



**What is the role of social media communication in older people's lives
and to what extent can it help mitigate loneliness?**

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Introduction

This study aims to investigate the significance of social media communication in the lives of older adults and its potential to alleviate loneliness, as it is an area of growing concern. This can be seen in reported findings that 15% of older adults report frequent feelings of loneliness (Newman et al., 2019) and that number has faced a significant increase post-COVID-19 (Geirdal et al., 2021). This research explores the perceptions and experiences of older individuals with social media. The study is interdisciplinary in nature, drawing from media, sociology, psychology, and medical literature. The study was not designed to draw any definitive conclusion but rather analyse the highly subjective and personal responses from individuals themselves to gather an understanding of social media impacts from a first-person perspective.

The focus of this report will be on the findings of the online survey. However, there is an additional literature review conducted on this topic which can be reviewed independently; however, it is referenced within this report. It is not a requirement to have read the literature, but its findings are useful to understanding the current research landscape on the topic and how it relates to the findings of this survey. Access to the literature review (and a research poster summarising this report) can be found at the bottom of the paper, however, a shortened summary will be provided below.

Methodology

This research involved a qualitative survey that was distributed online and garnered responses from 20 individuals. Ethical guidelines, as outlined by the AREA FREC research ethics committee at the University of Leeds, were adhered to (reference: BESS+ FREC 2023-0653-831). The survey was distributed through social media, mailing lists and word-of-mouth approaches. It was designed to have a smaller sample size but the focus being higher quality and longer responses. Additionally, a comprehensive literature review was conducted, with a focus on thematic areas including well-being, loneliness, social media, the impact of COVID-19, and various research methods. The survey findings and the literature review are being combined into a thematic analysis which is this paper's focus.

Literature Review

The literature review highlighted a research gap concerning the influence of social media on older adults, a gap that supported this interdisciplinary approach as the available literature had to be drawn from a range of sources and journals. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the attention on this subject as older adults turned to online interactions as a countermeasure to the isolation brought about by lockdowns, social restrictions, and their heightened vulnerability to health issues (Mckniff et al., 2023). Existing literature overwhelmingly concurs that social media and technology can complement face-to-face communication, and enrich connections, but it is not

positioned as a replacement (Chen and Schulz, 2016). The findings from the survey consistently echoed this sentiment. Respondents who engaged with social media iterated that it heightened their sense of connection, yet they underscored that in-person interactions held primacy in terms of maintaining their well-being. Participants notably made a clear distinction between online communication and what they often termed "real communication," which suggests that verbal communication holds a higher perceived value than its online counterparts. Although there is no research, we were able to access that directly covered this concept the researchers Pittman and Reich (2016) did assess a similar concept in which they analysed people's perceived values of different types of communication in social media. In their study they found that image-based posts on social media provided more positive gratifications than text-based posts and therefore images were perceived as more valuable. In a broader way this same concept is applied to the value of in-person versus online interaction as perceived by the sample of this study.

However, there is a consistent lack of consensus from the currently available literature on the extent to which social media can support an older adult's emotional and social well-being. This study is unique in the sense that the aim is to not draw a definitive or numeric conclusion, but rather operates like a pilot study by gathering a range of primary perspectives on the matter and analysing the common themes within these responses. This study, alongside the literature review, will be a good starting point for future research as it opens many pathways for further analysis and approaches.

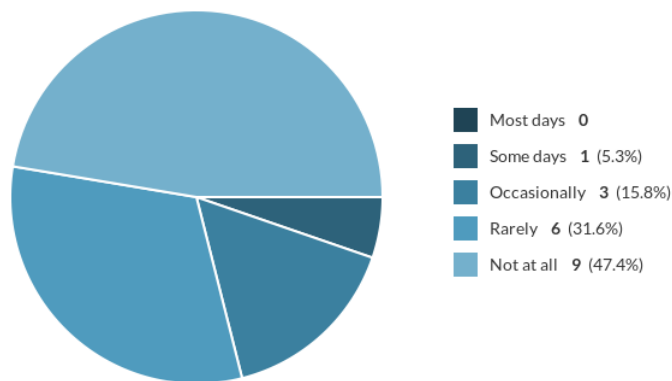
Furthermore, there is a significant issue within the literature around sampling that was not able to be addressed in this study but could warrant further research. A sizable portion of participants typically involved in studies on social media are in higher socioeconomic brackets and typically have a higher level of education not reflective of the population (Simons et al., 2022). This potentially may be impacting results as it is also found that those in both these categories have greater access to technology and a greater ability to integrate social media into their daily life (Conroy et al., 2020). Potential in future it may warrant research into the impacts of socioeconomic background on older adults' use of the internet/social media.

Findings and Analysis

From the responses to the survey, five salient themes emerged, repeated across responses to various questions: community, distrust, technological disadvantages, verbal communication, and hobbies. These themes were identified through iterative coding in the responses, although it is crucial to emphasize that these themes do not purport to represent the feelings of every individual participant. Instead, they encapsulate the most commonly occurring codes in the responses.

Well-being

The survey was thoughtfully divided into two sections. The first segment concentrated on well-being and included four scaled questions. This approach aimed to gauge the perceived mental well-being of respondents in relation to their social media use. Notwithstanding the small sample size, responses reflected percentages reported in larger studies. For instance, 15.8% of respondents reported semi-frequent feelings of loneliness, a statistic that mirrored the findings of Newman et al. (2019). However, the study's purpose is not to gauge the sample's overall well-being or relate that to the older adult population. It was primarily done so that in analysis any conclusions could be made linking perceived mental well-being and social media use.



[Figure 1: Responses to question 4 - Have you experienced any feelings of loneliness or social disconnect in the past month? Displayed as a pie chart]

Two free-text responses within this section yielded particularly insightful results. Participants highlighted the positive impact of engaging in social activities on their mental health, with a recurring emphasis on the themes of hobbies and community. Hobbies were viewed as a source of belonging without excessive emotional strain. This was described succinctly by one participant: "They [hobbies] give a sense of belonging to something that I like without it feeling terribly emotional". While community and hobbies were often intertwined, there remained a distinction. Community was often linked to physical spaces and interactions with acquaintances, such as family members, neighbours, and colleagues. In contrast, communication through hobbies or interests could involve interactions with strangers or take place in solitude, depending on the nature of the activity.

Impact of COVID-19

Responses to question 8, which probed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on socialization, yielded surprisingly positive insights. Online interactions, particularly through messaging and video-conferencing platforms, were deemed acceptable substitutes for face-to-face interactions during the pandemic. Participants emphasized

that being "online" allowed for a continued sense of community, often referring to the adoption of video-conferencing software, with Zoom being the most mentioned platform. Video conferencing was perceived as a substitute for face-to-face interaction, helping to bridge the physical gap. Moreover, respondents reiterated the importance of hobbies and interests in maintaining mental health, particularly during the pandemic. Many noted the need for "sufficient inner resources" to sustain their mental well-being during the time of isolation, some detailing it as a time of peak "productivity and fulfilment." Of course, many discussed the struggles related to the pandemic, describing it as "difficult" and a negative experience for their well-being but each response that detailed this also stated that social media was a positive experience during this time. One respondent discussed the importance of social media in combating feelings of loneliness as it helped ease their anxiety.

Social Media Use

The second section of the survey was explicitly dedicated to social media use. Approximately 80% of respondents reported some degree of engagement with social media, with variations in the extent of usage. Notably, a sizable portion of respondents had either discontinued their use of social media (15%) or had never used it (20%). The reasons for discontinuation or abstention were categorized into two main themes: distrust and technological disadvantages.

Distrust emanated from concerns about the safety of online platforms, encompassing issues such as scams, hacking, anonymity online, and spam. The theme of technological disadvantages encompassed struggles with physical technology, such as difficulties accessing or operating digital devices. A noteworthy 63.16% of respondents mentioned facing some form of technological disadvantage, which ranged from an inability to use social media at all to requiring minimal support from family members to operate devices.

The impact of these two factors, distrust, and technological barriers, appeared to foster a general unwillingness to actively engage with social media. There was a palpable lack of trust in the safety of online platforms, coupled with the sentiment that these platforms were often perplexing to navigate. These factors, in tandem, led to limited engagement, with some individuals opting for passive consumption of content. This passive engagement entailed using social media primarily to view the activities of friends and family without active participation, thereby not contributing content themselves. While this passive approach to social media usage is entirely valid, it should not be seen as a condemnation; rather, it underscores the need for meaningful engagement to encourage and sustain interactions.

Moreover, some participants questioned the value of social media compared to other activities in their lives. Some respondents expressed concerns about the excessive time consumption of platforms like Instagram, stating that these platforms are "no substitute

for seeing family and friends face-to-face.” This sentiment ties back to the notion that communication or engagement in online spaces needs to provide meaningful value to older individuals. For example, in a study conducted by Simons et al. (2022) they found that older adults were often passive consumers of social media, at most, due to the low levels of “social capital” it provides leading to older users feeling as though they do not benefit enough from engaging with social media. Simons et al. (2022) discusses this as typically older adults place a higher value on emotionally connected relationships than other life-stages, therefore social media's ability to enable connection is a bigger concern for older adults which has been reflected in the survey responses. This concern is interlinked with the underlying distrust in online platforms, which, in part, dissuades users from actively contributing content. As one participant succinctly put it, "I found Instagram consumed too much of my time, mostly on matters offering little more than curiosity or novelty." This sentiment reinforces the idea that the perceived value of online interactions plays a pivotal role in encouraging and sustaining engagement.

However, it is crucial to note that not all interactions with social media carry negative associations. Indeed, several respondents highlighted the profound and enriching impact of social media on their connections with friends and family. They emphasized that social media had enriched their lives by facilitating communication and sharing of photos with loved ones. These individuals, however, were also cognizant of social media's limitations and did not perceive it as a replacement for physical interaction. Instead, they saw it as a tool for enhancing existing connections. There was a significant repetition among individuals who used social media to bridge geographical gaps between friends and family who lived far away. Many described social media as invaluable when maintaining connections across long distances, but this was specific to individuals with social circles beyond their physical location.

Discussion

The study's findings underscore the multifaceted role of social media in older adults' lives. While it has the potential to enhance connections and combat loneliness, it is not a panacea for the deep-seated need for face-to-face interaction. Distrust and technological barriers pose significant challenges for older individuals, hindering their engagement with online platforms. The emphasis on hobbies and interests as sources of well-being highlights the importance of meaningful engagement in online spaces. This research underscores that social media should be viewed as a supplementary tool, complementing rather than replacing in-person communication. A nuanced understanding of the relationship between social media, loneliness, and the well-being of older adults is essential.

Conclusion

This thematic analysis paper offers insights into the complex and multifaceted role of social media in the lives of older adults. It emphasizes the enduring importance of community, hobbies, and face-to-face interaction in maintaining well-being. While social media can provide valuable connections, it should be considered as a supplement rather than a replacement for in-person communication. Addressing the challenges of distrust and technological barriers is crucial to harnessing the potential of social media in mitigating loneliness among older adults. The findings of this study underscore the need for further research in this under-explored field to gain a deeper understanding of the intricate dynamics at play.

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Appendix

[Additional documents associated with this survey and project](#)

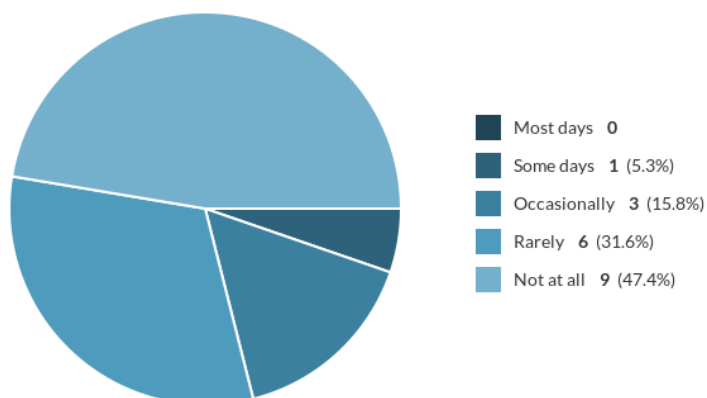


Figure 1 (Above): Responses to question 4 - Have you experienced any feelings of loneliness or social disconnect in the past month? Displayed as a pie chart.

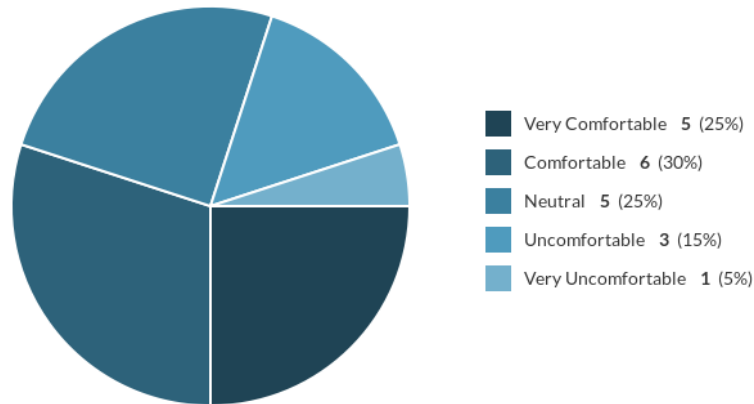


Figure 2 (Above): Responses to question 5 – How comfortable are you discussing your mental health and emotional well-being with others? Displayed as a pie chart.

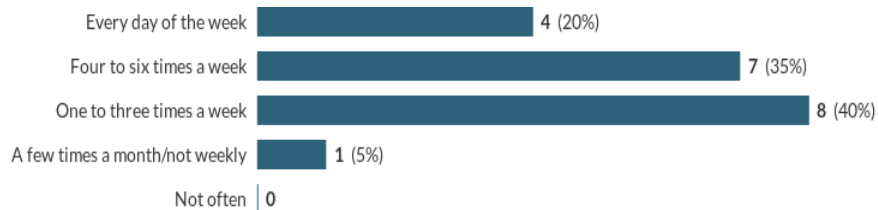


Figure 3 (Above): Responses to question 6 – How often do you engage in social activities or gatherings with friends, family, or community groups? Displayed as a bar chart.

Section	Question
Well-being	3. How would you describe your overall well-being at the moment?
	4. Have you experienced any feelings of loneliness or social disconnect in the past month?
	5. How comfortable are you discussing your mental health and emotional well-being with others?
	6. How often do you engage in social activities or gatherings with friends, family, or community groups? This can include one-on-one interactions or group interactions.
	7. In your experience, how does participating in social activities or gatherings impact your emotional well-being?

	8. How do you cope when your opportunities for socializing are limited, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic? Do you have any alternative approaches that you turn to in such situations?
Social Media Use	9. Have you used social media currently or in the past? If so, for how long have you used social media and what led you to start using it? If not, please discuss why you do not use them.
	10. If you do use social media which application (for example, Instagram or Facebook) do you use the most and what is your experience using it?
	11. If you do use social media in what ways do you engage with others on the applications you use, for example, do you post photos, videos or text and do you interact with other people's posts?
	12. If you have never used social media applications, do you feel you have/use an alternative? If so, please state what it is and why.
	13. Have you encountered any challenges or barriers when using social media applications? For example, issues with access to technology or struggling to understand it, if so, were you able to overcome them and if so, how?
	14. Can you share any specific examples of how social media has helped you feel connected or engaged with friends, family, or other individuals? Please do not include any names or locations.
	15. How does social media impact your well-being? Discuss in as much detail as you feel comfortable.
	16. Do you feel that social media is as useful as face-to-face interactions to communicate with others?
	17. Do you feel that social media is as useful as phone or video calls as a means to communicate with others?
	18. Have you noticed any changes in your social support networks or the quality of your relationships as a result of engaging in social media communication? If so, how would you describe these changes?
	19. Is there anything else you would like to add pertaining to any of the above questions?

Figure 4 (Above): A table displaying the questions of the online survey referring to its section and number for reference.

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