HOW COULD WE TRANSFORM EATING ALONE INTO MORE OF A SOCIAL EXPERIENCE?

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HOW COULD WE TRANSFORM EATING ALONE INTO MORE OF A SOCIAL EXPERIENCE?

RAN JING
COLLABORATIVE DESIGN 2017
SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY
Studies have revealed that living alone and eating alone lead to negative psychological impacts on older adults such as feeling of loneliness, and nutrition problems such as apathy about the food and decreases in food consumption. I am studying the behavior of elders’ toward food by comparing their behavior while eating alone vs eating in groups. Elders living alone in an independent housing facility were interviewed and four of them completed surveys on food choice, dietary patterns and food related activities. Research results have shown that elders are less motivated to embrace food activities when they eat alone. I want to explore how we might transform eating alone into more of a social experience in order to motivate elders to be more interested in meals and enhance their food intake. Based on the results from the research, I designed an elder-friendly application for elders to find companionship while having meals. My goal is to help elders participate in meaningful and satisfying activities involving food and thereby construct a better quality of later life.
HOW COULD WE TRANSFORM EATING ALONE INTO MORE OF A SOCIAL EXPERIENCE?

by

Ran Jing

B.E., Beijing Normal University, Zhuhai, 2014

Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Collaborative Design

Syracuse University
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANALYSIS &amp; SYNTHESIS</td>
<td>3-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INITIAL IDEA</td>
<td>9-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRIMARY RESEARCH</td>
<td>13-20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DESIGN THINKING</td>
<td>21-26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FINAL DESIGN</td>
<td>27-34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USABILITY TESTING</td>
<td>35-38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUMMARY</td>
<td>49-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCE</td>
<td>41-42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

According to the National Institute on Aging, an estimated 19 percent of men and around 37 percent of women over 65 lived alone in 2013. This is a number that has risen steadily in the last 40 years (Yagana). Elders are more likely to eat alone because of living alone (Torres 564-565). Living and eating alone impacts both the psychological and physiological aspects of elder living. Eating alone leads to the feeling of loneliness (Bofill 396-397), increases the risk of depression (Kimura 728), causes weight loss and decreases of appetite and enjoyment of meals (Shahar 186), and also leads to nutritional deficiency (Wham and Bowden 223).

“Successful aging” and “living well in later life” represent the concept of wellness from more than just a physical standpoint. Research has shown that participating in meaningful and satisfying activities involving food help contribute to the quality of elders’ lives (Wistow et al.). However, eating alone impairs the quality of an elder’s life. An additional study conducted by F.O.C.U.S. Greater Syracuse shows that 90% of elders described their preference to age in place. Poor participation in food activities is one factor of preventing elderly from staying in their own homes (Fausset 125-139). This indicates that by changing the situation and pattern of unhealthy eating behaviors when eating alone could potentially help elders to improve their quality of their life and achieve their desire of ‘aging in place’.

Additionally, less motivation in meals due to eating alone is not only seen among the elderly, it is also commonly accruing among different age groups. Based on a study conducted in the United States in 2008, children eating alone ate less than children eating with their siblings (Salvy et al. 514-518). This result indicates that less interest in food activities associated with eating alone exists in a broad range of groups. This situation in turn requires further attention to explore creative solutions to this growing problem.

In this study, I mainly focused on elders who develop inappropriate eating habits due to living and eating alone. By studying elderly’s eating behaviors and comparing them with elders eating in groups, I want to explore how we might transform eating alone into more of a social experience in order to motivate elders to be more interested in food activities. In this book, I will explain the process of analysis and synthesis of the topic, my research method and findings, the designing process, testing of my design intervention and reflection on my proposed intervention.
ANALYSIS & SYNTHESIS

Framing of the thesis statement.
When starting the project, three words came to my mind ‘Accommodation’, ‘Social’ and ‘Monitor’. I phrased them into three questions:

1. How could we better accommodate the elderly?
2. How could we encourage them to be more social?
3. What does it mean to monitor?

I started the broad conversations with experts from F.O.C.U.S Great Syracuse; Professor Deborah Monahan, who is a professor of Social Work at Syracuse University; and Deborah Market, who was senior activity coordinator of Francisco Eastwood Community Center; along with researching of reading/online materials. I then developed these three questions into 10 directions:

1. Residential Care
2. Independence Housing
3. Aging in Place
4. Others (Green House Movement, Village Concept, etc)
5. How could people maintain independence when they no longer can drive?
6. How to create social opportunities for elders through the Internet?
7. How to create social interactions by multigenerational activities?
8. How to monitor elderly in a more acceptable way?
9. How to monitor elderly in an easier way? (For those monitoring)
10. How do people check with elderly who live alone at home more efficiently?

During my research and conversations, the term “aging in place” was brought up many times. “Aging in place” means the elderly live in one’s own home and community safely, independently, and comfortably as the opposed to moving to a facility care setting (Mynatt et al. 65). According to the data from F.O.C.U.S Greater Syracuse, 90% of older adults prefer aging in place, what prevents them from doing that?

I interviewed elders at the Oaks, an independent living facility, about the reason they left their house and moved there. They described various reasons such as can’t manage the house maintenance anymore; simple tasks such as eating and bathing might be challenging; and more complex tasks such as grocery shopping, cooking and performing housework are difficult. They also expressed their needs to participate in social activities as a reason to move. Factors as declining health condition, physical environment barriers (lack of adequate transportation, poor home design, shopping & doctors not within short distances), less grocery shopping (Johansson et al. 49-66), difficulties in cooking, eating and house maintenance (Fausset 125-139), feelings of loneliness (Zehauker 773-778) all prevent older adults from aging in place.

Food related activities are the fundamental elements for “successful aging” and “good quality of later life”. The definition of the food activities in this book is any task, action, experiences that involve food. During conversations with elders and experts, I noticed many problems around food and kitchen tasks that prevent elders aging in place, for instance, the safety issues for elders to cook and use stoves in the kitchen, security of food (has the food in the refrigerator gone bad), elders’ diminished motivations to eat so they don’t meet their nutritious needs, etc. When I interviewed with Judith Huober, the director of Menorah Park, where the Oaks resides, I was aiming to consult about the Meals on Wheels program, an elders food delivery program, and we ended up discussing the topics above. She encouraged me to look into the declining of motivation in food activities among elders, because she saw elders at her facilities faced with this problem and as a researcher, she hadn’t seen many related studies. At this point, I formulated question in my mind as: How could we motivate seniors to be more interested in preparing for meals and increase their appetite to eat?

Elders’ appetite toward food decreases with the aging process. Research has shown that besides the consequences of gradually losing the appetite due to the normal aging process, psychological factors as bereavement and loss, poor cooking skills and less social eating opportunities all diminish elders’ food intake and dietary quality (Hughes et al. 270). Living alone and eating alone further exacerbates this problem.
“To eat alone is the saddest thing in the world,” said Ramon, a widower lived alone in the flat he shared with his wife for more than 50 years. (Bofill 387) Being forced to eat alone makes the loneliness more obvious, especially when losing significant others. Mealtime intensifies loneliness felt by elders, and eating sometimes remind of memories from happily old days. Feeling loneliness because of lacking communications during the meal might cause depressions to the elderly. (Kimura 730) Losing interests in food activities in some cases is a requiring of social interactions from families and friends (Bofill 389), and study revealed that elderly’s food intake increased 60% when inviting them to have meals with familiar others (McAlpine et al. 2003). Communications with families associates with good appetite (Okamoto). In a study of the relationship between food and social status, Gustafsson and Sidenvall (164-173) found that elderly described meals eaten with others as pleasurable, while elderly live alone viewed food as a necessity.

Besides the psychological impact of feeling the loneliness and depression, eating alone causes elderly additional risks for nutritional deficiency. Lower knowledge level of nutrition is reported among people aged over 65, particularly single, separated, divorced or widowed individuals rather than couples (Wham and Bowden 223). Researches have also indicated that eating without company significantly impacts the nutritional practice. Statistics shows that 42.6% among participated widowed men and women living alone were not meeting their daily nutritional needs, while 21.3% showed evidence of malnutrition (Ferry et al. 261-268). Older adults who live alone are less likely to cook for themselves and are probably less motivated to eat (Wham and Bowden 221). Surveys of elders living at independent living facilities demonstrate that older adults who live alone or eat alone have less food intake and have higher risk of being in poor nutritional status (Brownie 115). Another research article about identifying factors of nutrition risk of older adults suggested that one of the most common nutrition risk factors was frequently eating alone, along with a low consumption of meat, lack of interest in the meal preparations and perception of the individual’s, such as light or heavy (Wham and Bowden 223). Eating alone also causes weight loss and decreases of appetite and enjoyment of meals (Shahar 186).

These findings suggest that eating alone has negative impacts both on nutritional and physiological aspects of older adults. Therefore, I rephrased my thesis question to be: how might we transform eating alone into more of a social experience in order to motivate elders to be more interested in food activities and to enhance their appetite to eat?
INITIAL IDEA

Starting point of the design.
Though the process of talking with the experts and elders, several ideas came to mind. One idea was designing an interactive cooking game on the iPad or computer for the elderly that mimics real cooking, including popular menus and healthy food options, provides a sharing forum, supports video chat with friends & family members, and provides opportunities for multi-generational interaction.

After the elderly finish the dish in the game, someone will deliver the dish he/she just made to their front door.

The cooking game brings fun elements to the food activities that might add elderly’s interests in the coming meal. Besides, this food delivery service provides a daily social touch point for the elderly and also monitors their conditions in an unnoticeable way.

I brought this idea to the Oaks, and asked for feedback from the residents and the staff in the facility. They thought this idea was interesting, but there were several concerns:

- Elders who live in the rural area may not be able to reach it.
- Cost (usually food delivery is pricy), could elders afford it?
- Choices/taste of the food may not be able to satisfy every user.

However, they seemed to like the idea of video chatting with friends and families while participating in the food activities.

I asked elders at the Oaks about whether they had ever used video chat applications such as Skype and FaceTime. Some elders had but some hadn’t. A lady aged 83, who has never used Skype and FaceTime, told me that she didn’t know whom to contact. Her husband is alive but he has dementia and lives in another facility, he sometimes even doesn’t remember who she is. She has children but they get on with their own lives, are busy with their work, and they don’t have time caring for her. She has very few frequently contacted friends or relatives.

I start to think about helping elders in similar situations find new friends, which could also be a promising direction that I could dive into. A thought came to my mind that what about inviting strangers to cook or have a meal together?
PRIMARY RESEARCH

Interviews, surveys and cultural probes conducting at the Oaks.
In order to get a deeper understanding of the problem, I designed a research methodology, which is aimed at comparing eating activities by elderly when they eat alone vs. eating with others, and to know:

1) Do elders eat appropriately when they eat alone?
2) Where do elders obtain the food when they eat alone and when they eat with others?
3) Why are elders more willing to eat when they eat with others?
4) What kind of preparations do elders do when they eat alone vs. eating with others?
5) What food related activities might be helpful to people when they eat alone?

My hypothesis would be that elders are less motivated to embrace food activities and possibly eat inappropriately (insufficient amount of food, lack of nutrition, not on time) when they eat alone. Further, when eating alone, they don’t make preparations for cooking and eating, whereas they might cook, set the table and dress up when they eat with others. When elders eat alone, they might also engage in activities such as watch television, read a newspaper, play games like crossword puzzles, talk on the phone, or work on their laptop while they might mainly ‘chat and eat’ when they dine with others.

**IRB Authorization**

IRB, an institutional review board, is a type of committee used in research in the United States that has been formally designated to approve, monitor, and review biomedical and behavioral research involving human. They often conduct some form of risk-benefit analysis in an attempt to determine whether or not research should be completed. The purpose of the IRB is to assure that appropriate steps are taken to protect the rights and welfare of human participating as subjects in a research study.

As my research involved studying human behaviors, it was required to apply for the IRB approval before starting the research. Therefore, I submitted my application for IRB on January 30th and got the authorization on February 6th.

After receiving the IRB authorization, I started my research at the Oaks.

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**The Recruitment Process**

I made an agreement with the director at Menorah Park and she approved me to conduct research at the Oaks. There are 52 residents at Oaks, and 95% of them live alone at their apartments.

Firstly, I created the labels on the package envelope. After the discussion with the director, I decided to put the logo of the Menorah Park on the envelope so that the residents at the Oaks would feel secure about what was inside the envelopes. I also created a label of Judith’s information and mine as well as a label with the recipient “Resident at the Oaks”. I prepared 52 copies of the recruitment letters, consent forms and return envelope in these envelopes. I brought them to the front desk at the Oaks, and the staff there helped me deliver the letters to residents’ mailboxes. If they would like to participate, they returned consent in the return envelope and bring it to the front desk to turn into a box with my name on it.
I designed two cards and an additional date card for the elderly to record their food activities. The orange one is for the elderly when they eat alone, the blue one is for them when they eat with others.

To begin the research process, each participant will be given a package containing the following:

1. A one-time use camera
2. 21 orange cards with survey questions regarding meals they eat alone
3. 21 blue cards with survey questions regarding the meals they eat with others
4. 7 days’ worth of index cards pre-labeled with date and meal name
5. Large envelope for final delivery of surveys and camera

For each meal, participants will be asked to take a photo of their food before and after eating, with the date label card visible in the photo, and then answer the 6-7 simple questions on the card that corresponds to whether they ate alone or with others.

A week after sending out the recruitment letters, I received four responses indicating a willingness to participate in my research. I placed research cards, date cards, and camera in large envelope and put a number both on the envelope and the camera, and then delivered the envelopes to the participants.
More orange cards were used than the blue cards indicates that the participants had more time eating alone than in groups. Elders were less motivated to embrace food activities and ate inappropriately when eating alone, showing in the research as insufficient intake of food, skipped meals, repeatable food choices. Home cooked and food delivery were two main ways for elders to eat alone, whereas eating in restaurants, dinning rooms, cafes were majority of the meals elderly have when eating in groups. Elders ate alone while watching TV, whereas they socialized, communicated with others when ate in groups.

The research results are close to my assumptions, indicating that socially interactions is a factor that causes different level of motivation to embrace the food activities.

When participants finished with their week, they sealed their surveys and camera into the large envelope provided and brought it to the front desk, where I picked it up. Research results are as followings:

1. More orange cards were used than blue cards.
2. From the research, the mood level of the participants was all reported as the average when they eat in groups, whereas 8% of the meals they ate alone were reported as lower than average of the mood level.
3. Skipping lunch appeared when eating alone and the lady recorded the reason as she didn’t feel hungry.
4. Among the meals that participants eat alone, 58.3% were home cooked, 33.3% were left overs and 8.3% were food delivery from the dinning room. All the cooking involved simple tasks such as toasting bread, making coffee, and warming up leftovers.
5. Among the meals that participates ate in groups, 10% were home cooked, 10% were in the restaurant and 80% were in the dinning room.
6. When participates ate alone, they had simple and similar food each meal. Whereas they had more food options when they eat with others, they had soup, vegetables, different entrees, dessert and glass of wine.
7. 33.3% of researched meals eating alone were with no preparation for the eating process, 66.7% of the meals that participants set up the table. 57% of the meals eating with others participants dressed up.
8. All participants reported that they ate alone while watching TV, whereas they socialized, communicated with others when they ate in groups.

Analysis of The Results:

Low response rate: Residents at the oaks learned my research probe though the printed letters I put in their mail boxes. The written instruction of the research possibly increases residents’ feelings of complications toward my research, which might be a main reason to the low response rate. I went to the Oaks twice for recruiting participants through verbal explanations, but few elders showed up due to a flu influence. However, the verbal recruiting had a better outcome, two out of eight expressed as willing to participate my research. Therefore, I believe that collaborate with the director and ask for showing up on events and meet ups among the residents and verbally recruiting would be more effective.

Another reason for the low response rate might be the complexity of the research probe itself. The task for the participants was quite burdensome. The research
took 7 days and the participants were asked to complete 21 cards in total during this period. A resident aged 102 replied to me that he found my research very interesting but he didn’t have the patience to complete the research. Besides, competing the task and using cameras seems to be impossible for some elders, who have difficulties in eating (for instance, hand tremors) or need caregivers’ assistance to eat. To many elders at the Oaks, they also expressed their worries as they would forget to take photos or fill out the cards or forget how to use the cameras. In order to improve the research, I’m considering about either reduce the research period or reduce the record of the meals each day. For instance, either the participants record three meals a day for 3 days or they can only record dinner each day for 7 days. For elders who found using camera challenging or troublesome, ask them to write notes describing the meal and the amount they ate as a diary instead of using the camera would be a better idea.

Independence living facility setting: This research was conducted in an independence living facility, therefore the answers might vary from elders that live in their own homes and other facility care settings. The Oaks has a social setting for eating. Breakfasts and dinners are included in the housing fee at the Oaks, whereas lunches are not. Although these factors might have influence on the outcome of the research, because of the difficulties to access elders living at their homes, I still believe this research has value to study this important problem.
DESIGN THINKING

Asking experts from Aging Studies Institute and related fields for feedback about my project.
Along with the research and the design process, my program held a brown bag lunch for students showing research efforts and design concepts, and asking the audience from Aging Studies Institute and experts from related fields for feedbacks about our projects. My main purpose for this event was to gain input from the audience about developing design ideas.

For the presentation, I made two posters, showing the introduction of my project and graphics of the process of my research, IRB authorization, research card samples, instant camera samples, a laptop showing my website, reading materials, my design ideas (three design concepts) on the table, and a private space for the audience to experience chatting with a stranger, in order to attract attention during the event, and it was a good way for me to get some reflections about what people feel when they eat with strangers; do they enjoy the experience and do they think it is a promising direction to dive into.

Design Thinking

The three design ideas I was showing were:

1. Cooking game with the food delivery service
2. Video chat with friends and families while participating in food activities
3. Inviting participants to eat with strangers

From the audience’s feedbacks, most people didn’t think the food delivery idea was practical, considering about the cost and the difficulties to deliver food in rural areas. Considering about the practical of this idea, I decided to move on to other directions.
Many people thought the video chat with friends and families had much more potential. During the conversations, we talked about recorded video of family members/friends instead of real-time video chat sent to the elders as messages, so that the family members and friends could record the video when they have time. This inspired me that video could be a feature included in the design.

People seemed to like the idea of having a video chat with strangers, but the only concern was the security issue. There was a comment on my board that “How can you ensure that strangers will not exploit the elders?” Several audience commented about the same question during the event. During the conversations with the audience, an idea came up to mind: could there be a job for the person talking to the elders? If the person sitting at the other end of the Skype window is a professional employee, the risk of talking with them could be minimum. Besides, this reminds me of the co-housing concept that college students share the house with elders, and the students take care of the elders and get free housing. It’s a win-win situation. Janet Wilmoth suggested the elderly volunteers could also be a solution for this problem.

Professionals and elderly volunteers both seemed like promising development of the idea. However, I was still planning to let only users sit at both ends of the chat window. In this way, the elderly could find others in the similar situation as them and actually make friends, so the design is able to benefit more people.

For the security concern, using identity verification for every user could be a way to prevent bad things happening to the elderly.

“How will you reach people without an iPad or computer?”

This was another question that frequently asked during the brown bag lunch event.

From my primary research, all the participants reported watching television while eating alone gave me an idea to the question.

Television is a non-threatening device that almost every older adult owns and is already comfortable with. Besides, larger screens are easier to read for elder’s, instead of small texts and icons on the mobile devices.
An elder-friendly application that helps elders, who eat alone, find another person to enjoy the meal with.
Mealmates is an elder-friendly application that helps elders, who eat alone, find another person to enjoy the meal with, in order to motivate elders to be more interested in food activities.

The application is designed to be a simple experience for elders to use, bringing the companionship from families and friends and creating opportunities for elders to meet with new people.

There will be a camera coming along with the application for television users. The setup process will be simple and only needed for the first time use.
This design solution is focused on elders who mostly eat alone, are eager to change this situation, willing to get to know new people and comfortable with technology. This is a self selecting service.

**Design Rationale**

As people age, their eyes also undergo changes. The lens begins to yellow and darken, and the pupils shrink in size. This yellowing also “absorb” more of the blue light entering the eyes, which means the environment looks much yellow to elders than to young individuals. Older adults prefer cool tone blues, pinks and greens. (Christenson 3-6) During my observation at the Oaks, females often wear pink sweaters and T-shirts, and they told me the color pink is their favorite color. Based on these findings, I chose the bright pink as the main color for the interface.

“Designing interfaces for the elderly is more than just making fonts larger and increasing contrast.” Said Abigail McClung. No one is willing to be reminded of their age, the elderly are no exception. Instead of larger fonts, I used pictures, which are larger and easier to recognize for the elderly and are universally designed for people at different age group. I was trying to make the interface attractive, simple and stylish.

**Responsive Design**

The application is responsive to televisions, computers, tablets and phones. Younger generations could find the devices they are most willing to use. For example, grandchildren are able to use mobile devices to visually eat with grandmother instead of sitting in front of the television. The elderly also have more options to choose from based on their own preferences.

**Design Goals:**

First design goal is to bring the companionship from others and make the eating process more appealing and enjoyable to elders and create opportunities for elders to meet new people at the same time. My hope is that this virtual form of social interaction could improve the tough situations these elders experience on a daily basis.

Secondly, this application may provides caregivers a way to check in with elders living alone. It gives a reason to open a conversation about other issues and concerns in elders’ life and caregivers could also monitor elders’ mood and health condition by visually see them and gauge by elders’ willingness to talk and eat.
Exhibition in the 914 Works Gallery
April–May, 2017

Interacted with the audience
USABILITY TESTING

Identifying any usability problems, collecting quantitative data on participants' performance, as well as determine user satisfaction with the design.
In the exhibition, I put an iPad, with the Mealmates application installed, on the wall for audience to interact with. I also brought the design to the Oaks for usability testing. The participants were asked to speak out loud about their thoughts while using the application.

A lady aged over 80 mentioned that she was not comfortable with giving her SSN or driver license for verifying identification. She suggested using fingerprint for verification and mentioned fingerprint was easier to log in the application as well.

Three participants mentioned they were afraid to disturb the family members or friends. Some family members were not frequently contacted, the participants would like to make sure whether the contacts were willing to be invited for the meal first. They suggested it would be better if there could be a sign showing the contacts’ willingness for visually eating together.

One lady from the exhibition said she liked the format of video introduction for getting to know new contacts. An elder from the Oaks told me that she liked the using of the television for video chat, because she couldn’t see clearly on the iPad when her granddaughter tried to teach her how to use Skype.

The committee members commented that depending on when people elect to eat, this may narrow the choice of who elders be able to chat with. Therefore, adding a time frame on the interface would be a good idea.

Another idea was considering about collaborating Mealmates with programs as meals on wheels or blue apron. Receiving same meals could also be part of the sharing experience.
Eating alone negatively affects the elderly including both psychological and physical aspects such as feeling of loneliness, suffering from depression, losing weight, insufficient food consumption, lacking of nutrition, etc. My proposed design intervention ‘Mealmates’ could increase various forms of social interactions by virtually bringing the companionship of friends and family members to the elderly as well as creating opportunities for seniors to meet new people. Although this design won’t change the fact that many elders physically eat alone, my hope is that this virtual form of social interaction could improve the tough situations these elders experience on a daily basis. My further hope is that Mealmates will help to decrease physical and mental problems by motivating elders to eat with others.
DESIGN COLLABORATIONS

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Deborah Monahan
A professor of Social Work at Syracuse University

Nov. 2016
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Jeanne Diederich
IRB Administrator

Feb. 2016
Judith Huober
The director of Menorah Park

Mar. 2016
Patricia McGregor
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