

University

SOCIAL MEDIA AND SENIORS

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Course

Professor

Due Date

Social Media and Seniors

In the twenty-first century, the advanced development of information technologies impacts nearly every aspect of human life. The daily use of social media has become commonplace for millions of people around the globe. It is often superficially believed that the use of social networking platforms is a privilege of young and middle-aged populations. Therefore, seniors, as social media users, are often disregarded by opinion-makers, developers, and other stakeholders. In some cases, the disrespect to the needs and interests of elderly users might even be classified as an exertion of discrimination and ageism. Undoubtedly, social networking implies both benefits and risks for all groups of users, and seniors are not an exception. Eventually, elderly users should be facilitated by receiving an equal, easy, and safe access to content and communication opportunities associated with social media technologies.

In order to reflect on the issue comprehensively, it is primarily important to demolish the widely accepted stereotype of seniors as a group having little in common with modern technologies and social media, in particular. Last year's study by the Pew Research Center indicated that seniors have never been more digitally connected than they have been in the last decade. Notably, 59% of 65- to 69-year-old Americans use smartphones, while the share falls to 49% among 70- to 74-year-olds.¹ Undoubtedly, most of the seniors owning smartphones also tend to use social media on a more-or-less regular basis. The evidence showed that 34% of Americans ages 65 and up use social networking platforms to find information, share

¹ Monica Anderson and Andrew Perrin, "Technology Use Among Seniors", *Pew Research Center*, accessed June 13, 2018, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2017/05/17/technology-use-among-seniors/>.

experiences, and connect with friends or family members.² The figures speak for themselves: the number of seniors actively using social media continues to increase drastically.

The growing percentage of elderly people using social media stems directly from another global trend. Namely, this statement refers to the tendency of population aging, implying the increase of seniors in the general population. The number of seniors in the world is expected to reach the point of 2 billion people by 2050. Therefore, the fact that social media is designed primarily to meet the requests of young and middle-aged users appears to be largely discriminatory in regard to the elderly population. The lack of accessibility to social media can, therefore, be considered an exertion of ageism. Elderly people are largely limited in their abilities to access web-based communication platforms. Subsequently, decision-makers at all levels should reinforce their efforts aimed at facilitating seniors in receiving easy and safe access to social media.

At this point, it is necessary to discuss the positive aspects and benefits that elderly users can receive through accessing social media more thoroughly. The need for communication and social contacts represents one of the fundamental features underlying human nature. Retirement and aging are inevitably associated with the decay of one's social life. Due to limited mobility and, in many cases, health problems, the circle of an elderly person's contacts continuously decreases. In this context, using social media might help to undermine this negative trend. In particular, social networking platforms, like Facebook, can help seniors to keep in touch with their friends and restore connections with long-lost relatives and colleagues. To put it simply, social media can play an indispensable role as a means of socialization for elderly people.

² Monica Anderson and Andrew Perrin, "Technology Use Among Seniors", *Pew Research Center*, accessed June 13, 2018, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2017/05/17/technology-use-among-seniors/>.

Besides socialization, the use of social media can also reinforce seniors' access to useful information and entertaining content. In this regard, “e-health” initiatives may serve as an illustration. The term “e-health” is used to mark the wide range of activities aimed at providing users with healthcare services, information technology, and online communication tools. Specialized Facebook groups in which elderly users can share their health-related concerns and receive professional advice from medical workers may serve as an illustration of how e-health works. Using web-based communication tools, seniors can contact medical workers without leaving their homes. Networking platforms are particularly helpful for the elderly dwelling in remote areas as well as those restrained in movement.

At the same time, there also substantial risks and challenges stemming from the increased popularity of social media among the elderly. Paradoxically, the extensive use of social networking platforms may reinforce the psychological and physical isolation of the elderly. Online communication can never substitute real-life interpersonal contact and can have a positive effect only if it serves as a supplementing communication channel. Seniors' relatives should never disregard an opportunity for personal contact, even if they communicate regularly using social networks. In addition, spending too much time employing online platforms can have a negative impact on seniors' emotional and psychological health. For example, an uncontrolled access to social platforms can lead to attention deficiencies. Therefore, the time spent by seniors on social networking should always remain under control to make sure that the user's health and mental conditions are not threatened.

Another substantial threat associated with senior social networking stems from the difficulties with finding trusted resources. Undoubtedly, the safe and smooth use of social media is possible only when users are aware of the potential threats and the risks of data manipulation.

The recent presidential elections in the US may illustrate how the phenomenon of “fake news” shared on social media can influence national political processes.³ Senior users represent one of the most vulnerable groups in this regard. In addition, being unaware of the potential dangers, seniors are also likely to become victims of frauds, who are gaining an advantage of the blind confidence and loneliness experienced by a large group of old people. At the same time, the poor usability of technology still remains an obstacle for many seniors willing to connect with their friends and relatives by the means of social networking.

In this regard, it is necessary to focus more on the potential ways of tackling the above-outlined threats and overcoming corresponding challenges. First of all, it is a common responsibility of the relatives of seniors and the government represented by social workers to make sure that seniors' social connections are not limited to online networking. Additionally, to control the time spent on social media, software providers can develop special plug-in browser extensions that would provide elderly users with recommendations on how to use social media without risks to one's emotional and mental health. There are also other ways in which special extensions for browsers can customize the use of social media by seniors. For example, safe-mode algorithms can be used to identify and inform users of potentially malicious content shared online.

There are a plethora of opportunities associated with the increased popularity of social networking among elderly users. E-health services are only one example of how technologies can improve seniors' life quality. At the same time, social networking tools can be used to reinforce the active involvement of seniors in their country's political life. For instance, public opinion polls used by federal agencies while elaborating on strategic policy plans are in many

³ Neill Fitzpatrick, "Media Manipulation 2.0: The Impact of Social Media on News, Competition, and Accuracy", *Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communications* (January 2018), accessed June 13, 2018, <https://www.athensjournals.gr/media/2018-4-1-3-Fitzpatrick.pdf>.

cases disregarding the opinion of the elderly population, while seniors have fewer opportunities to participate physically in polls. Eventually, social platforms could fill that gap by providing the authorities with a direct communication channel for seniors without the need for the latter to leave their homes.

All things considered, the population of seniors, as well as social media senior users, continue to increase. Similarly to other modern technologies, social media implies both benefits and threats for all groups of users. Technology enables seniors to socialize by means of connecting with their friends and relatives. Yet, with uncontrolled use, it can also have a negative impact on seniors' emotional and mental health. E-health services may serve as a perfect illustration of how social media tools can improve seniors' quality of life. Subsequently, governmental agencies and software developers should reinforce their efforts to make social platforms safer and easier to navigate for elderly users.

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