



Teaching an Old Dog New Tricks – Seniors Connecting via Social Media

ANNE SUMMERHAYS

SCHOOL OF INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

ABSTRACT

Social media is an important platform for accessing information and connecting with friends and family, yet in 2016, only 34% of Americans over the age of 64 had ever used online networking sites. Older people face significant barriers to usage of social media and are particularly vulnerable to internet-based scams, yet risk suffering from loneliness and isolation while they go through major life changes associated with aging. Research suggests that social media could be an important tool to reduce this isolation, and help people stay connected and supported while they age. This essay discusses the heightened relevance of this topic in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, how older people most often interact with social media, the digital divide and how it disproportionately affects seniors, and some important upsides and downsides of older people being active on social media. Upsides include the capacity of social media to reduce isolation among vulnerable populations and improve various health outcomes, as well as being a chance to stay current with family members' lives. The most pressing downside is the dangers faced by older users who may not know how to protect themselves against internet-based fraud and identity theft. For those who wish to encourage older people to use social media to connect, there is therefore a strong need for digital literacy programs to help them learn to do so safely. Librarians can and will play a huge role in the future of this issue.

Keywords: Older people; Seniors; Social media; Social isolation; Social connectedness; Internet literacy; Digital literacy; Cybercrime

Introduction

The topic of this essay is social media use by older people and will focus on general aspects of the topic, highlighting health effects of social media use, privacy issues faced by older users, digital literacy instruction, and directions for future research. Social media is an important



platform for accessing information and connecting with friends and family, yet in 2016, only 34% of Americans over the age of 64 had ever used online networking sites (Anderson & Perrin, 2017). Older people face significant barriers to usage of social media, such as physical challenges, lack of access, and discomfort with technology. They are also particularly vulnerable to internet-based scams, which makes digital literacy instruction that focuses on safe practices particularly important. That being said, older people are at risk of suffering from loneliness and isolation while they go through major life changes such as losing long-term friends or partners and experiencing health issues and mobility loss. Research suggests that social media could be an important tool to reduce this isolation, and help people stay connected and supported while they age. The general public may have widely varying experiences with this topic, but the overarching question of how best to help people stay social, supported, and connected as they age is important for everyone to consider.

This essay will start with a note on the heightened relevance of this topic in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, discuss how older people most often interact with social media (who they connect with, barriers to use, impact on “real world” interactions), discuss the digital divide and how it disproportionately affects seniors, and bring up important upsides and downsides of older people being active on social media. Upsides include the capacity of social media to reduce isolation among vulnerable populations and improve various health outcomes, as well as being a chance to stay current with family members’ lives. The most pressing downside is the dangers faced by older users who may not know how to protect themselves against internet-based fraud and identity theft. In encouraging older people to use social media to connect, there is therefore a strong need for digital literacy programs to help them learn to do so safely. This essay will

conclude with a note on next steps, for instance in the further research that is warranted in this domain and the important role that librarians have to play in the future of this issue.

Social Isolation and COVID-19

It is important to note the effect that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on social isolation among vulnerable populations such as older people. COVID-19 poses a particularly high risk to seniors' health, making social distancing especially important, yet loneliness and social isolation are strongly associated with negative health effects in this population. Many older people have used technology to stay connected with loved ones during the pandemic, which highlights the potential that technological solutions have to reduce isolation among older populations (Penman, 2020). Our experience, as a society, of social distancing during the pandemic reflects the everyday isolation that many older people faced long before the pandemic began. Alongside the general flurry of COVID-19-related research, there has been a concurrent push to assess the wellbeing of older people during these difficult times, although further discussion of this goes beyond the scope of this essay. Both further research and a general awareness of the issue of isolation among aging populations are good starts toward finding compassionate solutions to this age-old problem.

How Do Seniors Interact with Social Media?

In order to delve further into this topic and figure out the next steps, it is important to start with an understanding of how older people currently interact with social media. Seniors are as diverse a group as any subset of the population but share in common a significant feature when it comes to discussions of social media: a lack of "nativity" with digital communication technologies. They may have differing levels of access to and comfort with technology, but none

of them grew up with Facebook, for instance. This section will start with how the research suggests older people most often use social media, such as who they connect with, how, and why (or why not). Related research gives some idea as to their attitudes towards social media, including how these have changed over time, and what barriers exist to usage among older populations. Finally, the last section will touch upon the potential impacts of social media use on real world interactions.

Who Do They Connect With and How?

A major question to start with in this research is how, exactly, most older people are interacting with social media. Early research in this field could aptly be summed up as concluding that they did not use it at all. In the years since the advent of the so-called Web 2.0 that first saw the proliferation of social media websites, however, this has gradually ceased to be the case. Technology has become more and more ingrained in the necessities of daily life for all people, including older populations. According to a Pew Research Center study in 2011, 65% of all internet users used social media, but only 29% of internet users who were over 65 years old ever used these platforms at that time (Zickuhr & Smith, 2012). This study noted that older adults were one of the fastest growing groups of social media users, yet in 2021, older users are still lagging significantly behind their younger counterparts. In 2021, compared to percentages in the eighties for adults aged between 18 and 49 (84% for 18-29 and 81% for 30-49), only 45% of people over age 65 reported using social media (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). This is a significant increase since 2011, especially considering the 2021 figures include non-internet users, but this change in usage over time has been less dramatic and conclusive than early researchers assumed.

The majority of older people use social media to connect with family and close friends, but many also reconnect with long-lapsed friendships and childhood connections or make new connections. Facebook and YouTube are currently the most popular platforms among older people, and many studies focus on Facebook use specifically (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). One such study found that 88.1% of respondents used it to stay connected with friends and family, 37% to connect with colleagues or groups, and only 13.6% were interested in meeting new people. Most of the participants' friends on Facebook were family members or close friends, which represents a tighter knit network than is common among younger users (Hutto et al., 2015). Older people who use social media typically do so in order to maintain relationships and stay up-to-date on what their peers are doing (Vošner et al., 2016). Participants were found to use Facebook to keep in touch with people who do not live nearby, to share and view photos, to see what their family members were doing, to communicate more easily with others, and out of sheer curiosity (Jung et al., 2017). The ability to reconnect with old friends, find supportive communities, and connect with younger family members or other connections may continue to drive older people to use social media more and more as time passes (Zickuhr & Smith, 2012). Although older adults tend to use the internet for both communication and information-seeking purposes, those who spend more time using it also generally have a larger online social network (Hill et al., 2015).

Attitudes and Barriers to Social Media Use

It is important to consider the attitudes of older people towards social media, the factors that can help them engage with others using these online social networks, and what barriers may stand in their way. Early exploratory research into older non-users' attitudes towards social media

found that their perception that the sites inadequately protect privacy was a major part of the reason they had never used social media (Xie et al., 2012). Privacy issues were one of the major barriers commonly found in these early studies, but some additionally found that older people were not well versed in the potential benefits they might gain from using social media. The main benefit they could think of was being able to stay connected with geographically distant grandchildren (Nef et al., 2013). Although the benefits to social media have become more generally apparent in time, partly because more older people are using it, Hutto et al. (2015) nevertheless found that privacy and security concerns, perceptions that it is too complex to learn, and lack of interest in or access to the necessary technology are all still major contributors to older people choosing not to use social media. Jung et al. (2017) mirrored findings that older people avoided social media because of privacy concerns, and also found that the opinion that virtual communication does not offer sufficient richness of social cues, a lack of desire to invest the time to learn and use a new technology, a perception that online communication lacks substance, and frustration with one's lack of technology skills all contributed to low usage rates.

In addition to these attitude-based reasons for not using social media, accessibility and other barriers to use must also be considered. Barriers to online engagement by older people include technological obstacles, low or unstable income, social role expectations, lack of intergenerational spaces, and impacts from local political climates (Sinclair & Grieve, 2017). Education levels have also been found to be a factor, with better educated people using social media more (Vošner et al., 2016). Social media has substantial potential to provide access to social networks for people who may be suffering from chronic pain or disabilities that make it more difficult to connect in person. Despite this potential, the required information technology and the

platforms themselves may still be ill-adapted to the needs of older populations. Szanton et al. (2016) found that homebound older adults were strongly interested in participating in social activities but reported health and transportation issues as major barriers to involvement. It is particularly hard to reach homebound older adults, both for studies on social media usage and for digital literacy and community outreach, so it is crucial to consider the barriers they face in connecting with their community.

Impact on Real World Interactions

Social media has a great deal of potential to facilitate social connections for those for whom leaving their home is difficult, but many people fear that usage of social media and digital technology will have the effect of making in-person contact a thing of the past. In terms of the impact of social media use on real world interactions among elderly populations, however, the literature mostly agrees that social media is usually used in conjunction with, rather than to replace, other social interaction. Hutto et al. (2015), for example, studied social media use among older adults and found no significant difference between users and non-users of social media in terms of regular communications such as phone or face-to-face. As well, studies have found that older adults use social media as a source of social connection similar to that gained in face-to-face interactions, and to the same extent as younger people (Sinclair & Grieve, 2017). At this point, social media seems to have a strong potential to supplement rather than detract from existing social ties.

Digital Divide

The “digital divide” is the term generally used to describe the overall inequality of access to information and communication technologies that exists in the world. Jaeger et al. (2012)

defines it as being “the gap—whether based in socioeconomic status, education, geography, age, ability, language, or other factors—between [those] for whom internet access is readily available and those for whom it is not” (para. 5). The “have-nots” here are otherwise marginalized people who are now further disadvantaged by their limited access to online information and services. Older people, particularly those with intersecting marginalized identities (such as queer or low-income older people), are disproportionately affected by this divide. This issue is becoming a larger problem as major services and functions are moving online. Older adults now often find themselves without the skills or equipment to participate, a problem frequently compounded by limited physical mobility and decreased size of their social network (Hill et al., 2015). Although older adults are increasingly engaged online, the evolving nature of technology means that they need to constantly improve their digital literacy in order to maintain the same level of social inclusion.

To get a clearer sense of how to close this divide, there needs to be some clarification about what it is and what causes it in the first place. According to Ang et al. (2021), discussion of the “digital divide” was originally driven by inequalities in physical access to the internet and has more recently turned to access to internet skills. Both of these angles, however, miss the health-related difficulties and other factors that remain barriers for older people, such as visual/hearing impairment, reduced cognitive functions, and fine motor skill issues. Olphert & Damodaran (2013) found that despite the existence of accessibility aids, people with a physical disability (in any given age group) are much less likely to be computer users than those without disabilities. As well, people living in rural areas and those with low incomes are more likely than other groups to disengage from internet use despite once being active (Olphert & Damodaran, 2013). Discussion

of participation, the current focus in social media research, is very important to consider, but most discussion of these issues implicitly bypasses the continued existence of a significant degree of inequality in the initial physical access necessary for this participation.

Olphert & Damodaran (2013) identify three main sources of inequality that lead to the digital divide: access to the equipment (Connectivity), the necessary skills (Capability), and the existence of material relevant to a given person or group (Content). All three of these need to be addressed in order to begin to close this divide that so negatively affects older people. Connectivity has been the focus of many library and governmental programs: in providing access to computers, tablets, and the internet, they attempt to allow all marginalized people a chance to stay digitally included in society. Library computers are known to be well-used, which is a good sign to their efficacy, but these programs are often underfunded, at least in the American context. In 2011, for instance, 64.5% of libraries in the US reported being the only free provider of computers and internet access in their communities, yet 76.2% reported not having enough workstations to meet patrons' needs during at least some part of a typical day (Jaeger et al., 2012). Although these figures are a bit dated now, this type of program is still relevant in 2023, as evidenced by the continued expansion of Halifax Public Libraries' computer and Wi-Fi programs (Halifax Public Libraries, n.d.). Regarding Capability, digital literacy programs are becoming more widespread and can provide the skills and confidence necessary for older (and other) users to connect more effectively and safely. Although the initial focus of both research and programs was solely access, internet literacy is increasingly a topic of the conversation in the literature of this domain. As to Content, there is little coverage of this issue in the literature, but perhaps an assumption that this will take care of itself in time. Social media is often highly focused on and

geared toward younger members of the population, but as older people become more active online, the online landscape will increasingly reflect the values and interests of these generations. As older people find more content that interests them, a feedback loop will likely be generated that further increases their involvement online.

Strategies used by federal governments tend to focus on getting people online rather than keeping them there and engaged, but this is a crucial part of the equation as well. As Olphert and Damodaran (2013) aptly point out, being digitally included can help older people maintain their independence, social connectedness, and sense of worth despite declining health and capabilities. The literature seems to conclude that because older people are increasingly using social media, this divide will eventually close on its own, but as reported by Kebede et al. (2021), the 2019 UK's national statistical survey showed 13.5% of people aged 65 to 74 years and 47% of those 75 years and older have still never used the internet, which makes this idea of an easy resolution of the digital divide seem optimistic at best. The digital divide is a direct result of the unequal power structures of society; this means that it is dangerously naive to assume that it will magically disappear on its own. A lot more work is needed to close this divide properly.

Reducing Isolation and Other Benefits

Research in this field has generally been inconclusive as to the causality of the relationship between social media use and mental health benefits, but clear that there is an association. Many studies have difficulty separating out which came first when it comes to seniors and social connectedness, the chicken or the egg. Are better connected seniors more likely to use social media, or does social media itself promote social connection? Despite the uncertainty about

causality, existing research does tend to agree that social media has the potential to facilitate maintenance and even growth of older people's social networks, thereby facilitating improved well-being. Wu and Chiou (2020) identify the mechanisms of this process as being through increased capacity to connect to others, engage in activities, and generally boost one's self-confidence through increased independence. There is significant research supporting the idea that loneliness and social isolation are linked to other mental and physical health issues, so it stands to reason that interventions to improve the well-being of older adults should include measures to reduce these common experiences of aging. Loneliness and isolation have long been tied to greater risks of physical and mental health problems like high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity, compromised immune function, anxiety, depression, cognitive problems (Zhang et al., 2021), impaired sleep, lower levels of physical activity, increased risk of developing Alzheimer's (Khosravi et al., 2016), and are generally associated with poor quality of life (Garcia et al., 2021). Maintaining strong social ties has been shown to reduce symptoms of depression, stimulate interest in daily activities, and improve overall life satisfaction (Hutto et al., 2015). With these links in mind, a key question in this research is whether and how social media can help reduce loneliness and social isolation.

Most studies point towards a significant link between social media use and both social connectedness and well-being among older people. One recent study found that frequent use of social media for communication purposes was associated with feeling less lonely. Perceived social contact and support were found to mediate this relationship, which is to say that usage of social media promotes supportive relationships that themselves reduce loneliness (Zhang et al., 2021). Wu and Chiou (2020) found that older adults who were familiar with social media usage had more

Seniors Connecting via Social Media

social support and lower depressive symptoms; social media mitigated depression by promoting more intergenerational interactions with family and improving emotional cohesion with them. Hutto et al. (2015) found that participants who were engaged in directed communications, as opposed to broadcast communications or passive consumption of others' broadcast communications, reported feeling less lonely and more satisfied with their social roles. Interestingly, this study found that passive consumption helped reduce feelings of loneliness without increasing role satisfaction, and frequent broadcast communications helped increase role satisfaction without decreasing loneliness. Ang and Chen (2019) found that online social connection reduced the negative effects of physical pain on participants' mental health. For older populations experiencing chronic pain, social media could decrease their risk of depression by compensating for reduced offline social participation. Those who spend more time using the internet also tend to have a larger online social network, which has been found to promote feelings of connectedness (Hill et al., 2015).

There are other potential benefits to social media use among older people beyond reducing their social isolation and symptoms of depression. Khoo and Yang (2020), for instance, studied the relationship between social media use and executive function in older adults, and found that social media use for interpersonal interactions improved executive function, at least partially through increased social support and reduced perceived constraints (i.e. feeling helpless to deal with a problem). They note that social media use requires a significant amount of information processing, which can offer opportunities to exercise and sharpen cognitive abilities. As well, social support itself has been shown to impact cognitive function (Khoo & Yang, 2020). Social media can also serve to keep older people informed about local events, facilitate in-person

Seniors Connecting via Social Media

social participation, and reinforce intergenerational ties (Zaccaria et al., 2020). All in all, there is good reason to think social media can have a positive effect on the lives of older users, so long as it is used responsibly.

Dangers of Social Media

Despite the many potential benefits of using social media to reduce loneliness and social isolation, there are also significant dangers that older people are especially vulnerable to, such as phishing, fraud, and other cybercrimes. Issues of misinformation and disinformation also bear mentioning as dangers of uninformed social media use, however, they are beyond the scope of this paper; it is hoped that the same digital literacy programs mentioned above could help with these issues as well. Studies have shown that older people are particularly vulnerable to cybercrime (and other social media dangers) due to a lack of knowledge and skills with digital technology, and because they have more trouble determining whether harmful behaviour is intentional or not (Garcia et al., 2021). Overall reporting of cybercrimes is known to be low (~15%), and older people are thought to be less likely to report scams than other groups because of either shame or due to fear that their family will think their mental capacities are declining. That being the case, it can be hard to tell the true extent of the issue (Lee, 2018). With cybercrime in mind, the fears expressed by many older people with regard to social media safety are understandable.

Existing research on digital media literacy focuses primarily on social media safety for children and adolescents, but fake news and cybercrime often target adults, especially older adults. The *FBI 2020 Internet Crime Report* found that there were significantly more cybercrimes (105,301 crimes for a total loss of \$966,062,236) committed against people aged 60 or older in

the US than any other group. The total complaints they received marked a 69% increase since 2019. This issue is clearly on the rise, both in general and because of increased dependence on digital technology during COVID-19 (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2021). Digital media literacy can help attenuate this through helping people to understand the threats and to better evaluate information sources. Not all cybercrimes are avoidable, but those which rely on individuals trusting fraudulent websites, emails, or social media accounts could be countered through education (Lee, 2018). Many educational efforts have focused on getting older people online, rather than helping them use social and other digital media safely, but these are important factors to consider for digital literacy programs.

Digital Literacy Programs

Digital literacy programs need to take into account the many factors that exacerbate the digital divide as well as providing instruction that helps increase learners' sense of confidence and self-sufficiency in using social media and other technology safely. Improved digital literacy is valuable for many reasons; it can empower older adults to become more independent, maintain their social networks, and enhance other knowledge bases (Hill et al., 2015). Older adults are generally less likely to use technology than younger adults, but those with more confidence in their abilities are more likely to do so than those who feel less confident (Hutto et al., 2015). Research suggests that these digital literacy programs should follow a needs-based approach that fosters older people's sense of self-efficacy and provides social support for learning (Rasi et al., 2021). This may sound obvious, but its implications for digital literacy programs are important. Not only do these programs need to teach older adults how to use digital platforms, they also

need to improve the learners' confidence and sense of empowerment. This latter goal requires that the learning process be predominantly driven by the students themselves.

It is important to design literacy programs with the needs of various non-digital natives in mind. The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened existing challenges faced by those receiving and providing digital literacy instruction; lacking access to in-person learning environments, educators are left using the very technologies that older adults struggle with to teach them how to use technology more effectively. In the case of older populations, this can be done through features like text alternatives (i.e. large characters or speech), multimedia content, simple page options, clear help and navigation tools, and colour palettes and page structures that make it easier for users to access the contents (Garcia et al., 2021). It has also been found to be useful to introduce important concepts before introducing site functions, actively focus on responding to privacy concerns, and incorporate ways in which social media can be relevant to participants' lives (Xie et al., 2012). Certain approaches that should be included in media literacy programs are peer instruction, intergenerational approaches, having compassionate and experienced teachers, collaborative and informal environments, supportive and friendly atmospheres, lessons tailored to the needs and lives of older people, multiple sessions across a long period of time, and slowed pace of instruction with printed handouts and a focus on repetition (Rasi et al., 2021). The research is growing, but more work is needed to increase engagement with those most in need of these programs.

Conclusion and Further Research

This paper has discussed general aspects of the topic of social media use by older people, including how and why they most often use social media, the digital divide that

disproportionately affects this population, health effects of social media use, cybersecurity issues faced by older users, and digital literacy instruction. Older adults are a group with widely varying demographics and needs, despite research that often treats them as homogeneous, but they tend to share similar goals (connecting with family and friends) and misgivings (privacy) regarding social media. They can face significant barriers to usage, such as physical challenges and lack of access to or comfort with technology. Access to technology in general is not equally distributed between or within nations, a phenomenon called the “digital divide,” but for older people, all socioeconomic, geographical, and health-related challenges factoring into these inequalities are compounded by the implications of aging, such as reduced social support and perceptions of societal irrelevance. Older people are already at a heightened risk of social exclusion due to factors like poverty, isolation, and ill-health, and are now further excluded as services and social opportunities are delivered or advertised through social and other digital media. Seniors’ involvement in social media has greatly increased in the last 10-15 years, but not to the extent promised by frequent talk in the literature of the inevitable end to the “digital divide.” Policymakers and librarians have both made significant efforts to reduce this divide, yet much of those efforts thus far have been focused on getting older people online, rather than on keeping them there or helping them use social and other digital media safely. It is important to keep these barriers in mind for any further discussion of these topics.

Social media has the potential to contribute to keeping older people informed about local events, facilitate social participation, maintain social connections, establish new social networks, and reinforce intergenerational ties. Older people are at risk of suffering from loneliness and isolation while they go through major life changes such as losing long-term friends or partners

and experiencing health issues and mobility loss. Research suggests that social media could be an important tool to reduce this isolation, and help people stay connected and supported while they age. Older people are also, unfortunately, particularly vulnerable to cybercrime, so digital literacy instruction that focuses on safe practices is key. Digital literacy programs should consider the impact of the digital divide on older people as well as provide instruction that helps increase their confidence and self-sufficiency in safe usage of social media. Improved digital literacy can empower older adults to become more independent, maintain their social networks, and enhance other knowledge bases, which makes their needs vis-à-vis new technologies an important facet of the overall discussion. They were a little late to the conversation, but ever since Facebook featured prominently on the cover of Time magazine in 2010 with an article about how it is “redefining privacy,” the question on the general public’s mind has been “just how safe is this stuff, anyway?” (Zeff, 2010). Older people are no exception to the general societal desire for answers to this question and need for knowledge about how to navigate online platforms securely.

As to next steps, both further research into the impacts of social media on older populations and more resources in terms of digital literacy programs are warranted. One of the major limitations of the studies referred to in this paper is the lack of proof of causality. Although associations between social media use and loneliness have been fairly consistent, it has been hard to determine which one leads to the other. Zaccaria et al. (2020) is one of the few studies set up to effectively determine the causality between social media use and the level of isolation and loneliness experienced by older people, but this study has been delayed by COVID-19 restrictions, so its results could not be included here. Further research is critically important to learn how best



to use social media to help reduce seniors' feelings of isolation. The role of public libraries in helping to bridge the digital divide and provide digital media instruction cannot be overstated.

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