# Love Thy Neighbor (Or Know Them, At Least): Building Trust Before Disasters

Kara Scherer | ENVS 400 | 23 February 2017

Disasters can take many forms including natural disasters, terrorist attacks, or viral epidemics, but they all cause widespread damage and disrupt people's livelihoods to the extent that there is a need for outside help (Wisner et al. 2011). Because of this massive scale of devastation, the first responders that we usually rely on may not be able to get to us for days or weeks, leaving neighbors to provide lifesaving assistance to each other (Aldrich and Meyer 2015). There has been an increase in research that examines the relationship between social capital and disaster preparedness, and its effectiveness in facilitating community recovery post-disaster (Aldrich, 2010a, 2012b, 2012c, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c; Beaudoin, 2007; Chamlee-Wright, 2010; Dynes, 2006; Koh & Cadigan, 2008; Nakagawa & Shaw, 2004 as cited by Reininger et al. 2013). In 2011, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) released a Whole Community plan for community resilience to disasters (FEMA 2011).

Social capital lies in relationships: participation in groups leads to benefits for individuals and the community (Portes 1998). An important component of any relationship is trust, which can be built through increased interactions with people (Glanville et al. 2013). However, in a time when social interaction in informal settings has been rapidly decreasing, where will neighbors be able to socialize and build the trusting relationships that will be so vital for establishing disaster resilience? Oldenburg introduces the idea of a third place: "a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work" (1989).

Though third places are typically brick and mortar establishments that people can meet and mingle in, Steinkuehler et al. introduce the possibility of a virtual third place. There has been criticism of social media as being completely opposite of third places -- of actually promoting individualism and "displacing crucial civic and social institutions" (Steinkuehler et al. 2006). However, more and more studies are showing that social media can be very beneficial to community engagement. According to Bouchillon, "like the physical community, social networking sites are thus a crucible for connecting, and it follows, for social capital" (2014). Steinkuehler et al. provide the theoretical framework for my analysis of virtual third places,

which I will discuss in my methods. This leads me to the overarching question guiding this research: To what extent can third places enhance the resilience of community networks before a crisis occurs? I've found that in Collins View, virtual third places facilitate trust-building interactions through quality content, member embeddedness, and online and in-person interaction that aid in promoting the social cohesion needed for a resilient community.

## Criteria for Building Trust

| Criteria | Description |
| --- | --- |
| Benevolence | Willingness of a party to benefit another |
| Integrity | A party's perception that another consistently relies on acceptable principles of behavior |
| Judgement | A party's perception that another is able to make decisions that further the interests of both parties in a relationship |

Table 1: Trust criteria as adapted by Porter et al.

I chose to examine the app Nextdoor, since it encourages neighbor-to-neighbor interactions in an online setting. Nextdoor is a unique platform in that it has all the capabilities of mainstream social media sites, but it has an added component of place: all Nextdoor users have to confirm where they live to gain access to their neighborhood content. Nextdoor acts as a kind of virtual third place for people to interact, but it also holds potential for people to meet in person since everyone lives in the same neighborhood.

Portland, OR, where this study is situated, lies inland of the Cascadia subduction zone, which is capable of producing a magnitude 9 earthquake in the coming years. The Director of the Portland Bureau of Emergency Management, Carmen Merlo, urges people to get to know their neighbors, as social cohesion is a big indicator of resilience (Gragg 2014).

**Methods**

There were two components to my methodology; qualitative analysis of Nextdoor posts, and a corresponding survey that I distributed via Nextdoor. These two methods were aimed towards answering the question: What kinds of relationships are currently being formed between

neighbors, and are they helpful or harmful in facilitating connection? The qualitative analysis was aimed towards determining what the main themes of interaction were. Since building social capital relies heavily on creating trust relationships, I broke trust down into benevolence, integrity, and judgement. The survey was a way for Nextdoor users to self-report, so I used it as a way to compare my own observations with the users' perceptions. The survey was designed to gage the validity of Nextdoor being a virtual third place, and to measure trust through content quality, embeddedness, and interaction.

I constrained my study area to only the Collins View neighborhood, since in the event of a disaster, roads will likely be destroyed so people will need to walk everywhere. Collins View has 658 neighbors signed up, with 2,775 in surrounding neighborhoods. Although I filtered out posts by the other neighborhoods, if a Collins View neighbor decided to share their posts with the surrounding community, those community members could reply to posts. Additionally, Collins View neighbors have the option to see the surrounding neighborhoods, and the interactions in those neighborhoods could influence their overall perceptions of Nextdoor, and could limit my own analysis of the type and number of relationships formed between neighbors.

I analyzed 48 posts that range from October 1st, 2016-December 8th, 2016. Although there were actually 173 posts in Collins View during this time period, I chose to analyze these particular posts because they each had four or more replies to them. Of the 173 posts, the average number of replies was 2.84, so I decided that four posts signified that the post was of above-average interest to people. Additionally, four replies would either allow for four different people to reply to the post, or a reply and subsequent follow up from two people, which could potentially create a connection between them. I analyzed the 48 posts for their potential for the neighbors to meet in person, community building, trust, and alienation.

After Portland experienced some severe winter weather, arguably a small-scale disaster that shut down the city for several days, I decided to do a second analysis to see what role Nextdoor played in facilitating connection. This analysis is still in progress, but I have already logged 162 posts in a one-month period -- close to the post total of my first analysis that was over a span of two months. Although I haven't completed my analysis, it seems as if this period of time provides even more evidence in support of my current findings.

I created the survey to determine how consistent my observations were with the neighbors' self-reported perceptions. I included several questions to pinpoint themes of trust, inclusivity, and virtual third places, which I will explain below.

*Which of the following would you be comfortable doing with a neighbor you met on Nextdoor?* This question included eight actions that a person could take, ranging from borrowing an item from a neighbor to giving them a key to their house in case of emergency. It was crafted to indirectly access levels of trust by examining behavioral manifestations of social capital in daily life (Aldrich and Meyer 2015).

*Which of the following do you associate with Nextdoor?* This question included Oldenburg's eight characteristics of third place, tailored to Nextdoor's functionalities (Oldenburg 1989).

*Who do you see as active members on Nextdoor?* This question was included to determine whether certain groups in the neighborhood were perceived as invisible.

*Which of the following groups have you ever been bothered by in Collins View?* This question strives to detect alienation, or if there are groups that are not as welcome as others.

Twenty-three of the 48 posts I analyzed had the potential for people to meet in person, which is a total of 48%. In my survey, I found that in fact, 50% of my 52 participants had met a neighbor in person because of Nextdoor. This does not necessarily lead to the assumption that 50% of people on Nextdoor have met a neighbor in person thanks to the app, but rather 50% of the people who took the survey, who are likely to be somewhat active on Nextdoor to begin with, had met one or more neighbors through the app.

Of the 48 posts, I analyzed which category proved to be most inviting of comments. Twenty-nine General posts, 8 Recommendations, 6 Lost & Found, 2 Classifieds, 2 Free Items, and 1 Crime & Safety. The survey results didn't quite mirror my observations -- General was the most used category, with Documents/Neighborhood information as second, and Crime & Safety and Recommendations as close thirds.

When analyzing the amount of trust people exhibit towards neighbors met on Nextdoor, providing a needed service was highest, followed by meeting for a social activity, borrowing an item, then feeding a pet or watering plants while away (Fig. 1). These findings also align with the qualities of third places: people are more likely to meet on neutral ground where they can come

and go as they please, which might explain why more people are willing to meet for a social activity and less likely to commit to sitting down to enjoy a meal together (Oldenburg 1989).

Although not all criteria of a third place scored highly in the survey, 82% of people associated Nextdoor with useful conversation, which Oldenburg argues is one of the most important qualities of the eight criteria of being a third place (Fig. 2). The least selected quality of Nextdoor was to be accepted regardless of social status elsewhere (25%) which could align with demographic information as well: 88.4% of respondents had completed a college degree or postgraduate degree, suggesting that most people on Nextdoor Collins View are of a similar status, at least in terms of education which is a large contributor to social status.

In an attempt to identify possible "outsiders" in the neighborhood, I asked which groups people had been bothered by before. Again, there were only 28 responses which is low compared to the full pool of 52 participants. College students and Other were tied as bothering the most people at 35.7% each (Fig. 3). In the same way that positive informal interactions can generalize trust to a larger group of people, negative associations can also be generalized to a larger group, namely college students. Lewis & Clark students, although transient members of the community, could still be very important in community resilience after an earthquake by transporting goods, clearing rubble, and accessing their own networks -- therefore it's important that they are seen as members of the community to ensure their involvement.

Animals were at the center of many of the community-building posts I analyzed, often resulting in an in-person meeting as well (returning a lost animal to its owner, for example). There are also generally a higher volume of replies to posts about hummingbirds, especially when the cold weather threatens their food supply. This suggests that finding a common interest between neighbors can be very beneficial to creating more personal connections.

In summary, I found that most people associated Nextdoor with at least one aspect of a third place. Although mostly low-commitment activities, people were also willing to do at least one trust-building activity for or with the neighbors that they met on Nextdoor. In contrast, there were fewer people that had complaints about aspects of Nextdoor, with the biggest complaint being irrelevant posts, which doesn't really affect trust or community. This suggests that Nextdoor is a successful virtual third place, and although people may not have built up trust with

their neighbors yet, this forum is a constructive way to do so. It is important to note, however, that this is a very specific demographic of people and cannot be generalized to other communities: the average person who took this survey was a woman over 40 years old, white, college educated, living in a single family home with only 1-2 people for over 15 years.

Future research could expand on this study in a number of ways. Replicating this study in different neighborhoods, especially those with a different demographic, would add to the generalizability of this study. Comparing personal networks with virtual networks could also be interesting in determining Nextdoor's success at expanding peoples' networks.

The implications of Nextdoor being a successful virtual third place could be very important in a society that continues to focus solely on work and home spheres, limiting interaction with people who encourage them to consider different viewpoints and ways of life. It could be a forum directed at the precise group of people who will need to be connected in the event of a disaster, which could vastly improve that neighborhood's resilience. If people are able to work together and organize efficiently after a disaster, it improves recovery time and frees up emergency responders to focus their efforts on more vulnerable parts of the city. Additionally, when communicating risk, people are more likely to listen to their friends and families than other authority figures like scientists and government organizations (Haynes et al. 2008). Perhaps even before the earthquake hits, the generalized trust that is being built on Nextdoor will encourage people to pay attention to preparedness warnings posted by neighbors, and take individualized steps to prepare such as making a kit or retrofitting their house.

**Works Cited**

Aldrich, Daniel P., and Michelle A. Meyer. 2015. "Social Capital and Community Resilience." *American Behavioral Scientist* 59 (2): 254–269.

Bouchillon, B. C. 2014. "Social Ties and Generalized Trust, Online and in Person: Contact or Conflict--The Mediating Role of Bonding Social Capital in America." *Social Science Computer Review* 32 (4): 506–23. doi:10.1177/0894439313513076.

Glanville, J. L., M. A. Andersson, and P. Paxton. 2013. "Do Social Connections Create Trust? An Examination Using New Longitudinal Data." *Social Forces* 92 (2): 545–62. doi:10.1093/sf/sot079.

Gragg, Randy. 2014. "The Big One: A Survival Guide." *Portland Monthly*, July 1.

Haynes, Katharine, Jenni Barclay, and Nick Pidgeon. 2008. "The Issue of Trust and Its Influence on Risk Communication during a Volcanic Crisis." *Bulletin of Volcanology* 70 (5): 605–21. doi:10.1007/s00445-007-0156-z.

Oldenburg, R. 1989. The Great Good Place: Cafe´s, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You Through The Day. New York: Marlowe & Company.

Portes, Alejandro. 1998. "Social Capital: Its Origins and Applications in Modern Sociology." *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1): 1–24.

Reininger, Belinda M., Mohammad H. Rahbar, MinJae Lee, Zhongxue Chen, Sartaj R. Alam, Jennifer Pope, and Barbara Adams. 2013. "Social Capital and Disaster Preparedness among Low Income Mexican Americans in a Disaster Prone Area." *Social Science & Medicine* 83 (April): 50–60. doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2013.01.037.

Steinkuehler, Constance A., and Dmitri Williams. 2006. "Where Everybody Knows Your (Screen) Name: Online Games as 'Third Places.'" *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 11 (4): 885–909. doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2006.00300.x.

Wisner, Ben, Jc Gaillard, and Ilan Kelman. 2014. "Framing Disaster." In *Handbook of Hazards and Disaster Risk Reduction*. Routledge. doi:10.4324/9780203844236.ch3.

**Appendix**

Which of the following would you be comfortable doing with a neighbor you met on Nextdoor?
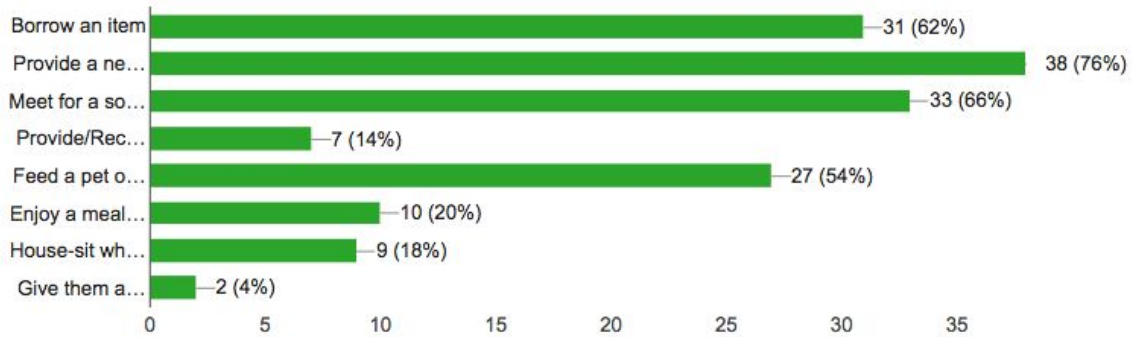
(50 responses)

| | |
|---|---|
| Borrow an item | 31 (62%) |
| Provide a ne... | 38 (76%) |
| Meet for a so... | 33 (66%) |
| Provide/Rec... | 7 (14%) |
| Feed a pet o... | 27 (54%) |
| Enjoy a meal... | 10 (20%) |
| House-sit wh... | 9 (18%) |
| Give them a... | 2 (4%) |

0    5    10    15    20    25    30    35

Figure 1: Trust

Which of the following do you associate with Nextdoor? (52 responses)

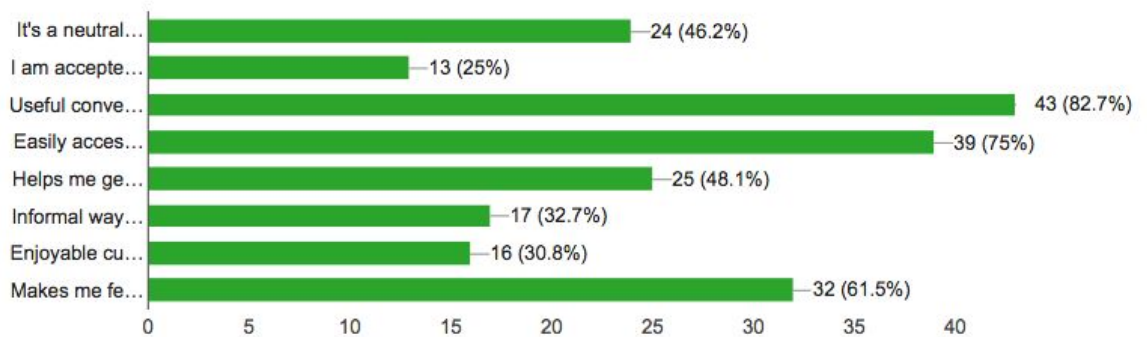| | |
|---|---|
| It's a neutral... | 24 (46.2%) |
| I am accepte... | 13 (25%) |
| Useful conve... | 43 (82.7%) |
| Easily acces... | 39 (75%) |
| Helps me ge... | 25 (48.1%) |
| Informal way... | 17 (32.7%) |
| Enjoyable cu... | 16 (30.8%) |
| Makes me fe... | 32 (61.5%) |

0    5    10    15    20    25    30    35    40

Figure 2: Third Place Criteria

## Which of the following groups have you ever been bothered by in Collins View?

(28 responses)

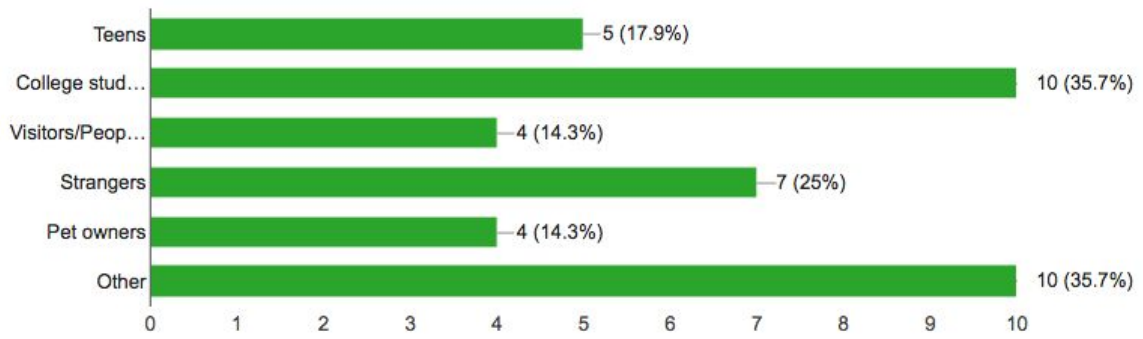| Group | Count (%) |
|---|---|
| Teens | 5 (17.9%) |
| College stud… | 10 (35.7%) |
| Visitors/Peop… | 4 (14.3%) |
| Strangers | 7 (25%) |
| Pet owners | 4 (14.3%) |
| Other | 10 (35.7%) |

Figure 3: Outsiders