

Social Media and Senior Citizens

R. David Johnson 25 June 2013

According to a study conducted by the *Pew Internet and American Life Project*, approximately 87% of senior citizens use online search engines such as Google, and a study conducted by the Nielsen Company found that 88.6% of senior citizens use the Internet to check their e-mail (Yang 2012). A recent study by Socialbakers found that the average age of a Facebook user changed from 29.53 in 2010 to 30.11 in 2013 as older people become more computer and social media-literate (Allen 2013). Such findings help substantiate the fact that senior citizens are more active with social media than previously assumed.

There are a few reasons why more senior citizens are using social media than expected. The findings from the study are likely because those who could afford a computer were adults in their forties when the Internet began to gain its popularity in the mid-1990s (Crouch 2011). The average price for a computer in the 1990s was approximately \$2,000.00 (Qasim, 2011). This is more than triple the cost of a basic personal computer today. Those who were able to afford a personal computer in the 1990s were presumably professionals, well-educated and in higher-income brackets (Crouch). These adults are now in

their 50s and 60s, are still active and well-educated with the Internet and social media. The following data from the *Pew Internet and American Life Project* illustrates the age ranges of individuals who use the Internet, social media sites and e-mail technology:

| AGE RANGE (YEARS) | INTERNET USE | SOCIAL MEDIA USE | E-MAIL USE |
|-------------------|--------------|------------------|------------|
| 18-29 | 97% | 86% | 91% |
| 30-49 | 91% | 72% | 93% |
| 50-64 | 77% | 50% | 90% |
| 65+ | 53% | 34% | 86% |

(Madden, M. 2010. Older Adults and Social Media: Social Networking Use Among Those Ages 50 and Older Doubled Over the Past Year)

Social Media has created a great opportunity for those individuals who fall within the senior citizen and elderly population in terms of increased social interconnection opportunities. Social interaction is an important human need at any age. Often, family and friends do not have time to care for senior citizens and the elderly, who may thus feel isolated from social interaction. Further, senior citizens tend to prefer independence, self-determination and quality of life in their own surroundings (i.e. home). One of the primary concerns for senior citizens living independently is the loss of social interaction which can lead to depression, isolation and decreased social activity. Social media, especially through the use of the Internet, is an excellent way in making both existing and new social connections more available to senior citizens (Fritsch et al. 2012).

There are a number of online communities that

specifically focus on social support for senior citizens. Some of the most popular online communities catering predominantly to this age group includes: AARP, SeniorNet.com, The Third Age, Yahoo Groups and SeniorSite.com (Chait 2013). Social support has been defined as "an exchange of verbal and non-verbal messages, which transmit emotion or information in order to reduce the uncertainty or the stress of a person" (Barnes and Duck 2007). Online communities allow seniors the opportunity to discuss and exchange experiences with their peers while also gaining social support. Further, most social network sites are free to join, with the only costs incurred include computer and Internet access.

Senior citizens can also employ social media outlets to engage in research, and to learn about topics that may be of interest to them. Such activities can lead to the origination of new hobbies, new business ideas and updated health information. Additionally, seniors can also learn about new products, work on their ancestry projects, and almost always learn something new along the way. Another benefit through the use of social media is the ability to access educational opportunities. Elderhostel, for example, is a worldwide network that provides access to educational opportunities for those at least 55 years of age. The program offers inexpensive short-term academic and cultural programs hosted by educational institutions around the world. The fee for such educational programs

is minimal, averaging approximately \$425 per student, including room, board and a week of college-level liberal arts and humanities courses (Virginia Division for the Aging 2013).

Many colleges and universities also offer courses for seniors, with information about such courses easily accessible on their websites. Also, many senior citizens who meet age and income restrictions may take these courses at little to no cost. According to a 2008 survey by the American Council on Education, 60% of accredited educational institutions offered tuition waivers to senior citizens (Brandon 2009). In some states, colleges and universities even offer free tuition benefits for senior citizens. In Texas, the College for All Texans Senior Citizen initiative encourages seniors to continue their education and stay involved with local colleges and universities by providing up to six credit hours of educational courses (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board 2013).

Further the state of South Carolina has adopted the following policy in catering to senior citizen education: "State-supported colleges and universities, and institutions under the jurisdiction of the State Board for Technical and Comprehensive Education, are authorized to permit legal residents of South Carolina who have attained the age of sixty to attend classes for credit or noncredit purposes on a space available basis with the required payment of tuition, if these persons meet admission and other standards deemed appropriate by

the college, university, or institution, and if these persons do not receive compensation as full-time employees (South Carolina Code of Laws, Section 59-111-320)."

Some institutions offer online courses, which can be a great social media tools for seniors in several ways. First, they provide senior citizens with an opportunity to socially interact with their peers. Online courses can eliminate the feeling of being isolated in a class of younger counterparts, as well as dispel feelings of insecurity of not completing their education earlier in life. Thirdly, senior citizens do not have to worry about revealing their age, educational and professional background or the like to fellow class members. Fourth, online courses allow senior citizens to read online posts and electronic articles, which in turn enables them to keep their minds active. Also, online courses are flexible for seniors. They can work on the assigned class material at their own pace while still participating in other activities and maintain a relatively low level of academic stress.

In recent years, social media has started to be utilized in senior housing communities (assisted living facilities and retirement communities). A majority of residents move to these communities for health purposes, less maintenance and for social company (especially in instances where a spouse has passed away). A social media activity program for senior residents was recently offered at Pine Grove Nursing Home, an affiliate of Pinecrest Medical Center in Powers, Michigan (Tellis-Nayak 2010). The assisted care

facility received a grant to buy a computer and a subscription to a web-based social media service called It's Never 2 Late (<http://www.in2l.com>), an online platform specifically created for person-centered care. Since the introduction of the program two years ago, residents at the facility have shown an interest in using the internet and an increased activity in actively emailing (Tellis-Nayak).

Social media can also be instituted in such living quarters for senior citizens to provide a system of social interaction and communication. The feeling of isolation can be decreased by giving senior citizens the feeling that they are physically closer to friends and relatives. Such impressions can be enhanced by means of audio and visual presentations, such as through online video conferencing.

This type of interactive social media for seniors is known as Ambient Assisted Shared Living (AMASL) system architecture. AMASL is currently being used in a number of retirement and assisted living communities in Europe. With AMASL, audio/video equipment is built into homes of seniors, friends and family, where all parties are able to interact with one another. For example, a live canvas and projector is usually installed at a convenient place in each home where everyone is able to interact with one another (Hummel et al.). Friends and relatives are able to remotely track senior citizens in their homes, as well as check on the state of the senior's dwelling including open doors

and windows through the use of special sensors that monitor every aspect of the home. These special sensors are able to detect emergency situations where senior citizens might require help or are unable to care for themselves. Any abnormal behavior in the senior citizen's home will trigger an alarm.

Smartphones are also changing the way in which senior citizens use social media to interact with others. An estimated 15% of those who are age 55 or older are now using smartphones (Carracher 2011). Smartphones or other mobile devices such as Tablets can enable senior citizens to reach out to family and friends and explore the web. They also permit family and friends of senior citizens to manage daily check-ins to ensure that seniors' daily needs are being met, and to catch any possible early signs of elderly neglect or abuse.

Studies have also been conducted regarding the ability of Alzheimer's patients to use mobile phones. In one case study individuals with Alzheimer's in Belgium were able to properly use a mobile phone after only two instructional (Salmon et al. 2002).

Although about 90% of Americans ages of 18-49 have cell phones, approximately only 57% of citizens over the age of 65 own them, according to the Pew Research Center (Madden). The cost of mobile devices may be one reason for this. However, smartphones are becoming more reasonably priced for seniors, as low as \$15.00, with

service for about \$7.00 per month (Karp 2011).

Additionally, according to David Herman, spokesman for the Alliance for Generational Equity: "We're in an environment where a lot of seniors are having to decide between rent and medicine and food, and dollars are critical...The less expensive we can make this, the more people we're going to have that will use a service they desperately need" (Karp). However, there are resources available to seniors to help obtain access to smartphones, including financial assistance from federal and state programs where a senior citizen may qualify for a free cell phone service plan.

One of the primary problems associated with linking senior citizens to social media is the challenge in adopting new technologies, in order to utilize social media's benefits. Further senior citizens are least likely to try new technologies or find them to be mentally stimulating. According to Parasuraman and Colby: "Older consumers are more prone to possess outright skepticism about technology... They are far more likely than others to believe the benefits of technology are grossly overstated, and much greater proportion agrees ... that technology might provide disappointing results," (Parasuraman and Colby 2011). In regards to using computers and the Internet for social media, the most frequently cited reason for not utilizing such technologies is the assumption that it will not be useful to them (Freese et al. 2006).

Further, inability to use social media technology can place

senior citizens who are less mobile than their peers at a disadvantage in being able to live independently and connect with friends and family. Senior citizens also generally lack confidence in using new technologies. Sometimes they may feel as if they are 'too old to learn new things' and may even experience computer-related anxiety. Screens can be too small and websites too difficult for senior citizens to read. A study conducted by Hata et al., concluded that the re-design of a keyboard combining the features of a touchscreen and a dictionary could be highly beneficial to senior citizens for both computers and mobile phone devices (Hata et al. 2001). A majority of senior citizens are more engaged in reading newspapers, watching television and pursuing hobbies. According to one study, 57% of seniors read the newspaper on a typical day compared to 40% of all Americans (Fox 2004). With technology at their fingertips, seniors can choose from hundreds of online newspapers, from all over the world.

Hearing-related problems may also cause social media disadvantages to senior citizens.. Although headsets can be used to help those with hearing disabilities, most do not use them. A research study conducted in Finland in 2005 found that 15% of those over 75 years of age with hearing disabilities do not use headsets due to the inability to understand how they work, or because they are not devices they would normally choose, due to either in shape or size (Lupsakko et al. 2005). In another study

conducted with senior citizens who used hearing aids found that approximately 8% of the participants showed difficulty in listening, and 46% failed in the acoustic tests that were conducted (Smeeth et al. 2002). The Fletcher et al. study also found that more than half of the senior citizens who failed the test had no special equipment, though 60% of them that wore hearing aids used them regularly. From the results of these studies, it is apparent that social media technologies can be challenging for senior citizens with hearing-related disabilities.

Senior citizens do tend to find access to health information increasingly important due to advancing health concerns and problems they encounter as they age. According to one study, health education is one of the factors which have resulted in the decrease in the number of chronically disabled senior citizens and those who require nursing home care (Fox 2001). Studies have shown that when senior citizens go online, they frequently look for health information (Fox & Madden, 2006).

However, there is concern that senior citizens are using the Internet to access health information which may be inaccurate (Lorraine and Park 2006). Furthermore, senior citizens who are computer literate tend to believe that many sources of health information they've obtained online are accurate (McMillian and Macias 2008). Many online health sources are actually sponsored commercial (branded drugs), media companies and general commercial sites which may provide misleading rather

than truthful information to online consumers. It is critical that senior citizens be properly educated in evaluating and interpreting appropriate and useful Internet resources in regards to health information.

Another growing concern in regards to senior citizens using social media technology includes Internet investment fraud. Although most senior citizens use the Internet as a form of social interaction with friends and family, many, just like younger adults, will encounter some type of investment opportunity while surfing the Internet. Some may use the Internet as a reference tool based on a solicitation received through the mail, either postal or through electronic mail. It is therefore important that our senior citizens be as educated as possible about fraudulent scams exposed to them while using any social media technology.

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