

AgingToday

the bimonthly newspaper of the American Society on Aging

ISSN: 1067-8379
www.asaging.org

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JULY–AUGUST 2018
volume xxxix number 4

Social media: an isolated older person's friend—or foe?

By **Tom Kamber**

Social media holds the promise of connecting everyone, everywhere, all the time. For isolated older adults, it would seem an antidote to aging's social afflictions: an adaptable solution that can revitalize old acquaintances, strengthen existing relationships and spawn new connections.

But three studies, plus lessons learned from a recent project at Older Adults Technology Services (OATS), shed new light on the link between social media use and older adult isolation, providing clarification on which tools are most effective, and how older people leverage them for maximum effect.

Data on Social Media Use

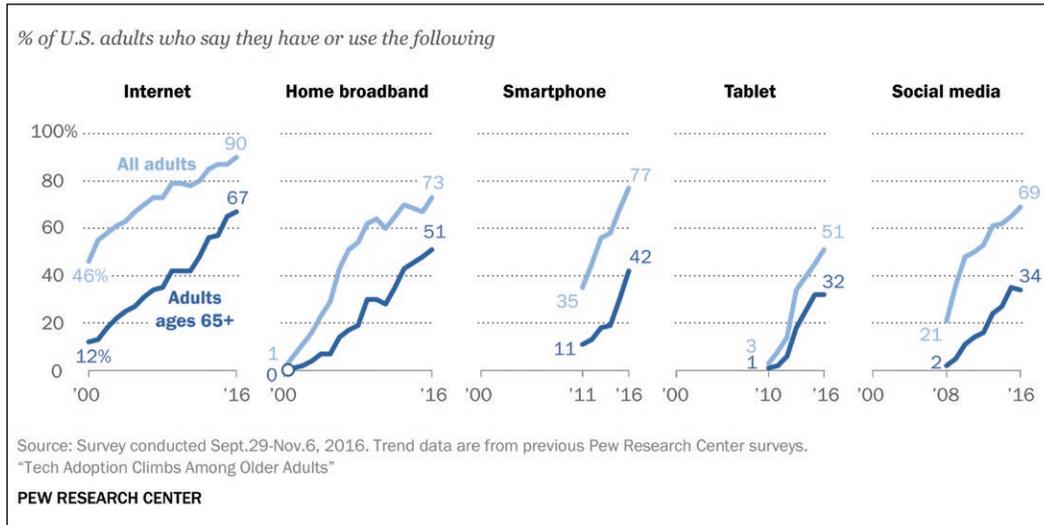
Tech Adoption Climbs Among Older Adults, a 2017 report published by the Pew Research Center (tinyurl.com/lbqv4u4), provides insightful statistics on how Americans older than age 65 use technology. It's a mixed picture: While broadband access and social media use are increasing among older adults, elders' technology adoption rates still lag behind the general population by double digits across all devices and platforms. Older adults are 23 percentage points behind all adults in Internet use, 35 points behind in smartphone use and 35 points behind in social media use. Only 34 percent of older adults use social media.

As with their younger counterparts, older adults use social media to find and share news and information and to connect with family and friends. And the small (but growing) portion of older Americans on social media is highly active; a separate survey by Pew (tinyurl.com/zk9nupm) found that older adults who engage with news on social media do so at similar rates to people ages 18 to 29. Still, older adults face barriers to adopting and using new technologies. With around 34 percent of older Internet users saying they lack the ability to use electronic devices to perform online tasks (such as banking and bill-paying), the defining barrier of entry for many is lack of access to training and support.

The Role of Facebook

In the April 2018 article, "Status Update: Gratifications Derived from Facebook Affordances by Older Adults," Eun Hwa Jung and S. Shyam Sundar (tinyurl.com/yascso4p) explore the benefits to older adults from using Facebook features. While many assume that using Facebook would increase social engagement, this study delves into the positive experiences associated with Facebook functionalities.

Smartphone Adoption Among Older Adults Has Nearly Quadrupled in the Last Five Years



Functionalities (or “affordances”) are features such as posting, direct messaging, reading content, commenting or updating one’s profile. Jung and Sundar evaluate which correspond to positive benefits to older adults, an important question that tackles the difference between passively consuming news on social media and actively posting content or changing profile presentations.

Jung and Sundar find that certain activities, such as customizing profiles, lead to positive outcomes associated with social engagement. With profile customization, the benefit comes from the older adult user’s feeling of agency. They also found positive associations between the number of status updates, comments and replies and a sense of activity and interaction. So not all Facebook activity is created equal, and activities requiring creative expression (where elders post something new instead of passively reading) seem to be associated with better outcomes.

Social Media and Older Adult Activism

In 2015, academics at the University of Toronto conducted an extensive literature review on the relationship between social media and older adult activism. They found that the great majority of articles about older adults being online were focused on the social aspects of participation—i.e., overcoming isolation—but very little had been written about the ways that social media participation shapes our political and civic dialogues and outcomes.

Citing one 93-year-old participant who experienced social media participation barriers “as a form of social exclusion,” the review’s authors called for a new emphasis on training and supporting older adults in using social media for advocacy and civic purposes.

In this vein, Older Adults Technology Services (OATS) recently embarked on a year-long initiative to help older activists and community leaders use social media and other digital tools for social activism. With sponsorship from Google, OATS recruited and is training more than 24 older adults as the first participants of ACTivate!, a 20-week leadership program that empowers older people to leverage technology for civic engagement.

In the program’s first phase, participants learned how to use social media (and other forms of technology) as advocacy tools. In the second phase (underway now), participants are developing and implementing a campaign around an issue they selected as a group—“the representation of older adults in media and technology.”

Jean, an ACTivate! participant from New York City, noted that ageism is still generally accepted in America, while other forms of prejudice such as racism and sexism are not. “There isn’t enough push-back from senior citizens against discrimination, and that needs to change,” he said. “There is a lack of knowledge among many older adults about how to fully participate in society because they are not computer literate and don’t understand the power of digital platforms. Many feel overwhelmed by technology, they don’t understand current civic engagement tactics. They are not empowered and become passive.”

In the context of the Digital Age (where civic engagement has moved online) and the digital divide (which left much of the older adult population behind), ACTivate! participants have found that elders not only are being left behind in terms of technology, but also they are excluded from policy conversations on issues important to them, including ageism. These findings resonate strongly with the results of the studies mentioned above.

Finally, while confronting ageism is a high priority for older adults, often ageism is compounded by other forms of discrimination. In discussions, ACTivate! participants agreed that older women of color suffer more from discrimination, and any strategy to combat ageism should acknowledge how these prejudices work together.

Social isolation and the digital divide between generations are interconnected social issues. Older adults *are* civically engaged, but have been left behind as technology has advanced. They possess limitless potential to develop as individuals, to support their families and communities and to change the world.

Only if we democratize access to social media can older adults effectively use it as a tool for positive change. We must infuse into the political discourse a narrative of older adults as both eager and capable of contributing to the social good. ■

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