C. Leonardi, C. Mennecozzi, E. Not, F. Pianesi, M. Zancanaro. Supporting older adults social network: the design of e-inclusion communication services. Gerontechnology 2008; 7(2):153. Aging is often associated with a progressive weakening of the social network whose strength is considered an important predictor of the quality of life[1,2]. It is crucial to support older adults' social inclusion through acceptable domestic services that promote social contact. We describe approach and interaction concepts for communication in a home environment, produced within the NETCARITY (FP6) project. A detailed analysis of elderly people social network and communicative behaviour was conducted as a first step of the User Centred Design process, by means of semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and scenario-based workshops with a group of volunteers aging from 65 to 89. The analysis focused on the composition of the elders' social network, the channels through which relationships are maintained, the social norms that frame social interaction, and the problems older people's experience. Findings suggest that elders are part of a rich relational universe, with its own distinctive features and social norms. Communication experiences vary according to: (i) the referent of the communication; (ii) the purposes of the social interaction; (iii) the degree of emotional involvement with the referent; (iv) anxiety associated with the management of different communicative situations; (v) protocols and norms framing the relationship. Elders experience a number of problematic situations when communicating with the members of their social network through the available technologies (mainly phone). We consider two of them. Firstly, elders feel much concerned about the possibility of disturbing their referents and invading their private sphere (for instance, calling by phone); this is typical of communications where the emotional investment in the relationship is high (for instance, with adult children). The non-availability problem often prevents older adults from initiating a telephone conversation. Secondly, the relationships with acquaintances or members of the peer group are characterized by the fear of intrusions in the own private sphere, the need to clearly separate the private and the social life, and the necessity to control the self-disclosure process, by hiding details about own private life and fragilities. As a consequence, relationships with peers tend to be experienced only in trusted contexts, organized around shared and transparent norms and protocols. The differences between the communications with loved ones and those with acquaintances and peers call for different channels for managing them, in the form of two distinct virtual places realized on a touch-screen device: the SocialWindow and the PublicSquare. Much as the traditional physical windows, the Social Window gives access to the social network for personal and intimate relationships. Through simple gestures on a list of personal contacts, video-communication can be activated. Intuitive functionalities are made available to communicate own availability as well to have information about the referents' status in order to cope with older adults' concern of disturbing them. The SocialWindow supports also a less intrusive communication through multimedia message exchanges as a way to signal the emotional closeness without the trouble of invading others' private sphere. The Public Square is based on the metaphor of the place where members of local communities physically meet to share knowledge and participate in social activities Requirements of the Public Square are therefore (i) the possibility to enter and exit the space without public notifications; (ii) the protection of privacy; (iii) the respect of shared norms guaranteed by trustful subject. To secure the users' control on the boundaries between the private and the public life, information about members' status (online, off-line) is not displayed. Similarly the video-conferencing modality has been discarded in favour of more neutral communication modalities (for instance, the asynchronous sharing of multimedia contents and synchronous textual exchange).

References

1. Abeles RP, Gift HC, Ory MG. Aging and quality of life. New York: Springer; 1994
2. Seeman TE. Annals of Epidemiology 1996;6:442-451

Address: Fondazione Bruno Kessler, Italy, cleonardi@fbk.eu

153