Social Media Use by Older Adults
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Abstract
Social media, in all its manifestations, has become a ubiquitous part of our culture, with the concepts of “like,” “recommend,” and “share” taking on new meanings in a wirelessly connected world. “Social media” generally refers to the use of technology for purposes of social interaction, technology that is characterized by voluntary participation, easy of use, immediacy, and reciprocity. While it was originally the domain of primarily younger users, recent statistics show that the greatest increase in adoption rate is by older users (65+). One reason for this increase is the ability of social media to facilitate social connectivity among people who, by virtue of geographic distance, physical immobility, or life-changing circumstances, would otherwise be socially isolated. Despite the vast numbers of older adults embracing social media, however, significant barriers prevent its being used by everyone. These barriers include poverty, lack of access to broadband connection, absence of training and support, poor interface design, and sensory impairments. Even if these obstacles could be overcome, social media is not a rich enough communications channel to completely replace people’s need for meaningful face-to-face interactions.

Much of the social media focus has been on its adoption by teenagers and young adults; less is on adoption by older adults. This report describes social media in the most general terms, details how widespread its use is, explores what social media can offer, and discusses some of the barriers to social media adoption, all through the filter of older adult users.

Introduction
Social media has been much in the public eye lately, from corporate mergers, acquisitions, and lawsuits to the release of a popular movie about the founder of a prominent social networking company. Psychologists and cultural pundits comment on the possible ramifications of new communication modalities, while teachers and parents bemoan ubiquitous use by the younger generation.

Where, in all this, do older adults stand? How are they using it? In what ways could they benefit by using social media? What are some of the barriers to its use by older adults? This paper provides an overview of the current use of social media by older adults.

What Is “Social Media”?
The term “social media” generally refers to the use of technology for purposes of social interaction. Much of the social media receiving so much public attention involves internet-based applications, either on computers or on mobile phones. Some characteristics of social media are:

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1 This report represents an updating of a paper written in 2010, which was submitted for a course in gerontology.
• Users’ ability to opt in or out (choosing to view, receive, or subscribe to a media source)
• Immediacy (nearly instantaneous interaction, not limited by business hours or other schedules)
• Reciprocity (two-way interaction between participants)
• Accessibility (widely available; doesn’t require special training or expensive equipment).

Common types of social media include e-mail, video chat, instant messaging, blogging, vlogging, photo and video sharing, webcasts, and podcasts. All of these technologies allow people to connect and communicate with one another. LeadingAge\(^2\) provides a reasonably high-level explanation of the major social media venues (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) on their Connect with LeadingAge page.

There is likely to be a social network already out there to appeal to every individual, and if not, they can create their own. “Top 10 Best Senior Social Networking Sites and Online Tools” describes the senior-friendly characteristics of their top picks, identifies the intended audience, and lists the featured topics, games, and applications. [Hardiman, 2010]

The old-fashioned “land line” phone may be on its way out, as cell phone usage continues to surge. Newer models provide such exotic applications as GPS, instant translation, restaurant locators, as well as supporting video, email, and internet browsing (at additional expense). Among certain segments of the population (anyone under 50), the telephone’s voice modality may be losing ground to texting.

Do Older Adults Use Social Media Today?

There is no question but that more and more older adults are online. From 2000-2009, there was a 70% increase in internet use by people aged 50-64, and a 38% increase by those 65+. [Lenhart et al., 2010] The year 2010 showed an 88% increase in social media use by people aged 50-64, and a 26% increase by those 65+. [Madden, 2010] He found:

> “Although email continues to be the primary way that older users maintain contact with friends, families and colleagues, many users now rely on social network platforms to help manage their daily communications—sharing links, photos, videos, news and status updates with a growing network of contacts.”
> [Madden, 2010]

Older adults’ use of social media has been amply documented, as in an AARP study on Social Media and Technology, which found that 40% of adults over 50 are either very or extremely comfortable on the internet, and 37% of those use social networking sites, mostly Facebook. [Koppen, 2010] Another AARP study of adults 45+ found that 73-76% of this group frequently use email, but 63% never use instant messaging, and 57% never use social networking (including Facebook, Twitter, etc.), and 71-73% never use online forums or message boards [AARP, 2010].

\(^2\) Formerly AAHSA, American Association of Homes and Services for the Aging.
The Pew report [Madden, 2010] suggests that the increase in use of social media by older adults may be driven by increased access to high-speed broadband: among those older adults with broadband connections, their internet usage is nearly that of younger users. The same report suggests three reasons why increasing numbers of older adults are using social media:

1. Social networking is particularly appropriate for reconnecting with people from one’s past. Older users who have retired or changed careers find this to be true.
2. More older adults than younger adults have some type of chronic health concern, for which social networking (blogging, online health forums) is a good source of support.
3. “Social media bridges generational gaps” - The social media context lends itself to supporting communication between people of different ages (sharing photos and videos, taking life histories, blogging).

What Does Social Media Have to Offer Older adults?

“Social media provides isolated individuals of any age group with a socializing outlet. It is not uncommon for the elderly in our society to feel as if they have lost their social voice, and the use of social media restores this voice, oftentimes from the comfort of one’s home. The value in maintaining this voice for the elderly individual is undeniable.” [Morrison, 2010]

The most obvious benefit of social media is that it can help people connect with each other. As we age, we tend to lose some members of our social support network: they change jobs, retire, shift into other social circles, move away, become less mobile, or die. And as our own mobility and energy are reduced over time, it may become more difficult for us to stay in touch with those we know, or to make new social contacts. Being able to send off an email is usually faster and easier than writing a letter and mailing it, and the recipient gets it significantly sooner. Using social media to stay in touch with grandchildren and other younger people is often more successful than hoping they’ll send a letter or come visit: it’s meeting them on their own terms, and at a low opportunity cost.

In addition to helping us keep in touch with our existing social contacts, social media has the potential to broaden our social network. Social networking sites often host special interest groups. So, for example, I could post a query asking for help resolving a problem (often a computer problem!), or looking for a recipe, or wondering if anyone in the local area will be attending a given performance at the local theatre. People will submit their responses, and I can follow up with them if I so choose. Thus, social network participants can actually meet new people, even if the relationship never progresses beyond the virtual.

This mode of communication may be unfamiliar to those older adults who have not been introduced to it at their workplace or by friends or family members, but it does offer an incredibly rich variety of options. And thus its second greatest benefit: it can keep users engaged, stimulated, learning. Particularly for older adults who are otherwise socially isolated, or who are in danger of slipping into a state of cognitive atrophy, the internet offers salvation.
In 2009, The National Institute on Aging awarded a 5-year, $1.9 million grant to the University of Alabama at Birmingham to examine “the ability of computer use and social media networking to enhance the quality of life of elderly adults through online social connections and easier access to health information.” [Short, 2009]

**What Are the Barriers to Elder Use of Social Media?**

For the uninitiated, computers themselves can be very intimidating. Many senior centers, public libraries, etc., offer introductory internet workshops geared specifically for seniors. Shelia Cotton, the principal investigator on the UAB study mentioned above, commented in an online interview that many of the seniors were initially reluctant to touch the computers, for fear of breaking them. In that study, graduate students will train 300 older adults residing in assisted living facilities how to use email and Facebook, search for health information, blog, and interact with online groups.

Some people adapt quite readily: Ivy Bean, of England, was almost 105 when she died. She had migrated to a Twitter account, with 27,000 followers, after maxing out the number of friends allowed by Facebook (5,000). [Gray, 2009] Edsel Odom, 69 years old and the victim of two strokes, is limited to movements of his head and one thumb. His computer system, which has been specially equipped with an infrared sensor, allows him to blog and to use Facebook, Twitter, and—his personal favorite—MySpace. [Morrison, 2010]

Living in Silicon Valley, it is all too easy to forget about the digital divide. Not everybody has a home computer with high-speed access, or a smart phone with internet capabilities. Currently about 75% of US households have internet in the home. For most media-rich online transactions, users cannot get by with dialup access. Broadband internet is available in 64% of US households, but older adults are only about half as likely to have it as the younger cohorts. [US Dept. of Commerce, 2010] So, actual access to the network is essential, and those who cannot afford it, who live in areas where it’s not offered, or who cannot manage the learning curve, are thus excluded.

Technical designs sometime suffers from something known as “feature bloat,” which occurs when designers are allowed to stick any old “wouldn’t it be cool if…” function onto a device or system, rather than letting user-centered studies drive the design. Some interesting work has come out of research labs, work which has specifically focussed on the needs, desires, habits, and capabilities of older adults.

Numerous researchers have studied the cognitive needs of older adults using the internet. They look at visual discrimination, distractability, short-term memory ability, and other traits associated with seniors, to measure how well websites work for this population. However, almost all the design guidelines proposed for older adults would also benefit the general population, so perhaps a common-sense approach would be for web designers to simply pay more attention to basic human interface design practices. After all, it’s not as if there’s a significant user base clamoring for busier, more cluttered computer screens with harder-to-remember terms, inconsistent layout, and less intuitive organization!
For example, Microsoft Research Cambridge (UK) reviewed the relevant literature in gerontology and human-computer interface (HCI) design, and offered some observations to consider when designing technologies for mediating communications for older adults [Lindley et al., 2008]:

1. Maintaining existing close relationships is more important than creating new relationships.
2. Family relationships are not necessarily reciprocal, i.e. older adults may see more value in being able to know the whereabouts, activities, etc. of their younger family members than vice versa.
3. Asymmetry is acceptable in familiar relationships, but not in friendships.
4. Balance of relationships may change as people age, but technologies need to be sensitive to the needs of older adults to maintain a sense of privacy and autonomy.

AARP published an expert review\(^3\) of 50 web sites, based on usability heuristics adapted for a senior audience. [Chisnell & Redish, 2005] Agelight LLC offers design guidelines in a physiological context. [Agelight, 2001]

**Social Media: Cures Loneliness, Depression, and the Common Cold?**

Definitely not the common cold and, unfortunately, probably not loneliness or depression, either. It’s a mistake to think that giving someone an email account puts them at the center of the universe. Just as there’s a difference between being alone and lonely, there’s a difference between being “not alone” and “not lonely.”

An AARP survey examined which factors were predictive of loneliness among adults 45+, and uncovered some interesting results. Adults who were younger, had never been married, and who had lower incomes were more likely to be lonely. Lonely adults experienced a lack of social support, had a decreasing social network, and were more likely to surf the internet. However, they were also more likely to believe that they had fewer significant connections, that internet use itself contributed to their loneliness, and that the connections they made (on the internet) are more lightweight. On the other hand, the same study found that people who did not have their own regular internet access were more slightly more likely to be lonely (only 7% of the survey participants did not already have internet access, and were provided it with for the study). Of course, it takes two to be connected: participants whose children used the internet were less lonely than those whose children didn’t use it. [AARP, 2010]

Findlay reported mixed results from literature reviews of several types of “interventions” for loneliness and social isolation in older adults. [Findlay, 2003] In two separate studies listed in the same paper, teleconferencing was found to reduce support needs and loneliness, especially for geographically isolated people. In three other studies of older adults, internet use, email, and online courses reduced their feelings of loneliness and social isolation.

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3 An “expert review” is an evaluation of the usability of a website, software application, etc., conducted by a usability professional. Usability is based on a standard set of design guidelines, or heuristics.
As discussed in [Kirk et al., 2010], elder participants had clear ideas about when it was appropriate to hold a teleconference call (with family members, but not with friends; at agreed-upon times, but not spontaneously).

Lindley et al. found that social media was largely viewed as suitable for maintaining existing relationships with “lightweight” interactions (rather than forming new relationships), and that participants choose which communication medium to use (e.g., email, video call, written letter) based on the intended contact (e.g., adult child, grandchildren, friends). [Lindley et al., 2009] They also considered whether the modality would allow time for reflection between turn-taking (written letters do, but telephone calls don't), and the relative value of the communication as perceived by the recipient (i.e., someone getting a written letter would know the sender had taken time and effort with it, but an email could just be dashed off to a number of recipients at the same time).

In other words, the attitude of “if you build it, they will come” is not necessarily warranted, because there are any number of factors to consider when evaluating the success of social media in establishing or maintaining social connectedness.

Conclusions
Over the past decade, social media has experienced rampant and ever-widening adoption. The group that has seen the greatest increase in adoption rates is that of older adults, defined here as 65+. By virtue of its relative immediacy and dynamism, social media can improve some people’s quality of life by relieving their isolation, and exposing them to new sources for social contact, information, and transactions. On the other hand, the current infrastructure cost, inaccessibility, and general complication level will leave it out of reach of many of those who could benefit the most from social media. And it should not be regarded as a replacement for human contact.
Bibliography


