allotments and community gardens have a lot of generalised benefits, including improving one's mental and physical health, creating the opportunity to engage with others, and creating a sense of community (Ferres & Townshend, 2012). They can be seen as social structures that facilitate the access to resources, advice, and support beyond the garden itself (Miller, 2012) and thus are places where social capital can be fostered.

Research suggests that social networks in allotments are characterised by friendships and reciprocal support, peer learning, and the freedom to experiment (Fieldhouse, 2003). Hence they fit particularly well with both the buffering and thriving social support models previously discussed. Not all allotments are the same, however, and so there is need to differentiate between certain aspects such as the general structure and how they are managed (Ferres & Townshend, 2012). For example, allotments tend to be very structured spaces whereas those with 'garden' layouts are not. Some allotments or gardens may be strictly managed by a local group or even the local authority whereas others might not.

Mutual aid

Earlier we conceptualised the 'good' community as something comprised of social networks and that should have permeable borders. This could be expanded to see a community as comprising of informal interactions in which "*one might develop a sense of inner purpose by communal co-operation*" (Sennett, 2012: 263).

Mutual aid consists of non-commodified exchanges, including but not limited to reciprocity between family, friends, and acquaintances (White, 2009). This sense of reciprocity has long been thought to underpin other human characteristics including social responsibility, co-operation, and the law (Purdam & Tranmer, 2014). There exists a 'spectrum of exchange', moving from purely unselfish exchanges to those where the 'winner takes all' (Sennett, 2012). Arguably mutual aid falls just shy of pure altruism, and is what would be seen as a 'win-win' exchange in which all parties gain something, either immediately or at some point in the future. Mutual aid can therefore be seen as having a dual role: helping others *and* serving self-interest (Purdam et al, 2014).

The U offers free 90 minute learning sessions about a range of different practical skills. It is an attempt to utilise what Hudson (2012) calls a 'nod and a wink', the creation of bonds between people with no need for intensive demand, disclosure, or shared values. These weaker ties are useful as they provide information about opportunities, are highly flexible, and can often promote innovation. Rather than focussing on the "solidarity of strong ties", it is argued we need to encourage the "trust inherent in hospitality" (ibid: 5) and thus create social capital via the extension of kindness and feelings of mutual aid to those we know very little about. Ultimately, the U plays a role in disseminating skills and connecting people by designating places and activities.

The expectation of return is one of four theories that people might draw upon when explaining instances of everyday support and mutual aid. The other three, as identified by Spandler et al (2014) in their primary research in Yorkshire, are mutual aid as inherent to humankind, a belief that giving and receiving are morally right, and that acts of mutual aid are essential to creating a good society. These theories do not necessarily translate directly into actions, however, and are mediated by other factors, including trust and a sense of duty, society, geography, familial and other relationships, and emotions (ibid).

Casserole Club is an initiative that brings together those who cannot cook for themselves and those who want to cook for others. The former are known as 'diners' and the latter as 'cooks'. Both parties are benefitting from the social interaction and sense of mutual aid, yet neither would see themselves as carer or being cared for respectively.

In some exchanges - particularly those centred on informal care - the division between giver and receiver is blurred due to a shared experience, attitude, or situation (Linders, 2009). This is important as it suggests that within certain group situations or contexts participants will not necessarily see themselves as explicitly giving or receiving support. It also highlights how conceptualising individuals as carer and person in need of care, particularly when they see themselves as being friends, is perhaps a false division.

Three Factors for Social Support

Whether explicitly about mutual aid or social support more generally, there appears to be three inter-related factors to the type, quantity, and quality of social support that might exist

in any given relationship. These are intimacy, contact frequency, and personal characteristics.

1. Intimacy: the strength of the relationship

As previously discussed, where a connection between individuals exists it will fall along a continuum between 'strong' and 'weak':

"Weak ties provide people with access to information and resources beyond those available in their own social circle; but strong ties have greater motivation to be of assistance and are typically more easily available" (Granovetter, 1983: 209)

This suggests that the function of any relationship is partly a factor of its strength. Generally speaking people have fewer strong than weak ties, but they are the most active in support terms. Strong ties may 'have greater motivation to be of assistance', but they also require far more time and effort to be invested in them. In terms of mutual aid, individuals tend to go to their inner circle of strong ties before their outer circle of weak ties, but in the right context people would consider doing more for others (White, 2009). Furthermore, there is a link here between tie strength and type of social capital: weak ties tend to be those that connect different individuals and therefore also groups, thus having parallels with bridging social capital. As Granovetter (1983: 202) argues:

"The weak tie... becomes not merely a trivial acquaintance tie but rather a crucial bridge between the two densely knit clumps of close friends."

Talk to Me Today is an initiative in Calderdale, North Yorkshire that shows how informal interaction can be encouraged with something as simple as a wristband (The Centre for Welfare Reform, 2014). The basic concept is that adults of all ages can wear bright orange wristbands (costing £1) that indicate they are happy for people to say hello and, if time allows, to have a chat.

These wristbands act as an icebreaker and can lead to conversations at bus stops, cafés or any other place in which you might meet someone. It also allows for people who feel shy to not wear one themselves but know they can go and talk to anyone who is wearing one.

In this sense, whilst Talk to Me Today is explicitly aimed at connecting people, it is very much a light touch approach. Furthermore it offers the opportunity for people to form weak ties, which can then potentially lead to friendships and differing forms of socially supportive networks.

More information can be found on this platform in chapters 4, 5 and 6.

It is for this reason that weak ties tend to yield more informational support, as connections between individuals and groups who are different (bridging social capital) will allow for a transfer of new information into and through more densely knit networks (bonding social capital).

We are therefore interested in platforms that encourage individuals to form new relationships, but might also offer the opportunity for people to become closer.

Streetbank is about sharing both things and skills with neighbours. It started in Hammersmith in Fulham, but has spread to be the “*largest hyper-local neighbourhood sharing website in the UK with 57,000 members*” that aims to connect people, save money, and improve the environment through “*small acts of neighbourly kindness*” (Stephens, 2014). People either declare an offer or a need on the website and wait for someone else within 1 mile to reply. It has had a positive effect on many individual’s lives; one man, Richard, suffered from serious mental health issues and went off his medication but connected to people through Streetbank who helped him through it (ibid). Streetbank therefore provides the opportunity for that initial link - the weak tie - to form, before gradually getting stronger and leading to particular forms of support.

So how do ties become stronger? It may feel like an obvious point, but it is down to doing friendly things in friendly places. This is the difference between a GP’s waiting room and the school gates; the former is generally far more formal and unfriendly, and a place where no-one is too keen to engage with others. The school gates, on the other hand, allow people with a commonality of interest and experience - their children - to engage on an informal basis. This does not mean that GP’s waiting rooms could not be made friendlier, but it does indicate that there are certain platforms that are inherently better at achieving such outcomes.

2. Contact frequency: the access that individuals have to each other

Kelly (2012) argue that whilst **neighbourhoods** are diverse there are some common features between most of them to encourage social connection. These include public places to meet such as sports facilities, parks, squares, community centres, cafes, and shops. Encounters here can be both deliberate or by chance. One example of how this works is provided by Harris (2007) in his discussion of **dog walking** in parks. Harris points out that having a dog is a good ice breaker and allows conversation to develop into other areas. Contact also tends to be fairly regular but non-committal, and in some cases can lead to instrumental benefits such as helping someone when their boiler has broken. Equally, if you are used to seeing someone in the park walking their dog and don’t see them for a while a text might be sent to see where they are.

By meeting frequently and regularly the relationships between the dog walkers grew stronger, thus allowing friendships to form due to an activity that is by no means aimed at explicitly linking people together.

Certain forms of access allow for specific types of support; for example physical access is often required for small or larger services, but others such as emotional support can happen at a far greater distance (Wellman & Wortley, 1990). This has particular importance when we think of internet platforms as it is easy to 'lend an ear' to someone without needing to be physically present. Indeed, studies have found that internet discussion forums can have a positive effect on wellbeing and can even promote more community engagement online (Pendry & Salvatore, 2015).

Some research has also found that online engagement in 'hyperlocal' neighbourhood based online networks such as Haringay Online enhances the sense of belonging, democratic influence, and neighbourliness in an area (Flouch & Harris, 2010). However, the

extent to which users of an internet platform engage will of course influence the types and level of support available to them (Ballantine & Stephenson, 2011).

Frequent engagement can also lead to shared values and a mutual awareness of both needs and capabilities, therefore providing greater understanding of when someone may need support.

Research conducted in Southwest Virginia found that networks of regular engagement, including on an everyday basis in the neighbourhood and as part of interest-based groups, were key to achieving socially supportive relationships (Brossoie, 2007). Therefore both the regularity and frequency of meetings between individuals is likely to have an impact on their relationship.

Children's Centres are also a place in which social capital can be incidentally accumulated. A study in Chicago found that through everyday engagement with a space, in this case childcare centres, people could build up networks of friendship and support (Small, 2010). The most important aspects to accidentally creating such social ties were related to a set and regular time frame in which parents could drop off their children, asking for parents to volunteer on field trips, and good connections with other organisations (Sethi, 2012).

It took about six months to build up the relationships and therefore gain access to resources (Small, 2010), thus highlighting the importance of ample amounts of time as a factor in creating social capital.

Good Gym is a not for profit organisation which originated in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets in 2010. Since then it has spread to other areas including Hackney, Liverpool, Camden, Lambeth and Bristol (Marsh, 2014).

It pairs up runners with less mobile people (called 'coaches') in their local area to bring newspapers, help with shopping, or even just to have a chat. Volunteers must sign up to run once a week for three months, and the average retention of runners is eight months - better than the retention rate for people who sign up to gyms (LGA, 2011). It supports local projects and also aims to work in collaboration with the NHS and local community centres (Marsh, 2014).

The Tower Hamlets pilot project found that experimentation and the use of the internet were key, as were being flexible and not worrying about slow progress. However, one major problem was the continuity of staff which was difficult with limited funding (LGA, 2011).

3. Personal characteristics

Satisfaction in interaction is key to the willingness of individuals to engage again (Buonfino & Hilder, 2006). Previous experience is therefore a fundamental part of social support, and platforms that take this into account may well be more successful than those that do not. Values can be a large part of this; for example some people may find the idea of asking for help, regardless of whether they need it or not, as inconceivable (Linders, 2009). This is true even of those who are ready and willing to help and support others.

One study found that there were gender differences between the types of support provided, with women more likely to both seek and provide emotional support (Wilkins & Kemple, 2011). Another study found that the nature of a relationship is also important; for example, mothers and daughters are more likely to talk about emotional issues than fathers and sons (Wellman & Wortley, 1990).

Commercial streets can also be places for social encounter. Key here is how accessible and walker-friendly streets are and the diversity of users. An example that relates to this is **marketplaces**. Research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation suggests that they are particularly important social spaces for mothers with young children, young people, and older people (Watson & Studdert, 2006).

After looking at eight different markets the researchers concluded that for markets to function as social spaces they need a diverse range of products that fit local needs/tastes, places in which people can linger, good access to the site (often via public transport) and good management by the local authority and local vendors.

Finally, the level of similarity between individuals was found to be significant as people who are similar often find it easier to be empathetic towards one another (ibid). In terms of informal care, it has been found that solidarity between those who are likeminded and are experiencing similar problems is commonplace (Linders, 2009). This has obvious links with bonding and bridging social capital, but also raises the question of whether platforms should focus on empathy between similar people or try and encourage commonality across difference. Similarity can of course be premised on a range of things as previously discussed, from shared spaces to shared interests and shared experiences.

Platforms for Incidental Social Support

All of the previously discussed factors relate to the quality of a relationship. The context (or platform) in which these relationships exist will also have an effect on both this quality and the quantity of relationships created too.

The literature suggests that there are a number of key factors in encouraging social interaction and socially supportive relationships - each of which are evident to varying degrees in the range of case studies already discussed.

These factors include:

- ▶ The need for a **shared space**
- ▶ A **catalyst** for engagement (often a shared interest, experience or personal characteristic)
- ▶ **Easy access** to the platform
- ▶ **Commitment** to the platform and a **willingness** to engage
- ▶ A sense of **mutuality**
- ▶ Regular and frequent engagement
- ▶ Feelings of **belonging**
- ▶ **Resources** (including financial, time or skills)

But which of these factors are the most important in encouraging incidentally supportive relationships to occur? And what types of platforms might be able to bring these important factors together?

All platforms exist on two continuums between formal and informal, and explicit and implicit. The formality of a platform mainly refers to its structure; for example, whether it has a specific membership structure. Explicit and implicit refer to whether a platform is purposefully trying to connect people. Examples of more formalised platforms explicitly aimed at social support include Good Gym and Casserole Club. Examples of informal platforms not necessarily aimed explicitly at social support include allotments and libraries.

Unfortunately there is sparse evidence on the *types* of relationships that such platforms encourage, beyond a basic suggestion of some form of social support. However, it is clear that many of them fit the aforementioned criteria of commonality, catalyst, initiator, belonging, commitment, and resources

1. Methodology

The fieldwork for this research was conducted between January and March 2015. It consisted of 10 interviews, most of which were conducted over the phone, and 4 short field visits.

The platforms that have been included in this report are:

- ▶ Two marketplaces (P02 & P07)
- ▶ Parental skills workshops hosted by a school (P04)
- ▶ A school gate (P05)
- ▶ A community choir (P06)
- ▶ A library (P09)
- ▶ A coffee shop (P10)
- ▶ A running club (P11)
- ▶ A community garden (P12)
- ▶ Talk to Me Today - a wristband scheme (P01)

The last platform is a bit of an outlier as it is explicitly aimed at connecting people, but in a very informal way. However, it does provide a useful example of an icebreaker, and potentially even a way to make unfriendly places friendlier, so has been included with the caveat that it is of a different order to the others.

Due to the nature of the platforms we were interested in researching and the scale of this project. We decided to examine several platforms within a specific area. One of the marketplaces (P02), the school gate, the library, the coffee shop and the community garden were therefore all located in a particular area of the London Borough of Newham. This was partly inspired by the street mapping exercises of the Below the Radar project (Soteri-Proctor, 2011), although no formal mapping exercise was undertaken and the project drew on the local knowledge of colleagues at Community Links. Even so, it was interesting to note how stories about building relationships and social support, and barriers to both, often overlapped between the platforms.

For each platform identified, a key individual engaged with it was asked to participate in the interview. Some of these people were those who organised or, in the case of the coffee shop, owned the platform. The majority, however, were just those who happened to engage with it. In this sense the sample was self-selecting as the people to whom we spoke were primarily those who had had a positive experience of the platform. This limits the research as barriers to participation in the platforms and formation of socially supportive relationships could not be explored in any great detail.

2. What characteristics do the platforms share?

This chapter looks at the reasons that participants had for engaging with their platforms and the benefits that were derived from participation.

Functional

Across all of the different platforms, there was unanimous agreement on one fundamental point: individuals primarily engaged due to functionality¹, whether it was picking up children from school, singing in a choir, or buying a cup of coffee. For example, in the case of the community garden², the notion of being able to grab a “*moment of peace and quiet, to escape the stress [of everyday life]*” (P12) was a powerful incentive to get involved.

Fulfilling

The primary purpose of engaging was therefore functional, but this resulted in a fulfilling payback. One clear benefit, explored in greater detail in the next chapter, was socialising. This alone has a range of **health benefits** which were recognised by many of the participants:

“We need to talk, we need to connect, and in talking we will solve our problems. In talking we will feel better.” (P01)

However, there were also other health benefits derived directly from the platform, in particular the physical and mental health benefits of gardening (P12), affordable and healthy food at the market (P07), and the ability of singing to reduce stress and increase wellbeing (P06).

Another benefit that people gained from participation was **a sense of belonging**, although whether this was an *outcome* of participation or more of a *facilitator* of ‘good relationships’ (explored further in chapter 6) is unclear. What is clear, however, is that this benefit is intrinsically linked with the friendliness of the platform, as illustrated by the running club member:

“...especially when you first go you do feel part of a group, and you’re proud of it... proud of running for a proper running club” (P11)

In many of the platforms there was also evidence of **skills and capacity building**, whether related to running a stall, fund-raising, gardening or running. In one case, a person managed to obtain employment through the social connections they had made at the marketplace (P02).

¹ Talk to Me Today (P01) is the only one that differs slightly on this point. Engagement was still ‘functional’, but that function was explicitly about connecting and socialising with others.

² The Community Garden in question is still waiting on signing the lease for the land, which has been a long drawn out process with the local authority. However, they have held several ‘clean-up’ events on the site.

Friendly

Whilst the primary purpose of engagement may have been functionality, the reason that people continued to engage with the platform was sociability - even if that was only *“in the back of [their] mind”* (P05).

One of the people who regularly used a local marketplace (P07) spoke of how she would rather go to the market than the corner shop when she runs out of ingredients, *“because there’s a fair chance [‘I’ll] bump into someone I know”*. This is particularly important on those days where she has not had the opportunity to do much socialising, and provides a far more fulfilling and friendly experience than merely buying food at the local corner shop. Later in the interview she contrasted the marketplace with the supermarket: *“by and large the number of times you meet someone you know there and you can stop for a chat are far less... it’s a more stressful experience”*, thus illustrating **the important divide between friendly and unfriendly functional spaces**.

Similarly, the running club participant (P11) told us how she only managed to make that crucial friendly connection with someone who lived in her local area by attending the running club. She argued that, whilst she had *“met her quite a few times”*, it was always at *“completely random places”* and so *“the friendship could never grow”*. However, because they ran together they are now really good friends, something that would not have happened otherwise.

The friendly nature of a platform was therefore integral to participants having a positive experience and it helped to cement the motivation of individuals continued engagement:

“The initial reason people go is to run, but often people will stay because of the people they meet... you form friendships... It might be a really cold night, and you’ll think: ‘do I really want to go?’ and you’ll end up going because of your friends.”
(P11)

Not everyone experiences the platforms in the same way, however. One participant contrasted her experience at the school gate with that of a friend who felt what she termed *“school gate pressure”* (P05). Perhaps this was due to the fact that her friend *“lives in a slightly more swanky area of London”* and as a result *“she considers her look before she goes to the school gate, and thinks about the clothes she’s wearing and how she might be looked at by other mums”*. Although it was not possible to explore this in much more detail, it does indicate that sometimes differences, in this case of income or certain cultural values, can lead to certain individuals or groups of people bonding to the exclusion of others. It also highlights the importance of comparing the same type of platform in different locations and through a variety of people’s experiences, as the person to whom we spoke found the idea school gates could be unwelcoming as *“extraordinary”*, largely because she doesn’t *“feel any of that at”*.

Notwithstanding the above, each platform provided an opportunity for people to connect with others whilst pursuing an interest, taking some ‘time out’ for leisure, or engaging in activities necessary for their day-to-day existence.

3. Why and how are the platforms valuable?

This chapter discusses the types of relationships that the platforms created, focussing particularly on the strength of ties and the extent to which they were supportive. Each of the platforms provided an opportunity for new social connections to be made to varying extents. Most of them also enabled people to either maintain already existing relationships, often created through living in the same locality, or strengthen new and old relationships alike.

Supporting each other

For Talk to Me Today, the only platform explicitly aimed at creating social connections, the mere act of connecting on a regular basis appeared to lead to a change in attitudes and behaviour:

“A friend of mine said... even now when she’s not wearing the wristband, she still has the wristband wearing mind-set.” (P01)

Others also spoke of this “*general sense of helpfulness*” (P07) instigated by engagement in the platform. There was a definite sense that each platform was “*a focal point for this kind of stuff*” (P12).

There was evidence of all four different types of support identified in the literature review (instrumental, informational, companionship and emotional), although sometimes the boundaries between discrete types were not clearly defined. As suggested by the literature review, weaker relationships tended to be limited to brief exchanges of information and small services, whereas stronger relationships often also provided longer term emotional support. However, as only one person from each platform was spoken to in any great detail, the extent to which this research can draw concrete conclusions about the causal link between the strength of a relationship and the type and quantity of support on offer is limited. In order to get a greater understanding, further research would need to do a thorough network analysis for each platform and speak to a wider range of people involved.

Instrumental

Instrumental support is the physical exchange of items, services and financial aid. Whilst most of the platforms appeared to lead to instrumental support in one form or another, it was predominately low-level services that were being exchanged and there was little to no evidence of financial aid. This doesn’t necessarily mean the latter did not exist, just that it could have been, as pointed out by one participant, a private exchange.

Much of the instrumental aid offered was around certain logistical challenges such as giving lifts to friends, providing a ladder for someone who had been locked out of their house, or getting their children to or from school:

“if someone is busy and can’t get children from school then they can ask their friends to come up and pick them up with their own children... we have parents who do that now, who will help one and other when one is not well, or whatever” (P04)

Another participant (P05) told us the story of how her third child fell ill with bronchiolitis when she was just five weeks old. As a result they had to spend a few days in hospital, and

she began to worry about the logistical challenge of getting her other two children to school. Thankfully she could “call on [the] support network” she had created and nurtured at the school gates, and someone stepped in to help her.

As both these stories illustrate, many instrumental exchanges were responding to a problem rather than promoting a positive opportunity. The one notable exception was a story of a man who got a job helping set-up and take-down a biodynamic fruit and vegetable stall, who ended up moving onto further training and spent several weeks on a biodynamic farm learning new skills.

Informational

Informational support was a mixture of responding to problems *and* offering support in the absence of adversity. One example of the former included information about someone who could provide childcare for a new mother:

“We had a customer [who] used to come in when she was pregnant and when her son was born she was looking for someone to be a nanny and the manager had a friend who was looking for a job... So she kind of linked them up together...” (P10)

This quote illustrates the importance of weak ties, providing what Granovetter (1983) called ‘a crucial bridge’ between two more densely knit networks. Without the weak connections made possible through the coffee shop, the pregnant customer may not have found a nanny as easily.

Another participant, this time from one of the marketplaces, told us how she learnt a new recipe from a spontaneous interaction at a fish stall:

“I was at a fish shop and a West Indian lady told me about stuffing mackerel with mushrooms, you know, so I sort of picked up a recipe there.” (P07)

Whilst this may seem like a small and inconsequential interaction, it highlights the importance of sharing information to bridge gaps between different communities and cultures. There were also examples of information about jobs and housing, one of which was a fusion of responding to crisis and suggesting opportunities:

“...or like a couple of people had rental problems, they were being evicted, so people were pitching in to help and say ‘have you looked here, have you looked there?’” (P06)

Emotional and companionship

Emotional support consists of kindness, empathy and love, and companionship is about not feeling lonely and having a sense of belonging. As with instrumental, specific instances of this appeared to be far more aligned with responding to a problem than enabling growth. For example, one participant argued that the group of people with whom she runs are very supportive when you have a problem, even going as far as saying “*sometimes... it’s a bit like a counselling service!*” (P11).

This general idea was mirrored elsewhere, particularly in terms of people proactively offering support when they think something is wrong. One participant (P05) felt confident that if she ever felt distressed others would notice and try to help her, citing specific examples where others *“have been in tears at the school gates because they’ve been having a difficult time”*. Their friends and acquaintances at the gates responded by offering support such as playdates with their child or just the opportunity to share their woes, thus highlighting how, even in seemingly small ways, strong social networks *“can rally around”* individuals in a time of need.

Another participant (P07) spoke about the importance of traders at the market in offering emotional support, arguing that:

“[The trader] is the sort of person who will talk to people about their problems and say something very sensible, you know, and I think some people feel better for getting it off their chest...” (P05)

Linked to this is the idea of a sort of ‘distance in closeness’ or a sense of anonymity in your problems; for example, the woman who attends a running club (P11) said that she took solace in the fact that she could discuss her problems with *“a different group of friends that don’t actually know your family and other friends, or people you work with”*. This was particularly re-assuring because they *“can discuss things and [know] it won’t go further”*. Possibly evident here, as argued in the literature review (White, 2009), is the right context providing the opportunity for support from an ‘outer circle’ of friends as opposed to close friends or family.

Multiple support for vulnerable people

Several participants also briefly discussed the idea of multiple forms of support co-existing for one or two individuals who were seen as particularly vulnerable. In one of the marketplaces this manifested as *“a bit of a duty of care”* for those *“who walk the market [and] have mental health problems”*. The traders encourage them to do *“odd errands... for a few bob”* and are looked after in a more general sense. This sometimes led to prolonged and large exchanges, such as the story of one trader who *“bought one of the guys a whole new set of clothing”* and *“also went down to see one of the guys on Christmas day, bought him a takeaway meal because he didn’t have anywhere else to go”* (P07).

Another example included the staff and some of the regular customers at the coffee shop (P10) noticing that another regular, who was *“borderline homeless”*, hadn’t *“come in for a couple of weeks”* and so they found *“out where he lived and went to see him”*. The respondent noted that this was possibly *“stepping over a line”* but ultimately the person in question was pleased to see them and be offered support.

Reciprocity and mutual aid

Reciprocity and mutual aid was often seen as an implicit, win-win exchange in which people invested time and effort to create a sense of the ‘good community’.

Many, for example, drew on the idea that it was a natural part of everyday life and linked this explicitly to the idea that people weren’t necessarily expecting anything in return:

“I guess that goes on to a certain extent in every part of life. You may not be purposefully looking for a trade-off for something... [but] it’s rare that people can act in a completely unselfish way.” (P12)

This very much ties into a “what goes around comes around sort of attitude” (P07), in which people might think, perhaps subconsciously, that “if I help you with this you’ll help me with that... although not necessarily here and now” (P01). Supporting each other is therefore also seen as a trade-off for a possible gain in the future, even if that is not a purposeful action and contractual agreement. It therefore is:

“not so much about expecting to have something back as it is just knowing that it’s physically hard keeping all the balls in the air... and that certain mind-set where you want to pay in, you want to do people favours knowing that it will maybe come back indirectly... It just contributes to an attitude that people do generally help each other, but we don’t keep score...” (P05).

4. What are the facilitators and barriers to the platforms' value?

A number of key facilitators and barriers to the formation and maintenance of socially supportive relationships emerged during the fieldwork. The facilitators, many of which were underpinned by trust, were:

- ▶ The permission to connect
- ▶ Regular, sustained engagement
- ▶ Commonality of interest or experience
- ▶ The importance of both physical and online spaces
- ▶ Some form of collaboration and co-operation
- ▶ Personal characteristics

And the key barriers to achieving this, bearing in mind neither list is exhaustive, were:

- ▶ Constrained resources (time, confidence, disposable income etc.)
- ▶ Personal characteristics
- ▶ Lack of trust

Facilitators

The permission to connect

Talk to Me Today, was primarily aimed at providing the opportunity for initial connections between individuals:

"It's a way of opening conversation. It might only be to say hi... in a café, in a supermarket, at work... and then life doesn't feel so lonely and so isolating." (P01)

All of the other platforms also provided this **permission to connect**. It was often suggested that people are reticent to be open about feeling lonely or wanting to make new social connections:

"Loads of people are lonely but no-one wants to admit to it, and people don't always know how to make the first step." (P01)

However, many of the platforms provided an antidote to this and stopped participants worrying about not having the permission to strike up a conversation with a stranger:

"I think that people generally want to talk to each other but, I think it's an issue that we have - worrying, 'I don't have permission to, or 'they might think I'm a bit strange'." (P09)

In this sense the platforms provided an icebreaker, allowing individuals to speak to each other about a shared interest or experience with no fear of reprisal - much like between dog-walkers in Harris' (2007) essay in the literature review. They are creating 'weak ties' - relationships that can be transitory, require very little effort to maintain, and do not tend to provide that much support – that can strengthen over time to provide something more.

At a very basic level, the functionality of the platform is what provides the permission to connect, but it is the friendliness of these connections that makes it a meaningful interaction that participants want to repeat in the future. Furthermore, although Talk to Me Today is of a different order to the other platforms, it is a useful example of how unfriendly functional spaces can be made friendlier.

Regular and sustained engagement

Several other platforms, in particular the two marketplaces, appeared to primarily be about maintaining relationships rather than creating or strengthening them. One participant argued that “you are more likely to see people you already know” (P07) and the other, at a different market, stating that it is “easier to develop friendships than start them” (P02). This is not to say that initial connections and subsequent strengthening cannot occur. However, as argued by one of the participants this would require a very set routine:

“...you need to be going to the same place at the same time... I have heard of women who are first at [trader’s] stall on a Thursday morning [who] gradually get to know each other, but I’ve never had that degree of regularity of shopping...” (P07)

The importance of regular and sustained engagement was mirrored in lots of other platforms; for example, the participant in charge of running parental skills workshops argued that “parents come to school every day, they drop off children, they pick up children... they are in school three or four times sometimes” and as a result often end up making good friends with other parents. Particularly important here, as evidenced by Small (2010) and suggested by the respondent from the school gates (P05), was the set time for dropping off and picking up children at the school gates.

It is the functionality of a space that enables this regular and sustained engagement to occur. Another participant (P09) explained how the library provided a space for people to “sit for free and read the newspaper”, this in itself doesn’t necessarily lead to connections but what does is the fact that “you see the same faces every day [and] there’s that opportunity to connect”. Therefore both “familiarity and regularity are very important”.

Commonality

At this point it is useful to think about the concept of ‘filters’: the first filter for meaningful engagement with a platform is its functional, fulfilling and friendly nature, as identified in chapter 4. However, the ability for that platform to ensure people feel comfortable is facilitated by commonality - either of interest or experience.

One good example of this was the coffee shop, which not only provided space for people to make that initial connection, but also additional activities and events that encouraged people to form stronger relationships:

“So I would hope that that would make relationships a possibility... for longer term relationships... it gives the opportunity to have shared interests and perhaps carry on a meeting after they’ve met during the activity.” (P10)

Commonality is therefore as important for developing relationships as it is for starting them. As previously mentioned, icebreakers provide that all-important first step for a relationship. Commonality goes deeper than being just an icebreaker, however, as it can bridge gaps

between diverse individuals and groups. Indeed, another participant contrasted her experience of the school gate with that of being on a train (in her eyes a functional yet unfriendly place):

“It brings together a diverse group of people, but you do have something in common. It’s not like standing next to someone on the train, you know you have a child in common and you have an institution in common.” (P05)

Perhaps the reluctance to engage with strangers on a train is linked to the assumption that you will have nothing in common with them and therefore the experience will be a negative one. However, a recent piece of research found that people misunderstand the consequences of connecting, however weakly, with others in such a situation. They mistakenly seek solitude because they assume that speaking to strangers will be a negative experience (Epley & Schroeder, 2014). This indicates that we assume others do not want to connect, when in fact “the pleasure of connection seems contagious” (ibid: 1).

Trust is integral to this, as pointed out by the respondent who was involved in running parental skills workshops. She argued that:

“... trust is very, very important because they really need that... I think that school is the safest place and opportunity for people to build trust with each other... when they find commonalities this helps build trust between them.” (P04)

This trust need not be the deep trust you might experience with a close friend or family member, but could merely be trust in the fact that the person to whom you speak is going to respond positively to that interaction. Again, this is why Talk to Me Today can make platforms friendlier and allow people to connect and find that commonality.

Physical and online spaces

The previous quote also highlights the importance of physical space. There are many aspects to this, one of which is the structure of said space. Again comparing their platform favourably with another that apparently doesn’t work quite so well, one participant suggested that the size of the space matters:

“It’s such a large library it’s not very conducive to building connections, to building community. Everything feels really distanced... People are closer together in smaller libraries so you’ve got more possibilities for interaction.” (P09)

Another participant’s arguments mirrored this when they spoke of the marketplace as a **‘permeable space’**:

“We’d seen another market... [where] you are kind of corralled, forced to go around in a certain way and certain direction. Whereas the way that [this market] works is you can criss-cross it, you know, your own way... You can wander across to stalls you want to go to or to someone you want to talk to.” (P07)

Both of these quotes highlight how the structure of physical space can increase the possibility for connection, but how did space in each of the platforms relate to maintaining or strengthening relationships? One participant mentioned the neutrality of some spaces - in

this particular case the school hall they hold the choir in: “I think in a way the school is good because... as an initial space I think it’s pretty neutral” (P06). We can then compare this with the intimacy of other spaces; for example, the pub that they go to after choir practice:

“[It’s] a 5 minute walk from the pub... that’s the place that allows us to get closer... it makes people more likely to stay involved.” (P06)

This “*explicit structure for socialising*” encourages more informal opportunities for people to develop their friendships and therefore illustrates the importance of thinking carefully about the space in which interaction occurs, and possible extensions to that space. Similarly, the fact that the coffee shop acts as a hub for events allows for people to engage at a level they feel comfortable with.

Another participant (P05) pondered the effect of structure on her engagement with the school gate, telling us of “*one school where you drop-off in a parking bay*”. This was something that she found perturbing as if that was the way in which her school gate was structured then “*it would entirely change how I felt about everything*”. Therefore having **space to linger** appears to be of the utmost importance, in the case of this research particularly for those platforms connected to schools as it allows “*for parents to come together... [to] then feel relaxed*” (P04).

Many of the platforms were also linked to related online spaces and used social networking tools to communicate with each other. In the case of the choir, email is used for formal communication but then “*there’s a lot of informal chat*” over Facebook, which “*is a very important tool*” (P06) for organising impromptu trips to the cinema and so forth.

Further research is needed on this point, particularly the importance of online and physical spaces for different groups and types of relationships. For some, online space is vital to staying in touch, but one participant said:

“I can’t imagine how I would try to set up the kind of support networks that you need, actually, without physically seeing people.” (P05)

Collaboration and co-operation

Although slightly less evident, a sense of co-operation or collaboration appeared to be important for developing stronger relationships. The act of doing “*lots of hard work together that they enjoy*” - in this case learning useful parenting skills - is a powerful one that helps to raise “*self-esteem and*” make “*sure people feel confident enough to find these friends and to help each other*” (P04)."

Mirroring this, the participant from the community choir argued that through the process of group singing “*you’re creating something, I think it’s a process of you make mistakes, you work on it together*” (P06) which is a way to fortify the connections that may have first been made by attending the choir.

Playing an **active role** is what helps to gel friendships and create a sense of community ownership, as pointed out by a member of the community garden:

“You can go to a park and it’s lovely, but somebody else has done it, you know... [with the community garden you can say] ‘that’s mine, I did that. I am part of this’ (P12).”

It is therefore important that participants not only feel as though they ‘belong’ to the community that is created by their platform, but that this feeling is strengthened through some sense of active ownership and collaboration. Arguably, all of the people to whom we spoke played an active role in their platform - again due to the self-selecting nature of the sample - and so this theme was implicit throughout many of the interviews.

However, further research could delve deeper into this issue by exploring how different people in the same platform may feel more or less of an active role and ownership over it. For example, it is notable that of all the platforms the marketplaces seemed to be the least about the incidental connections that this research is concerned with. Perhaps this is because the other spaces are primarily about production rather than consumption; even the coffee shop and the library - platforms where you might ‘consume’ coffee or a book - allowed for wider engagement beyond that act.

Personal characteristics

The final important factor, as identified in this research, is the role of certain individuals within the platform. To link back to chapter 4, it is important that they are friendly and encourage meaningful and fulfilling interaction. This was perhaps most evident in the parental skills workshops, as the practitioner who was involved played the role of facilitator:

“to let them know that they can share information with each other, and talk about each other’s problems... [then] they learn from each other and say they don’t feel like they are the only ones having that issue anymore.” (P04)

These key individuals play an integral role in organising the platform and motivating those who participate to continue doing so. It also has overlaps with the notion of the icebreaker as they can facilitate that initial connection between people. In this sense we can see how several factors combine to provide a catalyst for engagement.

In the marketplace, it was the traders who were key facilitators - particularly of social support which will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter. The participant drew a comparison between *“the poor harassed young women at supermarket till checkouts with huge queues and the constant beeping”* and the traders who are always *“very friendly”* and with whom people share *“their troubles”* to which he responds with *“some pretty wise things”* (P07), therefore illustrating once again the difference between friendly and unfriendly functional spaces,

Barriers

Although less explored in this project, and therefore a potential avenue for further research, a number of barriers to forming relationships were also identified. Barriers were less evident

due to the fact that the people we spoke to had, by and large, had positive experiences. They tended to be highly engaged with and committed to the activity. A way to overcome this limitation would be to do a place-based mapping exercise to speak to people in a local area who are not engaged with certain platforms and find out why.

The first barrier was a **lack of resources**, particularly finances and time. Most platforms spoke of the need for money or more participants to be able to continue and reach new people.

Secondly, whilst certain **personal characteristics** could be a boon for engagement, they could also be a barrier. This was particularly the case when people were exposed to people who were very different to themselves or if 'cliques' formed within platforms. A lack of confidence was also often mentioned as something that stopped people engaging.

Finally, a **lack of trust** was a problem for some of the platforms. Once again this was often due to differences between participants, but is by no means insurmountable as *"it [just] takes longer for them"* (P04) to form those initial bonds and begin to trust each other.

Conclusion

In the introduction we posed the question of whether platforms for incidental connection can go beyond being ‘just’ something fun to participate in to creating something of lasting value. It is clear from the people we spoke to that this is the case as, whilst individuals primarily engaged with their respective platforms due to its **functionality**, this initial engagement was solidified by the **fulfilling** and **friendly** nature of each platform. Participants soon found that they derived a range of wider benefits from engagement, including the creation and expansion of social networks.

In terms of the relationships created, they **ranged from casual acquaintances to long-term friends**. Many of these relationships were socially supportive, and there was evidence of instrumental, informational, emotional and companionship-based support. The support on offer was primarily about reacting to problems, but there were some examples of occasions in which support was offered in the absence of adversity. Many of the platforms seemed to have set boundaries with a definitive ‘in-group’ and ‘out-group’, but there was also some evidence of permeability amongst those platforms that were in the same area. Further questions therefore arise over the important balance between permeability and exclusivity in a certain geographical area or neighbourhood. Some sort of street mapping exercise in a number of different areas could yield useful information to answer these questions.

There were a set of facilitators and barriers to these socially supportive relationships being created. The facilitators ranged from something as simple as the permission to connect through to the actual structure of the space in which people engage. The barriers, less evident in this research due to the self-selecting nature of our sample, revolved around constrained resources and a lack of trust. What is less clear is how different platforms of the same type achieve the facilitators and mediate the barriers. To better understand this we need to compare and contrast several of the same type of platform and identify what works particularly well in certain contexts, and what does not.

Finally, the question of how we can activate ‘cold’ social networks that may well already exist in certain places remains. This could be as simple as tweaking the built environment of a platform; for example putting a set of picnic tables near a children’s playground at the school gates to allow both parents and children to linger and socialise. It could also relate to local economic development, the library featured in this research has decided to install a coffee making service to indicate that it is a space to linger also and has put the tender out to local businesses first. Further research is also needed to ascertain how we can encourage these platforms to flourish without negating their incidental essence. Ultimately this report offers some tentative answers to some of these important questions, but more research is needed to understand their implications fully.

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