

MAYOR OF LONDON

London New Girl: How digital communities are shaping fresh Londoners' social lives

By Dina Zubi

BACKGROUND

Being new to London can be both an overwhelming and isolating experience. With the Facebook group 'London New Girl' as a case study, the article looks at London newcomers and the challenges they face. It explores how an online community can be a space to build friendships, share intimate stories and get emotional support from virtual strangers, as well as why these young women have chosen to go online to find the connections they might be missing in their offline lives.

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(Photo Credit, Veronica Ortero)

Finding a social circle in a new city can be a daunting affair. Social media has opened up for alternative ways of getting advice, sharing interests and creating friendships. This is exactly what the more than 18k members of the private Facebook group London New Girl do. The group describes itself as 'a guide for moving to London and a thriving community for expat women living in London'. The posts in the group span from social events and dating stories to housing issues, family problems and job difficulties, topics many would perhaps only discuss with their closest friends.

London New Girl was started as a blog by Kamila Zawadzka in 2012 and the Facebook group was founded in 2014. In many ways, the group is a substitute for the analogue personal ads and advice columns of the past. The size of the community means that there is a wide span of different professions, skills and interests. Members look for anything from legal advice and medical help to date ideas and product recommendations. Some group members have even searched for people to go on holidays with. However, the majority of the posts are from women who are new to London and are looking to meet people with similar interests in their neighbourhood. This is perhaps an indication that finding a

community in London can be difficult. According to the Survey of Londoners, 27% of adults over 16 are socially isolated and 8% reported to often or always feel lonely.¹

My own experience of moving to London for the first time as an 18-year-old from Norway was also influenced by solitude. My accommodation for the four-month stay was a very small, badly decorated room in an Airbnb by King's Cross. The room had a futon that I never managed to turn into a bed, so I slept on it as a sofa for the full duration of my stay, too embarrassed to ask the host for help. Most evenings after class I would return home and heat a ready meal, watch Netflix and go to sleep. Even so, coming out of the choreographed chaos of the London Underground rush hour, I would look up at the glowing clock of St. Pancras International and feel at home in this city, like I was supposed to be here. And things got better. I made friends on my short course, people from home came to visit and I grew fond of the rapid tempo of London. However, during this initial period of loneliness it never occurred to me to reach out to people online.

So why have the more than 18k London New Girl members decided to do just that? 'It's a much easier and quicker way to make friends and find people in similar situations,' says Anna*. She has met with a few group members, but only two people she would want to see again. 'You don't really know if you click with another person until you meet,' she explains. Another group member, Jessica Thomas, says she was searching for a group where she could make female friends when she arrived in London. 'I was looking to meet likeminded people in a similar position to myself to have some fun, share stories and hopefully make friends', she says.

Jessica describes her move to London as 'information overload'. 'I had to learn how to navigate the city, how to dress for the weather and get used to the crowds all whilst looking for a job,' she says. Similarly, one of the respondents from the GLA's London Community Story project said 'when I arrived I was really excited but the speed of London and the largeness hit me all at once. (...) I felt overwhelmed.'² This feeling of overwhelmingness is a common topic in the Facebook group and many of the members express an acute feeling of loneliness after moving to London.

The Office for National Statistics' (ONS) research highlighted three groups that were more likely to experience feelings of loneliness, one of which they called 'Young renters with little trust and sense of belonging to their area'. Furthermore, some of the characteristics the ONS found that make people more likely to experience loneliness were; being female, belonging to the 16 – 24 age group, not living as a couple and being unemployed.³ These findings correlate well with the demographics of the London New Girl group, as most are young women that are new to their area and therefore presumably don't own a property, live with a partner or have a strong sense of belonging. Many of the women in the group

¹ Survey of Londoners, Greater London Authority, 2019 (<https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/survey-of-londoners-headline-findings>).

*Name has been changed

² London Community Story Research, Greater London Authority, 2019 (<https://www.london.gov.uk/LDNcommunitystory>).

³ Community Life Survey, Office for National Statistics, 2016-2017 (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/lonelinesswhatcharacteristicsandcircumstancesareassociatedwithfeelinglonely/2018-04-10>).

are also unemployed when moving to the city, which the group's dedicated job search initiative, 'Work Wednesday', is a testament to.

While many of the London New Girl members want to arrange physical meetings such as dinners, yoga classes or museum visits, others look for emotional support. One member shared 'So my boyfriend broke up with me a couple weeks ago. I get so anxious about being alone now. (...) I just feel like crying all the time and have lost interest in the things I like. (...) Any tips or help is greatly appreciated.' The post garnered over 77 comments, ranging from 'Exercise, it's great for your mental health' and 'Get drunk with girls and dance to Lizzo' to lengthy responses about similar experiences and ways to move on from heartbreak. The group therefore provides a space for members to share intimate feelings and connect through similar experiences.

But there are also downsides to digital relationships. As has been well documented in the media, it is virtually impossible to know whether the person you are chatting to is who they say they are or indeed if they are to be trusted. A London New Girl member shared that she had arranged to go on a night out with 20 other members from the group, but was left to pay for the table reservation herself when only one other person showed up. As one of the interviewees from the GLA London Community Story research said 'there's a lot of good that comes out of social media, like there's that ability to communicate with other people, but that's also debatable because that communication is so much more impersonal'.⁴ This is perhaps part of the reason why it is more difficult to cultivate meaningful relationships online and to translate them into real life friendships.

The general consensus in the psychological community and the overall population seems to be that digital friendships are second-rate to physical friendships. This is much due to the lack of three dimensionality online, since features such as body language, physical touch, facial expressions and gestures are absent. While this is certainly a fair point, groups such as London New Girl function more as a starting point for the development of offline relationships, a database of friends you haven't met yet, if you will. The group therefore provides women who are new to London with a space to make the social connections they might be missing from their 'real' lives.

The 'Groups' feature has been around since the early days of Facebook, and in May 2018, 1.4 billion members used groups every month. 'People want to be a part of meaningful communities', said Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg upon launching the new 'Groups' tab on the app. The aim of the new feature was to make groups a more intrinsic part of the social media platform. The company estimated around 200 million of its users to have membership in a 'meaningful' group, but Zuckerberg has stated a desire to get that figure up to 1 billion within five years.

As Facebook continues to grow and social media activity becomes an increasingly public part of our online personas, perhaps groups such as London New Girl are a way of reclaiming the platform as a space for genuine, interpersonal connections. At the very least, the group has been a launch pad for many London novices to build social lives in a new city

⁴ London Community Story Research, Greater London Authority, 2019 (<https://www.london.gov.uk/LDNcommunitystory>).

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