

The Role of Social Media in Older Adults' Wellbeing: A Literature Review

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Introduction

The impact of social media on well-being and loneliness has been widely explored in academic research. However, there is a significant gap in understanding how social media affects the well-being of older adults aged 65 and above. This literature review aims to provide an overview of the current state of research on the topic and identify key findings and areas that require further investigation. This information will then be used to support the understanding and focus of the accompanying qualitative survey.

Defining Social Media and Technology

Before delving into the literature, it is essential to define the terms used in this review. Social media encompasses traditional platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, as well as messaging and calling software like WhatsApp and Zoom (Pittman and Reich, 2016). Social technology refers to the devices used to access social media, such as smartphones and laptops (Newman et al., 2019). The distinction between these terms is crucial especially when discussing the sociological impact of the two. As Newman et al. (2019) have discussed social technology and social media exist in broad contexts of communication that have many nuances depending on the individual, it is therefore important to understand the differences between how they are used. Newman et al. (2019) reported that the adoption of social media was steadily increasing in older adults and with that the capabilities for potential benefits.

Themes and Disciplinary Perspectives

This literature review organises the existing research into several themes, including mental well-being, loneliness, social media, technology, older adults, and research methods. These themes reflect the multidisciplinary nature of the topic, which draws insights from fields like media studies, communications, sociology, health, and psychology. Since there was limited literature on the current topic it meant branching out into further disciplines - at first this was a concern about how to homogenize such varied approaches to study and understanding. However, I believe the range of approaches that have been proposed for this topic has allowed for a wider range of perspectives on the issue which is important when something like this does not have one clear answer. Although the studies from media studies journals tend to disagree

with those from a health perspective, they each provide a unique analysis and more importantly, contribute greatly to the field.

Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic brought attention to the importance of online communication for all age groups, particularly older adults who were more medically vulnerable and often faced nationwide lockdowns (Geirdal et al., 2021). Consequently, there was a notable increase in research exploring the effects of social media on older adults during the pandemic. As a result, there was an increase in literature post-2020 exploring the capabilities of social media and its impact on loneliness and well-being, however much of this was in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and therefore findings must be recognised as being in the context of lockdowns which had a significant impact on a person's mental state and willingness to adopt social technology (Mckniff et al., 2023).

Most of the research in this time frame found positive associations between social media and mental well-being, particularly in older age groups. As Hawkley et al. (2021) discussed in their study maintaining contact for older adults was crucial for their mental health as increased loneliness can lead to depression and negatively impact physical health. Similarly, Geirdal et al. (2021) conducted a quantitative study that noted the increase in emotional distress during the pandemic was at an all-time high in adults. Although Geirdal et al. (2021) assessed that the distress was largely situational to the pandemic and social restrictions it was still important to examine potential solutions to mitigate this distress such as social media which in the studies data did seem to improve respondents' well-being and reduce feelings of loneliness to an extent. However, Hawkley's et al. (2021) study also found that remote contact, via social media or social technology, could not be used as a full replacement for in-person contact even during a pandemic and that feelings of loneliness during this period were still prevalent despite and uptake of online-based connection.

Social Media as a Supplement for In-Person Interaction

Most studies agree that social media serves as a supplement to in-person interactions and can enhance social connections. While online interactions alone may not be enough to sustain overall well-being, they can improve the quality of life and alleviate feelings of loneliness and social isolation in older adults. Notably, no studies found negative associations between social media use and loneliness, though some indicated a lack of significant impact on their respondents (Kim and Lee, 2023). The participant's prior experience with social media and willingness to embrace it were crucial factors affecting these outcomes (Mckniff et al., 2023). This does not dismiss the capabilities of social media or technology, but it does recognise that online interactions do not exist within a vacuum and therefore external factors, such as an individual's health, relationships and socioeconomic status, must be considered when analysing someone's wellbeing (Simons et al., 2022).

Sampling Issues

Sampling emerged as a significant concern in literature. Researchers encountered challenges in recruiting participants, leading to two main issues: either a lack of participants altogether or a skewed sample consisting of individuals with higher socioeconomic status and greater digital media literacy (Conroy et al., 2020). The socioeconomic status of an individual was a repeated factor that had a more than significant impact on results as it can lead to a number of compounding results (Simons et al., 2022). For example, those in a higher economic class, with more disposable income, typically have better access to technology and the resources to learn how to use it which can then make it easier to adapt to one's lifestyle (Conroy et al., 2020). As a result, studies recognised that when samples had a more than proportionate sample of those in higher socioeconomic brackets could impact the reliability of findings (Geirdal et al., 2021). Future studies should address these biases and strive for more diverse and representative samples.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this literature review highlights the scarcity of research examining the role of social media in older adult's well-being. While social media appears to benefit older adults' connectedness and mental well-being, further studies are necessary to establish concrete conclusions and address sampling biases. It is crucial to promote positive engagement with social media among older adults to harness its potential benefits fully (Chen and Schulz, 2016). As the digital landscape continues to evolve, understanding the impact of social media on older adults remains a crucial area for investigation and should be approached with interdisciplinary collaboration and rigorous research methods.

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