

Urban Connection:

Fostering Community through
Online Platforms for Social Well-being



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of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Design in Inclusive Design

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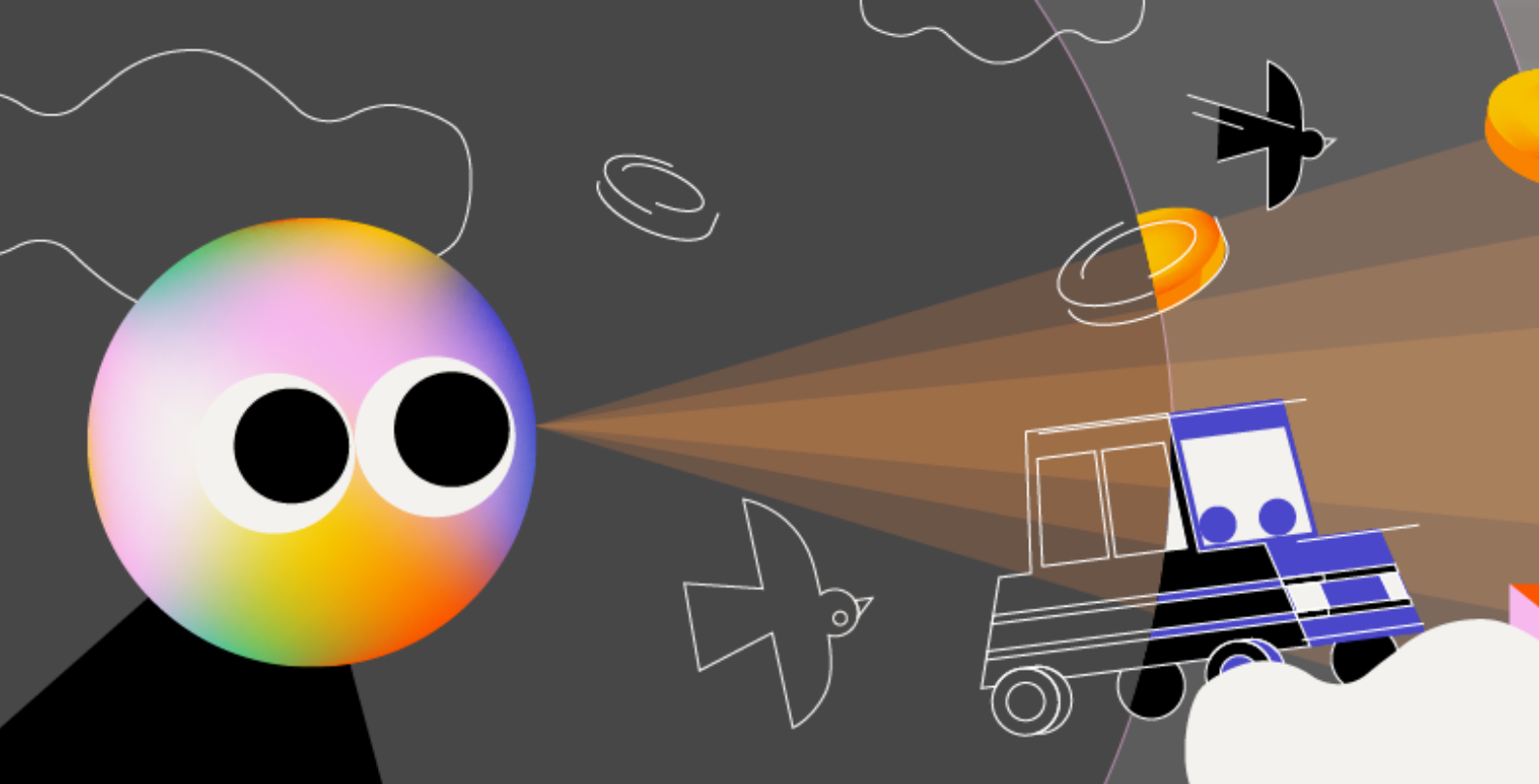
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Abstract:

This research focuses on the experiences of newcomers in Toronto, a city known for its cultural diversity. Approximately 46.6% of the Toronto Census Metropolitan Area's population comprises immigrants, yet meaningful interactions among residents are constrained. The Toronto Foundation's 2023 report indicates alarming loneliness rates, contributing to the emergence of an asocial society with associated health risks. While scholarly discussions on urban design's impact on community and social well-being are prevalent, this research seeks to move beyond discourse and actively contribute to city changes. Embracing principles of civil society, it recognizes that authentic civil society and democracy necessitate civic learning.

By studying newcomers, the research aims to explore factors influencing their integration, understand their experiences, and evaluate the role of online social platforms in fostering societal involvement. Through a multifaceted approach, it aspires to contribute insights that enhance the sense of community and social well-being in Toronto.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I acknowledge the land we are meeting on is the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. We also acknowledge that Toronto is covered by Treaty 13 with the Mississaugas of the Credit.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

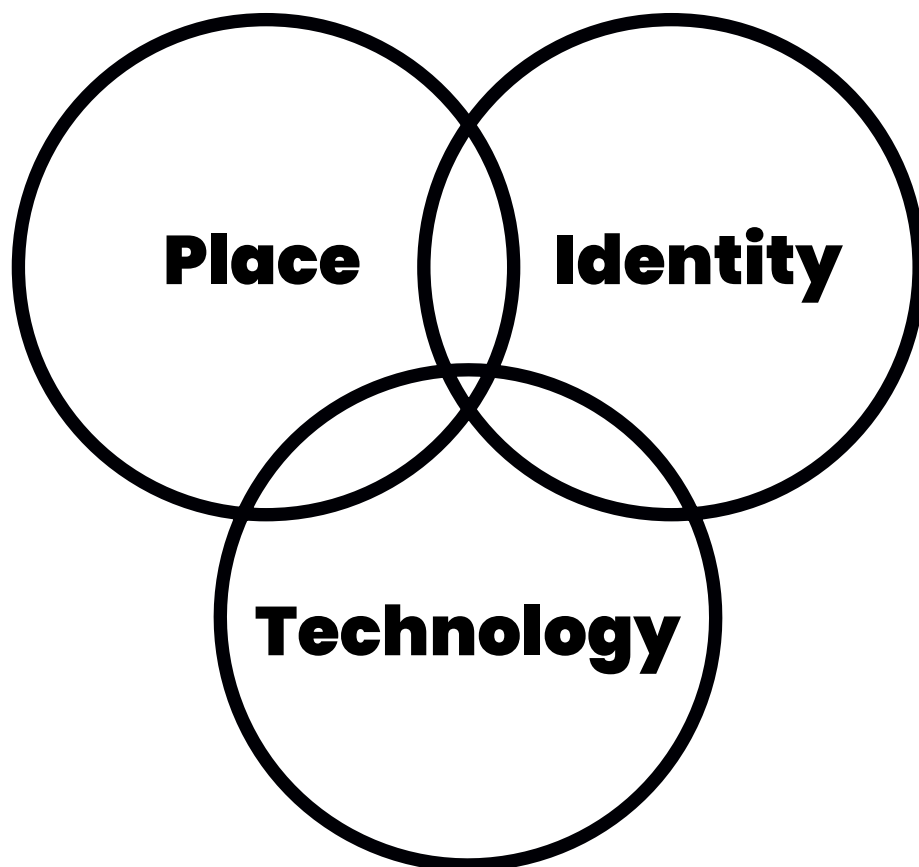
Toronto, a city celebrated for its cultural richness and diversity, is a significant hub for immigration in Canada, with 46.6% of its population being foreign-born (Statistics Canada, 2021). As of July 1, 2024, the Toronto Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) reached a population of 7,106,379, marking a 3.9% increase from the previous year, primarily due to international migration (Statistics Canada, 2024). While immigrants continue to shape the city's identity, they face significant barriers to integration, with approximately 37% of Toronto adults reporting feelings of loneliness at least three to four days a week—28% higher than the national average (Now Toronto, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic and the increasing reliance on digital technology have further intensified social isolation, contributing to what some describe as an asocial society—a phenomenon linked to serious health risks such as dementia, heart disease, stroke, and premature death (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).

In this context, social well-being, defined as individuals' appraisal of the quality of their relationships with others, their sense of belonging, and their engagement in social structures and communities, becomes a critical component of urban resilience (Keyes, 1998). It includes positive social functioning, a sense of integration, contribu-

tion to society, and the belief that one's life is meaningful within a social context.

It is important to recognize that individual and collective actions shape social well-being. As social media platforms become deeply integrated into everyday life, their role in shaping social connections is expanding. By 2025, global social media users are projected to reach 5.42 billion (Agorapulse, 2024). However, while digital spaces offer opportunities for engagement, they also present challenges in fostering meaningful community interactions.

This research investigates how online social platforms can enhance community-building among Toronto's young adult newcomers (ages 18–44). It explores the concept of digital third spaces, online environments that may compensate for the decline of physical third places like cafés, community centers, and public gathering spaces. By analyzing the effectiveness of these platforms, this study aims to identify design solutions that **encourage authentic engagement, social well-being, and a stronger sense of belonging for urban newcomers.**



Keywords

Socialize, Sense of Community, Online Social Platform, community engagement, community participation, newcomer, Co-design, inclusivity, digital third space.

Chapter 2

Project Background



2.1 The Rise of the Asocial Society

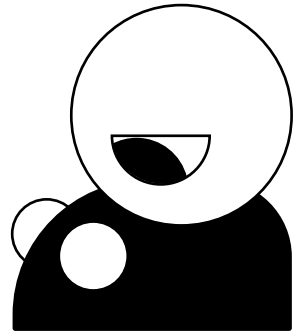
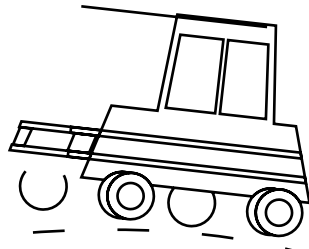
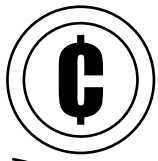
The emerging asocial society is one of the 16 global challenges identified by Policy Horizons Canada (2018), driven by individualization, changing work structures, technology dependence, and a decline in social skills. While technology facilitates instant communication, it also reduces spontaneous, in-person interactions, contributing to weakened social ties. This shift has profound societal and health implications, including a rise in mental health issues, reduced civic engagement, and increased social fragmentation (Policy Horizons Canada, 2018).

In the next 10–15 years, the need for technology to facilitate human connection will increase. Digital platforms like Meetup and Bumble have gained popularity as tools that encourage social interactions, highlighting a societal shift towards using technology to bridge social gaps. These findings underscore the increasing need for technology to facilitate human connection, particularly as traditional social structures continue to evolve. As digital spaces become more central to daily life, understanding how they can foster meaningful

community engagement, rather than merely replacing physical interactions, becomes critical.

This study examines whether digital third spaces can reduce key factors contributing to asociality:

- **Technology-Driven Social Isolation:**
Increased digital engagement often replaces physical interaction.
- **Urbanization & Transience:**
High mobility and temporary living arrangements reduce long-term community ties.
- **Declining Civic Engagement:**
Fewer people participate in local events, voting, or community organizations.



2.2 Social Isolation in Toronto and Its Impact on Newcomers

Toronto's social landscape is shifting, with residents reporting lower civic engagement and increasing loneliness (Toronto Foundation, 2023). Factors such as transit inaccessibility, high living costs, and urban anonymity make building community bonds difficult.

Newcomers, defined as individuals who have lived in Canada for five years or less, experience these challenges more acutely. According to Mental Health Research Canada (2023), 26% of newcomers reported experiencing anxiety, compared to 22% of non-newcomers. 20% of newcomers experienced depression, compared to 14% of non-newcomers. Many newcomers struggle to navigate city resources due to language barriers and digital inaccessibility (Toronto Newcomer Strategy 2022-2026). While the City of Toronto recognizes these challenges and provides interpretation services, its limited resources and bureaucratic inefficiencies hinder effective support. Many newcomers avoid municipal services out of fear of deportation or systemic barriers. This led to whether digital platforms could fill this gap by providing newcomers with alternative ways to connect, integrate, and build social trust

2.3 The Role of Urban Design and Social Infrastructure

Social infrastructure refers to physical spaces and organizations facilitating human interaction (Klinenberg, 2018). These include Public spaces (parks, libraries, community centers). Commercial third places (cafés, barbershops, bookstores). Civic hubs (museums, cultural centers, public squares).

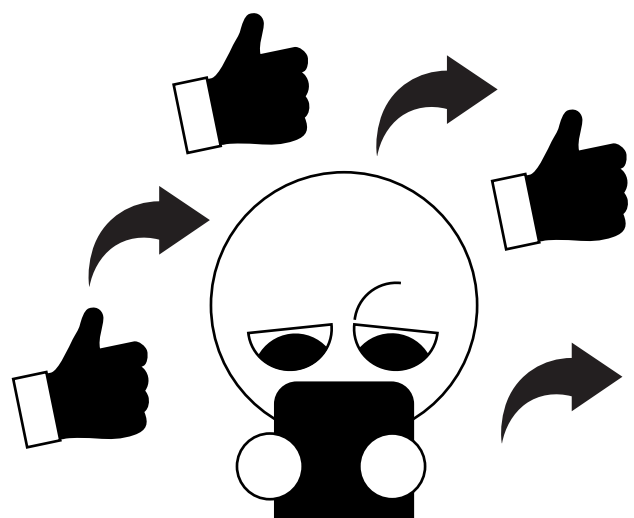
Urbanist Jane Jacobs (1961) emphasized that thriving cities require vibrant, inclusive spaces where people can naturally engage in social interactions. However, the decline of third places in Toronto, due to gentrification, rising rents, and shifting lifestyles, has reduced spontaneous, in-person connections. Sociologist Ray Oldenburg (1989) defined third places as informal gathering spaces outside work and home essential for community life. Traditionally, these spaces have been cafés, bars, and local markets, but in the digital age, social media and online communities are attempting to replace these roles.

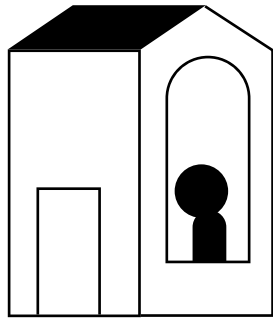
2.4 Digital Spaces, Hyper-Consumption, and Loneliness

As digital interactions replace in-person engagement, online communities have evolved to offer connection; many resources argue that it is not capable of fostering the same sense of belonging as traditional third places, even worse, it has been isolating users further than promoting community engagement. It can also be seen in new social behaviours, such as hyper-consumption.

Mina Le's video essay *Third Places, Stanley Cup Mania, and the Epidemic of Loneliness* highlights how hyper-consumption has replaced community engagement. The rise of TikTok trends like the Stanley Cup Craze—where influencers promote high-end consumer goods—demonstrates a shift where materialism serves as a substitute for human connection. Najma Sharif echoes this concern: “These people have no time, few friends, and nothing to do... They collect cups and things they do not need to feel alive. They are crying out for help.” While no concrete Toronto-specific data exists, this phenomenon raises the potential problem of Digital Dependency such as Algorithmic Isolation, Platforms

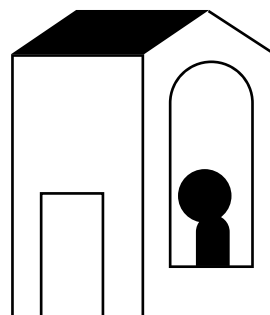
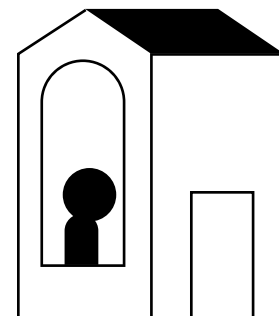
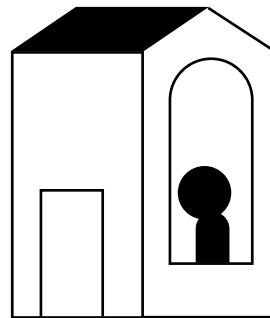
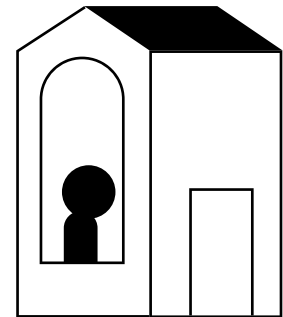
prioritize engagement-driven content over meaningful interaction. Superficial Interactions, Social media promotes surface-level validation (likes, shares) over real connections and increased Screen Time, Heavy digital engagement correlates with declining mental well-being (Twenge & Campbell, 2018).





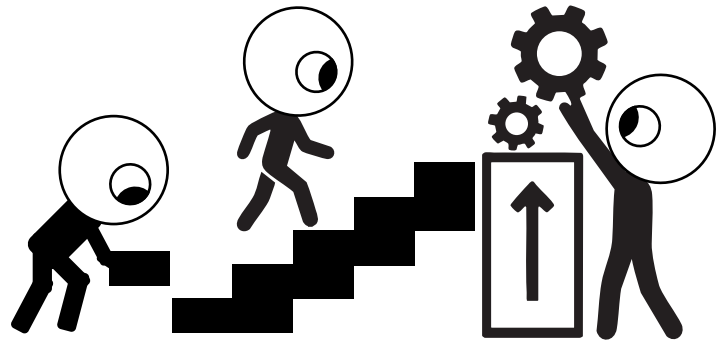
2.5 Multiculturalism and Social Division in Toronto

Canada is often described as a “nation of several nations” rather than a fully integrated multicultural society (Bhatt, 2014). While multiculturalism is a celebrated national policy, critics argue that it has led to ethnic enclaves rather than cross-cultural interaction. Challenges of Multicultural Integration include: Ethnic groups often live in separate neighbourhoods, reinforcing social separation. A lack of structured cultural exchange leads to surface-level interactions rather than meaningful integration. Newcomers experience a dual challenge: adapting to Canadian culture while maintaining their identity. To address these challenges, digital third spaces must be designed to foster cross-cultural interactions and community-driven initiatives. Instead of replacing physical social structures, digital platforms should serve as bridges to real-world engagement. Toronto’s rising asocial society is a result of urban design shifts, digital dependency, and declining traditional community engagement. While newcomers face additional barriers, digital platforms hold the potential to rebuild social trust and facilitate cross-cultural interactions—if designed with inclusivity and engagement in mind.



Chapter 3:

Elements that Combat Asocial Society



3.1 Social Capital as the Foundation of Human Interaction

As defined by Putnam (2000), social capital is the network of relationships that facilitates collective action and cooperation for mutual benefit. In the context of urban newcomers, substantial social capital can mitigate social isolation by fostering trust, reciprocity, and community engagement. Social capital is often divided into three key dimensions:

- Structural Social Capital – The formal and informal networks that connect individuals (e.g., community organizations, social groups).
- Cognitive Social Capital – Shared cultural knowledge, norms, and trust.
- Relational Social Capital – The quality and depth of personal relationships that sustain a community.

However, social capital is not just about the present, **it exists across three temporal layers**; The Past (Inherited Social Capital): The collective memory and historical knowledge passed down through generations, The Present (Ongoing Social Interactions): Everyday exchanges, relationships, and community engagement, The Future (Planned Social Investments): The intentional efforts to sustain and

strengthen communities over time.

In cities with strong historical continuity, these three layers reinforce a shared identity and sense of belonging. However, in Toronto, many newcomers and native-born residents struggle to develop a deep-rooted connection to the city. Many lifelong residents do not know the origins of local holidays, street names, or historic events. With a high percentage of renters and newcomers, few feel a long-term attachment to Toronto. While diversity is celebrated, limited public efforts exist to connect communities through shared histories.

This historical disconnect affects social cohesion and newcomers' ability to integrate. If even long-time residents lack a deep sense of place, how can newcomers develop one? Without a collective historical foundation, it becomes difficult to establish meaningful social capital.

3.2 The Role of Sense of Community (SOC) in the Digital Age

Sociologists Gusfield (1975) and McMillan & Chavis (1986) define Sense of Community (SOC) as the psychological feeling of belonging to a group. SOC consists of four fundamental elements:

- Membership – A sense of belonging and shared identity.
- Influence – Feeling that one's voice matters in the community.
- Integration & Fulfillment of Needs – Access to shared resources and mutual support.
- Shared Emotional Connection – The bond created through common experiences and histories.

In order to integrate McMillan and Chavis's (1986) Sense of Community (SOC) theory into modern digital settings, it is useful to leverage gamification as a central design principle. Within the realm of gamification, Yu-kai Chou's Octalysis framework, with its eight core motivational drives, provides a structured approach to fostering engagement, retention, and positive user behavior (Chou, 2015). These drives: Epic Meaning & Calling, Devel-

opment & Accomplishment, Empowerment of Creativity & Feedback, Ownership & Possession, Social Influence & Relatedness, Scarcity & Impatience, Unpredictability & Curiosity, and Loss & Avoidance—can be woven into online communities in ways that directly reinforce the four elements of SOC: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection.

A focus on membership benefits from drives such as Social Influence & Relatedness, which help individuals recognize shared identities and group norms, the platform can facilitate connections through carpool matching, encouraging interaction among attendees and reducing barriers to participation. Early Adopters and influencers are encouraged to share their experiences, promote events and inspire others to join. Local partnerships with businesses and organizations strengthen ties to the community, thereby creating a sense of belonging. Designing platform features highlighting users' relationships (for example, matching newcomers with experienced members) further strengthens that initial

bond. Epic Meaning & Calling likewise boost membership by providing a larger unifying purpose, so users feel “called” to contribute to the common good—one can envision a campaign that welcomes newcomers to a city, framing engagement as part of a broader cultural mission.

Turning to influence, the drives of Development & Accomplishment and Empowerment of Creativity & Feedback are especially valuable. People invest deeply in a community when they recognize their contributions and can trace their progress. A digital space could make these achievements more visible with specialized badges, letting users witness how their actions—such as organizing meetups—directly shape the group. Likewise, creative tools that allow members to propose new events or features underscore their power to influence communal life, heightening users’ sense that their voices matter.

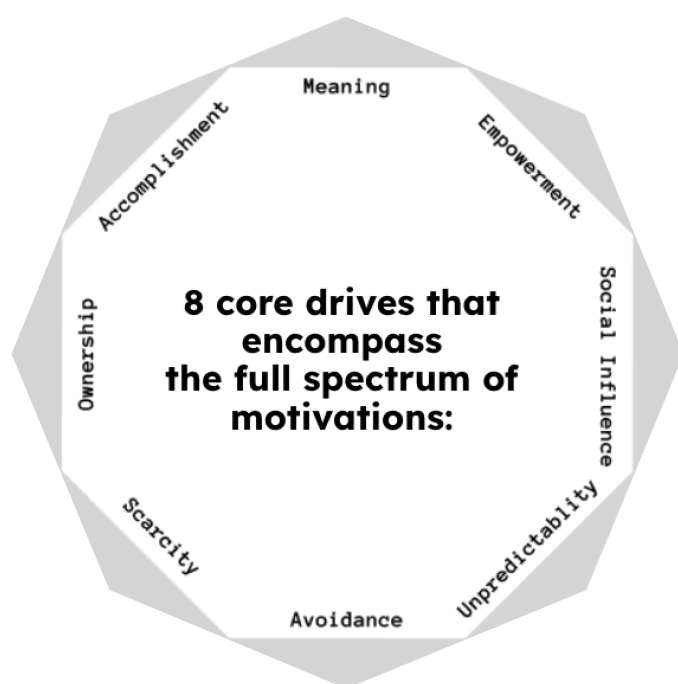
When it comes to integration and fulfillment of needs, Ownership & Possession can spur investment by giving users tangible or symbolic “stakes” in the community—digital to-

kens, neighborhood “currency,” or specialized privileges. Scarcity & Impatience then fuels timely engagement by placing a sense of urgency around community-building tasks. For instance, introducing short-term events or limited sign-up windows can incentivize participants to collaborate on collective goals (like a neighborhood clean-up) before the opportunity vanishes.

Finally, shared emotional connection emerges when users bond over memorable or emotionally charged experiences. Unpredictability & Curiosity is particularly potent here, as small surprises—such as unexpected rewards or “secret generosity” initiatives—help create stories that reinforce a deeper sense of togetherness. Meanwhile, Loss & Avoidance cleverly taps into people’s fear of missing out, ensuring they do not want to lose the social benefits and unique experiences the community provides. Gentle reminders about upcoming milestones or gatherings, framed around the potential regret of skipping them, can nudge users to stay active and engaged.

Woven together, these Octalysis drives work

synergistically with SOC theory to transform routine digital interactions into meaningful collective experiences. By appealing to individuals' desire for belonging, recognition, and fulfilling connections, designers can bring the fun, motivational aspects of gamification into alignment with the deeper psychological need to form a supportive and coherent community.



3.3 Online Social Platforms: A Double-Edged Sword

The rise of digital third spaces provides an alternative to physical community hubs, yet these platforms do not always foster deep social connections. According to Henri Lefebvre (as cited in Soja, 2010, p. 96), technology companies shape a “bureaucratic society of controlled consumption,” where digital platforms are designed not for community-building, but for user retention and advertising revenue. While digital third spaces can be powerful tools for social engagement, they also come with serious challenges like Algorithmic prioritization of content over genuine interaction, Polarization and echo chambers that reinforce ideological divides, Superficial interactions that lack long-term social impact.

To understand the strengths and limitations of digital third spaces, this study examines three case studies later in chapter 6:

Facebook Groups & Nextdoor :
Online neighborhood forums.

Gaming Platforms:
Interactive digital third spaces.

Live Streaming & Social Media Platforms : Hybrid community-building models.

3.4 Navigating the Challenges of Online Social Platforms

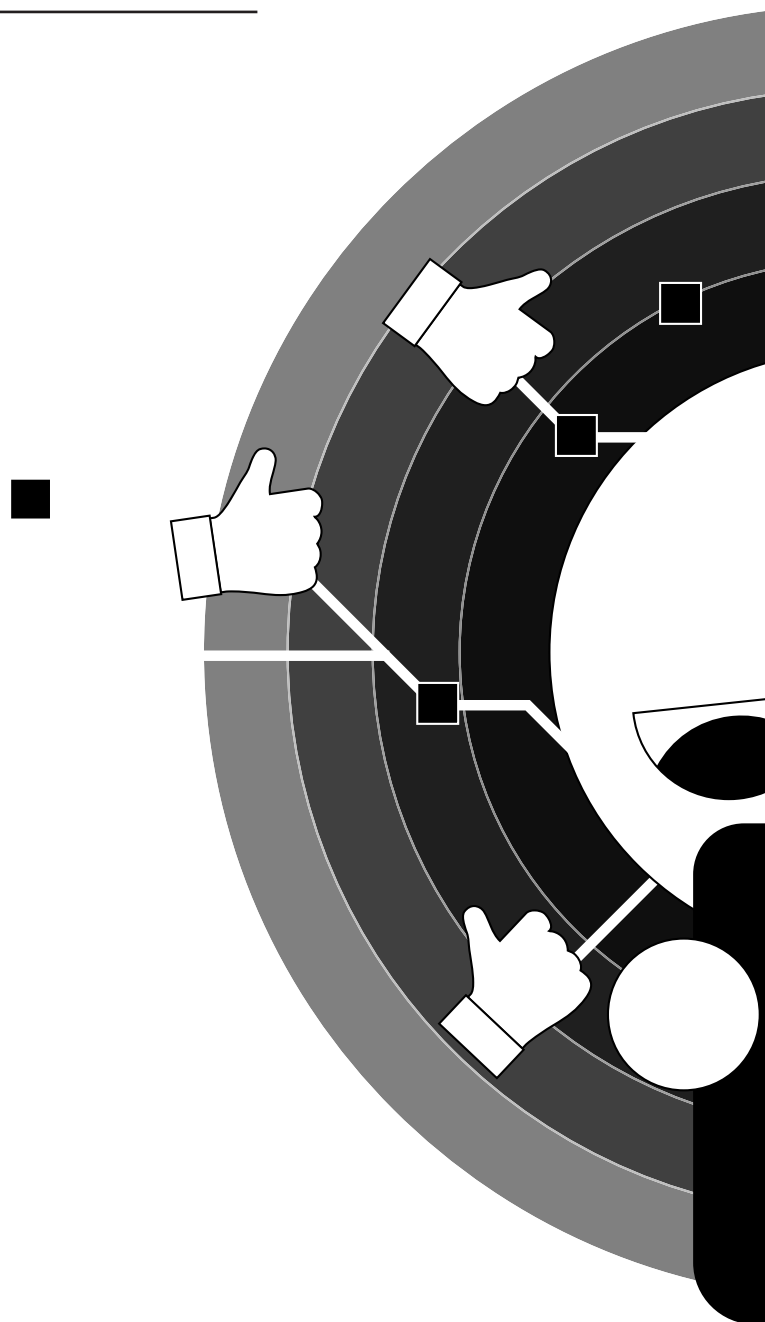
While digital third spaces present new opportunities, they also create significant risks. This research identifies two critical concerns:

1. Privacy & Data Security

Online platforms collect and monetize user data, often without transparency. A study by Alshehri & Alamari (2023) found that user data privacy concerns directly impact online community engagement. Hence, To foster trust & safety, platforms must prioritize user control over personal information.

2. The Rise of Echo Chambers & Digital Polarization

Social media algorithms create self-reinforcing bubbles, leading to ideological segregation. Misinformation spreads more rapidly in closed digital networks, reducing the diversity of opinions. Hence, designing platforms encouraging exposure to diverse perspectives is key to lowering digital polarization.





3.5 Conclusion: Rethinking Digital Third Spaces

We live in an era of digital saturation, where opting out of online spaces is nearly impossible. If we cannot escape digital third spaces, we must redefine them. Rather than letting social media serve passive consumption, we must explore how to design online platforms that actively promote social competence, meaningful connection, and inclusive community-building.

Chapter 4:

Hypothesis and Research Question

Digital platforms can enhance social capital and belonging among newcomers in Toronto when designed with inclusivity and engagement in mind. Discussions surrounding social media and online platforms often focus on their negative impacts; including social isolation, misinformation, and surveillance capitalism. However, this emphasis overshadows an important area of potential: the ability of technology, especially social platforms, to cultivate meaningful connections and foster a sense of community, particularly in urban environments.

The concept of Sense of Community (SOC), developed by McMillan & Chavis (1986), highlights belonging, influence, shared emotional connection, and fulfillment of needs as the cornerstones of strong communities. While much research has examined how these elements manifest in physical communities, their application to digital spaces remains underexplored—especially in urban settings where traditional, geographically bound communities are increasingly being augmented or replaced by digital alternatives. This shift in urban community dynamics underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of how

digital platforms can positively influence urban community engagement, social capital, and a sense of belonging. While newcomers often face systemic barriers to integration—including language barriers, lack of historical knowledge, and difficulties navigating city services—digital platforms have the potential to bridge these gaps, fostering community resilience and social trust.

4.1

Research Focus and Approach

Preliminary research and case studies suggest that digital platforms hold considerable promise in enhancing community engagement among marginalized groups, providing social support networks for diverse communities, facilitating the sharing of local knowledge and resources, and strengthening the social fabric of urban environments.

However, much of the existing discourse on technology and community-building is framed through a negative lens. This study challenges that perspective, arguing that when strategically designed, digital platforms can guide individuals toward beneficial outcomes rather than solely monetizing engagement. They transform digital spaces into virtual extensions of physical communities and empower communities to actively shape their social environments. By exploring how digital third spaces can be leveraged for meaningful engagement, this research seeks to develop practical insights for designing inclusive, socially responsible online platforms that translate virtual interactions into real-world community participation.

4.2

Primary Research Question and Sub-Questions

The primary research question guiding this study is:

How can online social platforms enhance community engagement and social well-being?

To address this, the study explores the following sub-questions:

1. How can online social platforms help urban newcomers foster a sense of belonging?
2. What design features encourage meaningful community engagement on digital platforms?
3. What are the limitations of existing social platforms in supporting urban connections?
4. How do users define and interact with digital vs. physical third places?

Chapter 5:

Methodology

5.1

Research Approach

This research employs a mixed-method approach, combining secondary research, structured observation, a resident questionnaire and co-design session to explore how online social platforms can enhance community engagement and social well-being among newcomers in Toronto. The study focuses on gathering quantitative and qualitative data to understand participants' lived experiences, their challenges in urban integration, and their interactions with digital third spaces.

The methodology consists of three main data collection methods:

1. Secondary Research & Observational Study:

Analyzing existing academic literature, reports, and digital engagement trends.

2. Resident Questionnaire :

A structured online survey targeting young adult newcomers in Toronto (ages 18 - 44, residing in Toronto for five years or less).

3. Co-design :

A session will complement these methods, where selected participants will collaboratively explore solutions for digital third spaces and community-building.

5.1.1

Secondary Research & Observational Study

The first phase of this research involves a literature review and structured observational analysis to contextualize the study within existing scholarship on social capital, online community-building, and digital third spaces. This phase includes examining case studies of existing online community platforms (e.g., Facebook Groups, Nextdoor, MMORPGs), analyzing urban engagement trends in Toronto using publicly available reports, and Observing online discourse in local digital communities to identify common themes in engagement and isolation.

5.1.2

Resident Questionnaire

To gain firsthand insights, an online questionnaire will be distributed to newcomers aged 18–44 who have settled in Toronto within the past five years. The survey will explore participants' experiences with community engagement, sense of belonging, and digital platform usage.

Recruitment & Participation:

1. The survey will be disseminated through online channels, university networks, and newcomer community organizations.
2. Participation is voluntary, and respondents will receive a \$10 Tim Hortons gift card as an appreciation for their time.

3. Responses will be anonymized to ensure privacy and confidentiality.

Questionnaire Structure

The questionnaire is designed to cover four key themes: (1) Demographics & Background, including Age, gender, cultural background, Length of residence in Toronto, and Primary language spoken at home. (2) Community Engagement & Social Capital, Frequency of attending in-person and online community events, Challenges in engaging with local communities, Level of trust and comfort in engaging with different social groups. (3) Digital Platform Usage, Preferred online spaces for community engagement (e.g., social media, discussion forums, group chats), Perceived effectiveness of digital platforms in fostering a sense of belonging, and Barriers to using online platforms for community participation. (4) Perception of Digital vs. Physical Third Spaces, How participants define and interact with digital vs. physical community spaces, Whether online platforms replace or complement physical social interactions, Design preferences for an ideal community-building digital platform.

The survey data will be analyzed using thematic analysis, mapping responses to the Sense of Community framework (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) and the COM-B model (Capability, Opportunity, Motivation – Behavior) to assess how digital platforms influence community participation

5.1.3

Co-Design Session

My co-design workshop is a collaborative, participatory session to engage six participants over three hours in exploring their experiences as newcomers and co-designing a more inclusive community platform. The workshop follows a structured yet interactive format, beginning with a collective story-drawing exercise to foster connection and creativity. Participants then engage in a journey-mapping activity, reflecting on their experiences of arriving, settling in, and integrating into the community. Through facilitated discussions and guided activities such as the “Rose, Thorn, Bud” participants analyze existing platforms, identify challenges, and brainstorm potential improvements. The final stage encourages ideation and low-fidelity prototyping, allowing participants to visualize solutions that could enhance community engagement. By centering participants’ voices and lived experiences, this workshop aims to co-design a digital platform framework that genuinely reflects the needs and aspirations of diverse community members, ensuring inclusivity, accessibility, and meaningful social connection.

5.2

Ethical Considerations

This study has been approved under REB File No: 102624 and adheres to ethical guidelines. Participants will review a consent form before engaging in the questionnaire or co-design sessions. Personal identifiers will be securely stored and deleted after the completion of the study. Participants may opt out at any stage, with a two-week window for withdrawing their questionnaire responses.

Chapter 6:

Data Analysis and Discussions

6.1

Online Observation:

Understanding Digital Community Interactions

To examine how online social platforms facilitate or hinder community engagement, I conducted a non-participatory observation of various digital spaces, including Reddit, Facebook Groups, and Nextdoor. By analyzing discussions, engagement patterns, and recurring themes, this study explores how these platforms serve as digital third spaces for Toronto residents, particularly newcomers.

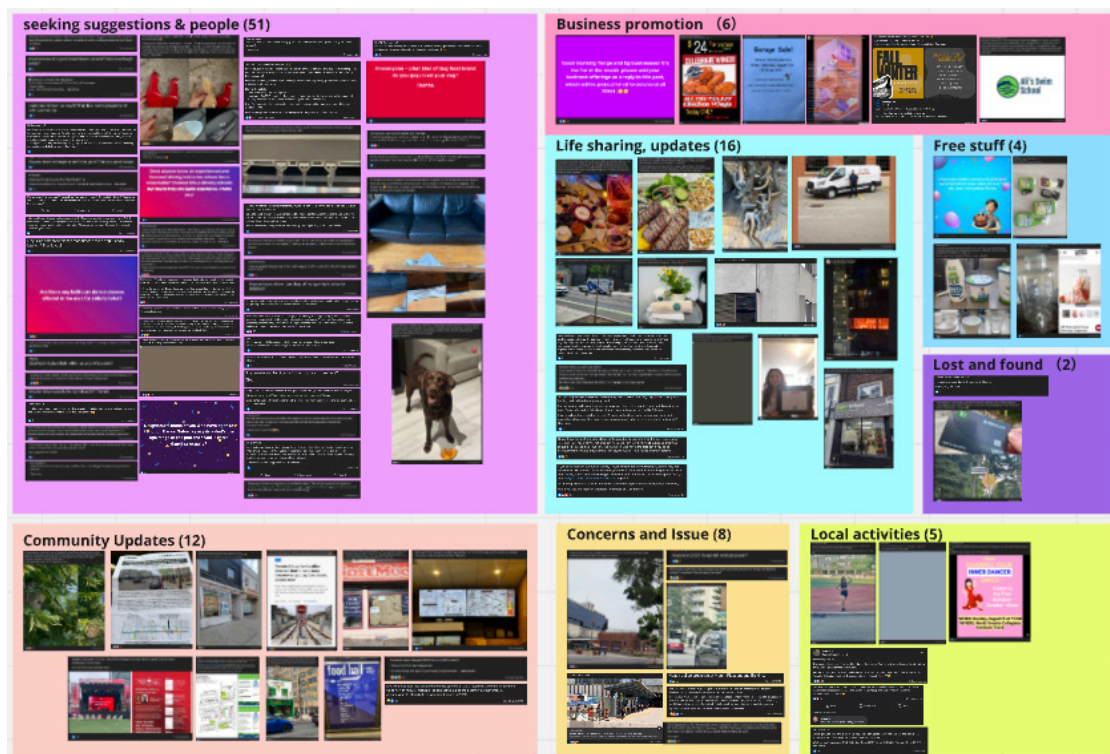
6.1.1 Reddit – r/askTO

One of Toronto's most active digital third spaces is the subreddit r/askTO, which serves as a localized discussion forum for 234,000 members. Over a sample period from 2023 to 2024, I observed 50 posts to analyze engagement patterns, community discussions, and platform limitations. The most frequently discussed topics included local events and activities, workplace concerns, personal and social issues, local experiences, and accessibility of public services. Users commonly sought restaurant recommendations, job-related advice, and guidance on navigating city life.

Despite its role in facilitating discussions, r/askTO faces several engagement challenges. A key issue is a decline in post quality and engagement, with users noting that increased censorship and strict moderation policies have suppressed meaningful conversations. Many discussions also exhibit redundancy,

with repeated questions about topics such as landlord-tenant disputes and employment rights. Additionally, there is an observed increase in negativity and lack of informative content, discouraging sustained community engagement. However, the platform continues to be a valuable space for seeking recommendations, sharing experiences, and discussing local concerns.

Strategies such as co-moderation, transparent moderation policies, and community-led discussions could be implemented to improve engagement and foster a stronger digital community. Features like smart search and auto-suggestions could reduce repetitive posts by directing users to previously answered questions. Additionally, positive reinforcement mechanisms, such as featured posts, community awards, and interactive features like polls and Q&A sessions, could encourage more meaningful discussions.



Screenscap of facebook post categorized into 6 themes

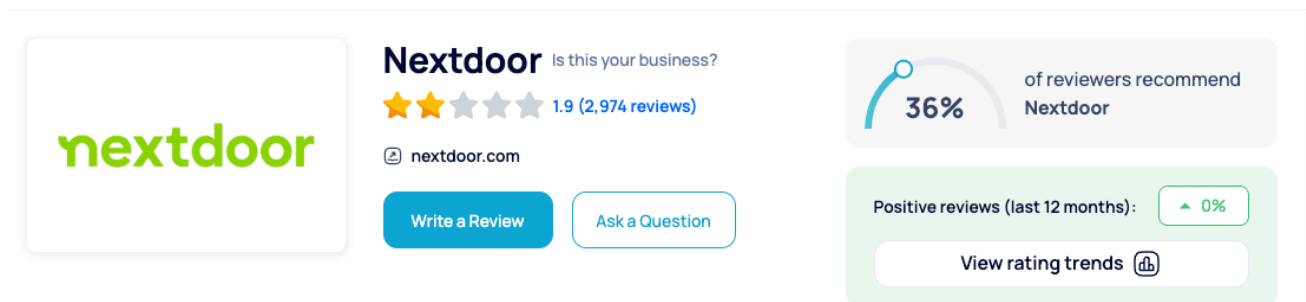
6.1.2 Facebook Group – Yonge and Eglinton Community

A closed Facebook group dedicated to the Yonge and Eglinton neighborhood, with 17,300 members, was also observed over a sample period in August 2024. The group primarily functions as a space for localized discussions, recommendations, and community updates. Posts were categorized into six themes: suggestion-seeking posts (51%), life updates (16%), community updates (12%), local concerns (8%), neighborhood activities (10%), and lost and found (6%).

The most engaging posts related to life-sharing experiences, such as people celebrating personal milestones, posting observations about the neighborhood, or sharing positive community moments. In contrast, community concerns and updates—such as TTC delays or safety warnings—tended to elicit mixed reactions, with some users expressing frustration while others provided solutions. A recurring challenge in this group was the

repetitive nature of requests, where members frequently asked for driving instructors, business recommendations, and event listings. Although strong engagement was strong, this redundancy often diminished participation in newer posts.

To enhance the user experience in neighborhood-focused digital communities, improvements such as a “similar post” feature, thematic posting days, and simplified event-hosting tools could be implemented. Structured event planning tools could encourage residents to move beyond passive online engagement and actively participate in local meetups and initiatives.



Screenscap of a Next door reviews on Sitejabber

6.1.3 Nextdoor – Yonge and Eglinton Neighborhood

In contrast to Facebook and Reddit, Nextdoor was observed to have a poor user experience and engagement. While designed as a neighborhood-centered digital platform, it was cluttered with repetitive posts, excessive advertisements, and spam-like content. A significant issue was intrusive notifications, which persisted even after attempting to unsubscribe. Similar concerns were reflected in user reviews on Sitejabber, where Nextdoor received an average rating of 1.9 out of 5 stars from over 3,000 users.

Users expressed dissatisfaction with over-moderation and biased censorship, leading to the removal of discussions without clear justification. Privacy concerns were also prevalent, as some users reported incidents of harassment and unauthorized data collection. The platform's excessive focus on business promotions over genuine community discussions contributed to its decline as an

effective digital third space.

Despite these shortcomings, digital platforms like Nextdoor highlight common challenges that other community platforms face: moderation struggles, redundant content, and lack of trust-building mechanisms. Addressing these issues is crucial for designing more effective community-driven digital spaces.

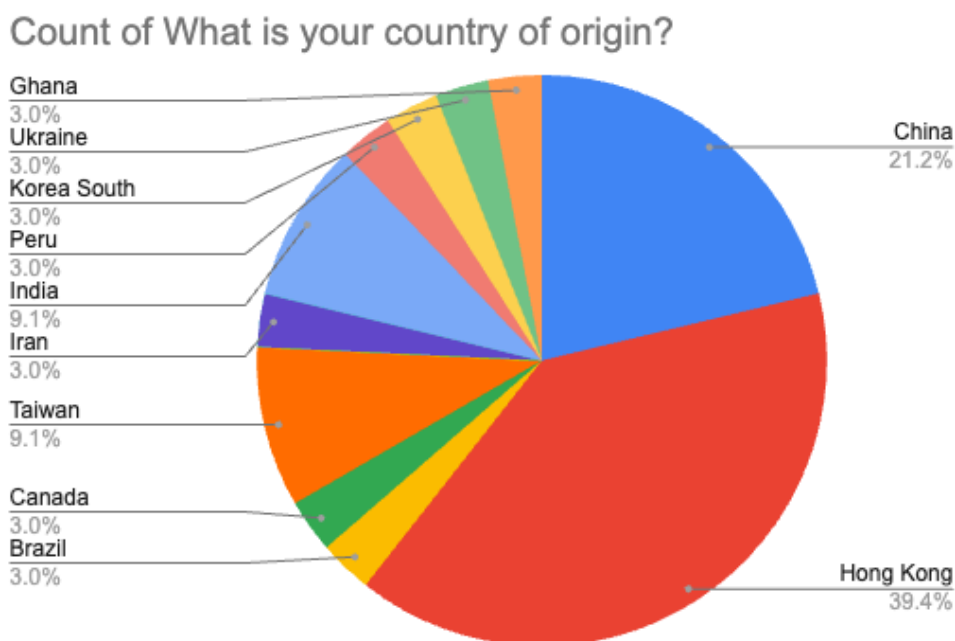
6.2

Survey Analysis: Newcomers' Perspectives on Digital Engagement

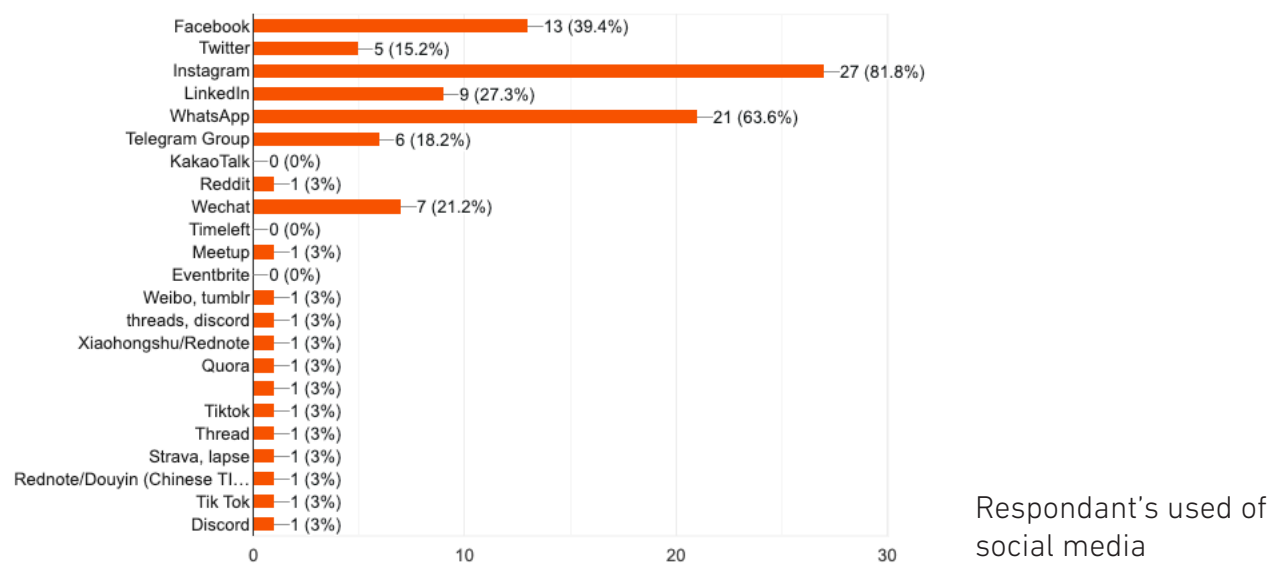
In addition to online observations, a survey was conducted to gather firsthand insights from newcomers in Toronto (ages 18–44, residing in the city for five years or less). Although the total sample size was 32 respondents, the survey provided valuable recurring themes that will be further explored in the co-design session.

Most survey respondents were aged 25–34, with a smaller number in the 18–24 range. The majority identified as female, while a smaller group identified as male or non-binary. The most common countries of origin were Hong Kong, China, India, and Taiwan, with additional respondents from Brazil, Peru, Iran, Korea, and Ukraine.

The primary reasons for moving to Toronto were education, job opportunities, permanent residency, and improved living conditions.



Pie chart of Respondant's Country of Origin



The most cited barrier to community engagement was the lack of access to relevant event information, with many participants stating that they did not know where to find community activities. Financial constraints and time limitations also prevented active participation, as several respondents noted that events were often too expensive or did not fit their schedules. Language barriers were another major obstacle, particularly for non-native English speakers, who expressed discomfort in attending social events.

Beyond logistical barriers, some respondents reported feeling emotionally disconnected from the community, even when they attended local events. Many described Toronto as indifferent, where people were polite but not necessarily welcoming. As one wrote, "Many people in Toronto are reserved and indifferent." Additionally, trust and safety concerns were raised, with some participants expressing skepticism about random online events due to fears of scams and misinformation.

The most frequently used platforms for community engagement were Instagram,

Facebook Groups, WhatsApp, Reddit, Discord, and Meetup. However, perceptions of these platforms varied. Some respondents found online groups helpful, particularly for neighborhood updates and niche hobby-based events. One respondent shared "Online groups helped me during a power outage—neighbors shared updates." and "Meetup helped me find a weekly board game group." Others, however, believed that social media lacked real community impact, with many describing it as a space for passive content consumption rather than meaningful interactions.

6.2.4 Suggestions for Improving Digital Community Platforms

These findings align with the Sense of Community framework, particularly in addressing barriers to membership, trust, and emotional connection. Applying the COM-B model also highlights that digital engagement strategies must enhance opportunity (event discovery and accessibility) and motivation (trust-building and sustained participation) to foster stronger community ties. Several key recommendations emerged from the survey, including centralized event discovery tools, personalized social-matching features, and stronger moderation to prevent scams. Respondents also expressed interest in platforms encouraging in-person participation, such as those integrating discount incentives, event reminders, and gamification for real-world engagement. This chapter analyzed the findings from online observations and survey responses, identifying common challenges, platform limitations, and potential solutions. While digital platforms are essential tools for community engagement, their effectiveness is often hindered by moderation

issues, redundant content, and a lack of emotional connection.

In the coming co-design solutions, we will dig deeper into the real-life experience of newcomers and use their experience to develop an ideal digital community-building platform that fosters trust, inclusivity, and real-world social engagement.

6.3

Challenges and limitations in Recruiting Survey Participants

Finding a sufficient number of participants for the questionnaire was more challenging than expected. A sample size of 32 respondents is relatively small for drawing generalizable conclusions, especially for a city as diverse as Toronto. My initial plan of posting it on campus did not work, likely because there was no immediate incentive, and students usually look at flyer boards for event listings rather than surveys. This approach turned out to be a failure, leading me to rely on my friend group instead. Fortunately, my network includes a diverse mix of nationalities, but since English is not their first language, some respondents may not have fully understood the intent behind specific questions.

Additionally, I noticed a terminology challenge in how participants perceived the term “social platform.” Despite distinguishing it from social media, many still associate it with platforms like Instagram and Facebook, leading to initial negative reactions. However, during the co-design session, some participants later revealed that they use social platforms like Eventbrite or Canoo to meet people. This highlights the difficulty of overcoming pre-

conceived notions through a survey alone, even with explanations, misconceptions may persist.

Given these challenges, I realized that surveys provide a quick glimpse into participants’ perceptions but may not always capture their complete understanding of my research question—especially in a multicultural setting. In this case, measuring newcomers’ feelings toward Toronto and social media through a survey alone might not be the most accurate approach. Therefore, co-design sessions are a valuable supplementary tool to triangulate findings, clarify wording, and cross-check participant responses for greater accuracy.



Poster used on flyer boards



6.4

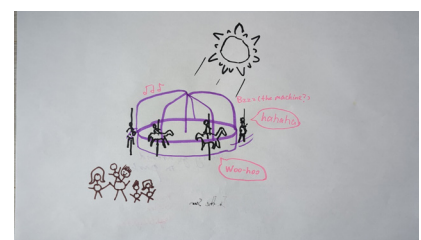
Co-Design Session:

Newcomers' Vision for a Community-Driven Digital Platform

The co-design session brought together five newcomers to Toronto to collaboratively envision an assistive online community platform that facilitates information-sharing and encourages offline engagement in local events and activities.

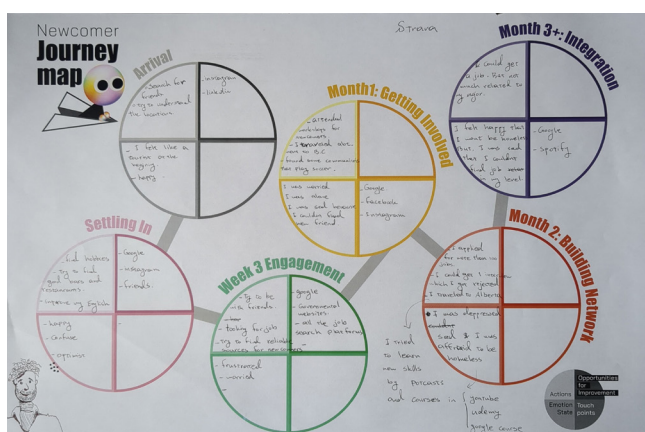
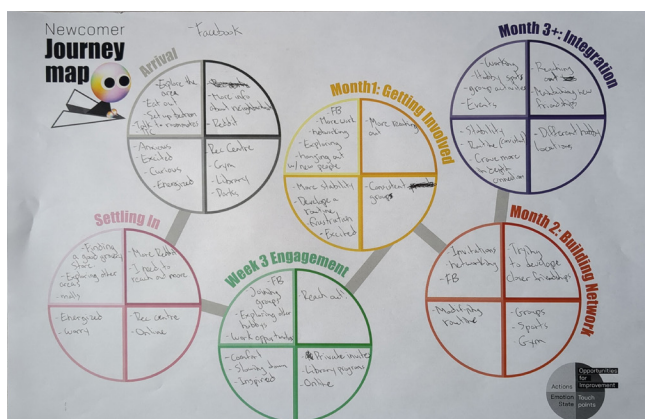
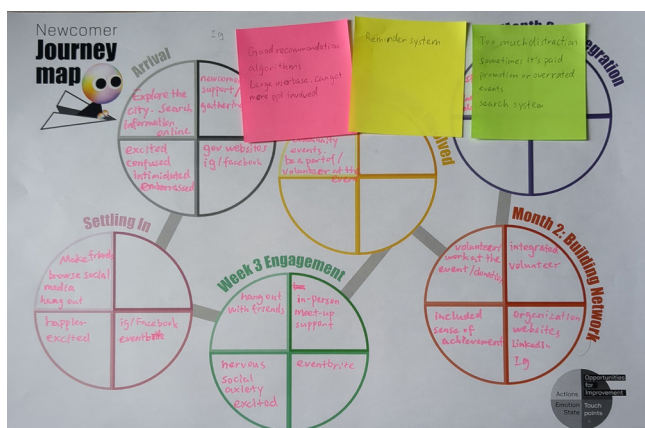
The session starts with a collective storytelling icebreaker activity designed to refresh their minds and bring communal memories into focus. Each participant contributed to a shared story by drawing scenes and passing their paper to the next person to continue the narrative. Participants reflected on what represents a community to them, answering prompts such as "What symbolizes a community in your memory?" and "What sounds do you hear in this community?" Their drawings depicted religious experiences like temple visits, Bible study, and festival celebrations, alongside sensory elements such as the warmth of sunlight on the skin and the laugh-

ter of children playing in a park. This activity helped participants ground their thoughts in personal experiences before moving on to a more structured exploration of their journey as newcomers.



examples of storytelling icebreaker drawing

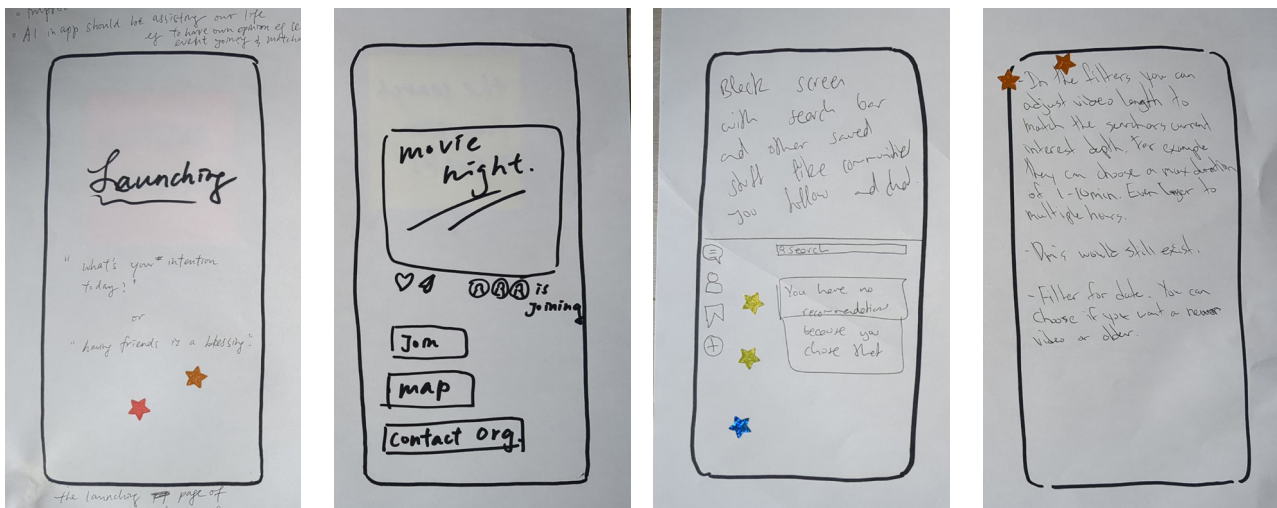
Following the storytelling exercise, participants engaged in a journey mapping session, visualizing their experiences of arriving in Toronto, settling in, engaging with the city, building networks, and integrating into the community. The goal was to understand how they navigated their transitions, the emotions they experienced at different stages, the digital touchpoints they relied on, and what forms of support could have made the process smoother.



examples of journey mapping

Participants widely agreed that their initial arrival in Toronto was filled with excitement. Most relied on Google Maps for navigation and turned to Instagram hashtags like #Toronto and BlogTO to explore local events and places of interest. However, their emotions became more complex as they moved into the settling-in phase. Many described feeling frustrated due to rental scams, difficulties opening bank accounts, and challenges securing essential services. During the engagement phase, experiences varied. Job seekers expressed frustration with the limited effectiveness of online job platforms, leading them to explore alternative platforms like Threads by Meta and engage with niche communities using Toronto-related hashtags. In contrast, international students found social engagement easier, as they could make friends and discover events through their schools' social media platforms.

A particularly interesting discussion emerged around online discrimination and political concerns. One participant shared that they had frequently encountered nationality-based discrimination in online spaces, leading them to avoid engaging in digital communities and instead prioritize in-person



examples of participant designing their idea layout's of social platform

connections. Conversely, some participants avoided events associated with their home country due to political tensions, preferring to engage with people outside their cultural groups. By the network-building stage, those who had secured stable jobs described their experiences as socially fulfilling and motivating. However, others struggled with maintaining relationships, mainly due to financial instability and time constraints. Many turned to online platforms like Reddit, YouTube, and Google Courses to upskill and adapt to the challenges of life in Toronto.

Ultimately, the session revealed that newcomers rely on a mix of event-based applications such as Canoo, Eventbrite, and Airbnb Experiences to discover activities, but only build meaningful relationships through in-person interactions. Digital spaces such as Reddit, Discord, and X (formerly Twitter) serve as tools for virtual networking, reinforcing the idea that community engagement is a continuous interplay between online and offline interactions.

With participants sharing their digital experiences, the session progressed into the idea generation phase, where they envisioned their ideal social platform. Since none of the

participants were UI/UX designers, the session began by having each person select a social app they enjoyed using. Through the Rose, Bud, Thorn technique, they identified strengths, areas for improvement, and limitations of their chosen platforms. Instagram was favored for its algorithm and visually engaging interface, but participants found it overwhelming due to excessive information and a lack of reminder functions. They believed Instagram's event organization features could be improved with a built-in calendar or notification system to help users keep track of events. Facebook was recognized for its wide range of community features, including groups, marketplaces, and messaging services, but its outdated user experience failed to encourage younger users to engage. Strava was praised for fostering interest-based communities, allowing users to connect over shared fitness goals, but was seen as expensive. WhatsApp was valued for its direct, one-on-one interaction model, but lacked broader community-building features.

In the final stage of the session, participants were invited to design their ideal application, either by refining an existing platform or conceptualizing an entirely new one. After

voting on the most critical features, participants envisioned an ideal social platform prioritizing customization, intention-setting, and actionable engagement. They suggested that the launch page should set the tone for community-building by including personalized prompts such as “What is your intention today?” or “Having a friend is a blessing.” The main interface should be highly customizable, with a top section dedicated to saved communities and events and a bottom section displaying only content users actively follow, unless they choose to explore recommendations.

To facilitate offline engagement, participants emphasized the importance of event pages that include ride-sharing options, RSVP transparency, and clear reminders to reduce barriers to participation. They agreed that an ideal platform should minimize algorithm-driven distractions, balancing personal customization and simple, direct tools that support social connection and engagement.

Final Reflection

This session highlighted that digital engagement is not the final destination but a bridge to in-person interaction. Newcomers rely on digital platforms primarily as tools for opportunity and discovery rather than spaces for genuine belonging. The ideal community platform must combine personalization with actionable tools that encourage participation, reduce information overload, and address the barriers of trust, accessibility, and engagement that newcomers face. By prioritizing intentionality and customization, a well-designed platform can enhance the transition from online interaction to real-world connection, ultimately fostering a more immersive and meaningful community experience.

Chapter 7 :

Summary of Key Findings

5.1

Research Approach

This study began by examining the rising prevalence of social isolation and declining civic engagement among newcomers in Toronto, recognizing that language barriers, limited social infrastructure, and the loss of traditional “third places” have exacerbated their sense of disconnection. Through a mixed-methods approach—combining secondary research, online observations, surveys, and a co-design workshop—it identified how digital platforms could either reinforce isolation or serve as vital tools for building community.

Key insights revealed that users often seek straightforward information on local events and resources yet remain wary of privacy concerns, repetitive content, and negative social interactions. Participants expressed interest in features that foster trust, personalize social connections (such as cultural and interest matching), and encourage face-to-face meetups. Building from these findings, the framework presented in this study emphasizes designing online “third spaces” that go beyond passive engagement. The proposed social platform addresses intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors by integrating

core concepts of Sense of Community (membership, influence, integration, and emotional connection) with gamification approaches drawn from Yu-kai Chou’s Octalysis Framework. Features such as badges and localized “currency” acknowledge user contributions, while creative co-design tools invite members to shape their community spaces. Timed challenges and occasional “surprise” events build excitement and solidify emotional bonds. In doing so, the platform shifts away from superficial consumption-based participation and foregrounds meaningful social interactions.

Ultimately, this approach illustrates that digital platforms can empower newcomers—and the broader population—to participate actively in collective decision-making and social activities. By providing easy access to community knowledge, and inspiring members through inclusive, game-like strategies, the platform can help cultivate sustained trust and engagement. Therefore, The framework holds significant potential for enhancing newcomers’ well-being and sense of belonging and reenergizing civic life in diverse urban settings.

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