

Seniors are taking the kampung spirit beyond the neighbourhood

It's time to support an 'ageing in networks' approach – one that recognises mobility, community, and connection beyond the block.

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Much is being done to help seniors in Singapore age in place and thrive in doing so. There is the Age Well SG programme that is expanding the number of active ageing centres and activities brought close to the homes of older Singaporeans.

Active ageing centres will also work with community partners such as Sport Singapore or the People's Association, and make use of all the spaces in the community, including coffee shops, pavilions and community clubs. The aim is to encourage social interaction and prevent social isolation.

These efforts rightly signal the

importance of engaging seniors so that they remain physically active and socially connected. And they tap Singapore's beloved kampung spirit, involving a strong sense of community and where neighbours help each other.

But a study by the National University of Singapore shines new light on what the kampung spirit means for them today. It found that seniors have diverse ties, many of which are located far beyond their residential neighbourhoods.

The study, which we carried out from 2021 to 2024 on the social networks of 1,199 Singaporeans aged 60 years and above, found that immediate and extended family members are the most prominent in their social networks and named early in the survey. Friends and co-workers are named later, while neighbours are named last.

Funded by the Singapore Social Science Research Council, the study also found that the named contacts are on average located 4km away from where the seniors lived. Geographic Information Science (GIS) mapping further showed that their social networks

are both locally situated in the residential neighbourhood and spatially expansive, extending to other parts of Singapore.

At first glance, these findings seem to suggest that the kampung spirit, or neighbourhood cohesion, has

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However, another way of looking at it is that seniors today are ageing in networks that are located in multiple places, presenting unprecedented opportunities to enlarge the kampung spirit across Singapore through leveraging travel and digital connectivity.

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By this, we mean recognising that seniors are willing to go the distance to access the activities and social networks that they value. It also means we need to enhance the infrastructure and social programmes that would encourage them to remain physically mobile and socially connected for as long as possible.

WHAT ARE THESE SENIOR NETWORKS?

Conversations with seniors revealed the reasons behind the pattern of travel beyond their neighbourhoods. Some commuted to support loved ones or to meet up with friends and former neighbours who live in other parts of Singapore.

Others were willing to travel farther for social activities because they prefer dance, music, exercise and other recreational activities which were not available nearby.

A senior in her 80s who participated in the NUS study

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Social networks aren't confined to one place

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said she travels from her home in Hougang to a community club that is 15 minutes away by bus, twice a week, because her friends use it and they want to learn more advanced dance steps from the instructor there.

Another retiree who participated in the study said he commutes a few times a week from Taman Jurong to meet his friends who live elsewhere to go prawning together, a hobby which they all enjoy. When he wants to learn how to use digital technologies, he prefers to ask former colleagues who he still contacts, rather than his neighbourhood friends.

These findings tell us that proximity to neighbours and neighbourhood facilities is only one of the factors that seniors consider in their daily activities and social interactions. The depth of the social relations that they have with other contacts in their lives matters as well. Seniors engage with amenities not only because they are nearby. It is also because their networks make those places socially meaningful.

WHAT THIS MEANS ON THE GROUND

Most of the seniors in the study use the public bus or MRT services to get around. Some are willing to change bus services a few times during an out-of-home trip to reduce walking distances if they need to. The high uptake rate among seniors for the pilot privately run shuttle bus service linking towns in Marine Parade, Mountbatten and MacPherson reflects the importance of good transportation connectivity to them.

A seamless commute can make a world of difference in enabling seniors to maintain valued social networks, regardless of where these are located.

Government investments have been ramped up in recent years to expand travel connectivity and create an aged-friendly environment in Singapore. However, the experience on the ground – based on the go-along



interviews that the researchers did with seniors – suggests that walking and transportation accessibility are still experienced unevenly in different parts of Singapore.

Sheltered walkways for seniors to reach bus stops or MRT stations are not always linked seamlessly from block to block, exposing them to rainy conditions or heat stress on hot days. Slip-resistant pavement surfaces can help prevent falls, but some are too bumpy for seniors to easily pull their shopping trolley bags.

Limited bus services at some bus stops, particularly in private estates, can also deter public transit-dependent seniors from going out.

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WHAT MORE CAN BE DONE

Supporting older Singaporeans' choices to maintain diverse social networks in multiple places will have added importance in Singapore's next phase of preparing for a super-aged society by 2030.

Other than improvements to facilitate getting around, transportation hubs such as bus interchanges and MRT stations, which are regularly used by older Singaporeans during their commutes, can be repurposed or designed to incorporate elder-friendly facilities and activities that encourage social mixing.

Curating elder-friendly social programmes that encourage

ageing in networks is crucial, too. Rather than duplicate services, an ageing-in-networks approach calls for collaboration across active ageing centres, community centres, residents' networks, community groups and commercial partners.

An example could be the Odekake Rehabilitation Initiative in Japan. Seventeen partners in Hakodate city – including long-term care facilities, commercial partners, government agencies and individual volunteers – came together to encourage seniors who require care and support to shop, dine and interact, and in the process, revitalise what was a declining historic marketplace and commercial centre.

Through the collaboration, the Japanese seniors who participated experienced cognitive and physical stimulation, while the retailers saw improved revenue. The long-term care staff could also focus on specialised care as they received support from volunteers during the outings. A report on the initiative shared that caregivers had positive feedback. For example, people who used to refuse to walk by themselves took the initiative in climbing stairs to buy gifts for their great-grandchildren.

In recognition of its successful

outcomes, the collaborative initiative was awarded second place in the Healthy Ageing Prize for Asian Innovation in 2022.

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Older Singaporeans can flourish better from participating in a wide range of social activities happening in different parts of Singapore, maintaining a variety of social networks for supportive care.

An ageing-in-networks approach allows seniors to create a combination of social ties, online and offline, near and far. In these ways, the kampung spirit can be enlarged beyond individual neighbourhoods to connect communities across different parts of Singapore.

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