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Older Adults, Social Technologies, and the Coronavirus Pandemic: Challenges, Strengths, and Strategies for Support

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Abstract

COVID-19 is a threat to everyone's health but can be especially devastating to older individuals. To prevent spread of the virus, social distancing has become the norm worldwide. However, with social distancing comes significantly less face-to-face interaction, which may be particularly harmful to older adults given their existing levels of loneliness. While social technologies can be used to provide critical social interaction during this time of necessary physical distancing, older adults tend to either lack access to these technologies or the skills and experience necessary to use them effectively. Once online, older adults face the additional challenge of being outsized targets of misinformation and scams, both of which abound in the context of COVID-19. In this essay, we discuss the challenges faced by older adults in their use of digital media for social connection in the present pandemic, as well as highlight some of the population's untapped strengths which can be leveraged to help them live prosperous online lives. Finally, we provide recommendations for actions which key stakeholders can take to support older adults in this pursuit.

Keywords

older adults, digital literacy, social media, misinformation, COVID-19

COVID-19 is a threat to everyone but is especially harmful to older individuals. People 65+ years make up nearly 80% of COVID-19 deaths in the United States, and those 60+ years make up 95% of deaths in Europe and the majority of deaths in India (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020; Dey, 2020; Lardieri, 2020). Social distancing has become the norm worldwide to slow the transmission of the virus. For older adults, who are most at-risk, this is all the more important to stay healthy. One negative consequence of stringent social distancing is significantly less face-to-face interaction, which is critical for human health (Martino et al., 2015). Older adults tend to already suffer from high levels of loneliness (National Health Service, 2019) and thus are at double risk during the pandemic, from the virus itself and the loneliness induced by social distancing.

Digital media such as social networking sites, video chat, and online games can help people stay socially connected during this time of necessary physical distancing (Ellison & Hancock, 2020). Unfortunately, older adults are not currently well-positioned to take advantage of social technologies. In this essay, we discuss the challenges faced by older adults in their use of social technologies while also highlighting their unique strengths that can be leveraged to overcome these challenges. Finally, we offer recommendations for how various stakeholders can support older adults in their effective use of digital technologies.

Challenges

One issue facing older adults with respect to using digital media to socialize is that they are less likely to have access to it compared to younger individuals. For example, younger adults own smartphones at significantly greater rates than older adults in advanced economies around the world, and the gap in ownership between younger and older tends to be even more pronounced in emerging economies (Silver, 2019).

In addition to this gap between the haves and have-nots, scholars have documented an important additional gap

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between the younger and older when it comes to digital media: a disparity in digital skills, with younger users generally being more skilled and experienced than older users. This gap in digital skills, which extends beyond the gap in physical access, was dubbed by Hargittai (2002) as a "second-level" digital divide and has been documented in several studies (e.g., Hargittai & Dobransky, 2017; Hargittai et al., 2019; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2010).

Deficiencies in digital skills and experience can come from a variety of sources. Some relate to attitudes: older adults often feel skeptical of new technologies or perceive they will be difficult to use (Hunsaker & Hargittai, 2018; Vaportzis et al., 2017). Some are related to the fact that today's digital technologies were not an essential part of many older adults' working lives (Friemel, 2016). Some challenges are physiological—contemporary communication technologies such as smartphones have relatively small screens that rely on touch inputs and thus require good eyesight and physical dexterity to use (Berenguer et al., 2017).

Older adults, once online, are also targeted by misinformation and fraud. During the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, individuals 65+ years were twice as likely to be exposed to fake news stories on Twitter and seven times more likely to share fake news on Facebook than 18- to 29-year olds (Grinberg et al., 2019; Guess et al., 2019). Furthermore, a variety of frauds, such as romance scams, phishing attacks, and even COVID-19 scams specifically target older individuals and are increasingly perpetrated using social media (Alhariri, 2020; Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2014; Oliveira et al., 2019).

One explanation for their heightened susceptibility to misinformation might be that older adults have problematic folk theories—lay understandings of complex systems—about how social media works. For instance, Fletcher (2019) found that older adults were more likely than all other age groups to (incorrectly) think that news encountered in their Facebook Newsfeed was curated by professional editors and journalists, which might make them more likely to trust and share misinformation encountered in that environment.

In addition, older adults may struggle in distinguishing between their "known" and "unknown" networks in online social feeds, due to what we refer to as *social network distortion*. By "known," we mean individuals and institutions whom people know well in the offline world (e.g., friends, family) or want to know (e.g., a future client or romantic partner) and by "unknown" we mean entities who people do not know and have no anticipated future interaction in the offline world (e.g., strangers, advertisers, fraudsters). In online social feeds (e.g., Facebook/Twitter feeds, email inboxes), communications from these groups are distorted and blurred together in a way unlike in the offline world, where there is a visceral difference between how a friend approaching feels compared to when a stranger approaches. Difficulty in distinguishing between these networks might lead someone to trust or engage with unknown actors in a way similar to known actors. While there are many legitimate unknown actors, such as a local company advertising its services, there are also those who wish to do people harm, such as spammers, phishing attacks, and disinformation campaigns. Because of less experience online and potentially flawed folk theories of where social content online comes from, older adults may be especially susceptible to confusion caused by social network distortion.

Untapped Strengths

Despite these challenges, older adults possess many important strengths. For example, older individuals tend to gain significantly more daily free time as they retire (Marcum, 2012), meaning that they might have more flexibility than others to make use of digital resources. For example, consulting fact-checking resources is one of the primary recommendations for verifying information online (Robertson, 2019). However, conducting additional searches and consulting external sources can be time-consuming. If equipped with resources on how to fact-check, older adults might even be more likely than other age groups to engage in fact checking. Older adults may also be more motivated to fact-check as they tend to be civic and politically minded. Older individuals are most likely to turn out to vote in democracies around the globe (Bunis, 2018; Franklin, 2004) and are more likely than their younger peers to volunteer and provide community support services in several countries worldwide (Salamon et al., 2018). With the right support, older adults could combine modern resources with a lifetime of experience making judgments about individuals and situations to play a key role in reducing misinformation.

Older adults also possess qualities that might help them remain resilient during social distancing. Compared to younger people, older individuals are more practiced at supporting themselves in daily life (e.g., household activities), less likely to need to relocate geographically (e.g., move out from college), and less likely to be severely negatively impacted financially (most are in retirement). Older adults are also especially good at regulating their emotions (Burr et al., 2020). Taken together, these strengths suggest that older adults may be better suited to endure the unprecedented coronavirus pandemic and the new reality of social distancing than other demographics, which may allow for them to focus on digital literacy.

Older adults possess many strengths that can help them, and society more broadly, through these present difficulties (see Figure 1), but they also are by no means alone in facing challenges with digital technologies. Older adults represent an important group in society – by 2030, more than 1 in 4 Americans will be aged 60 and over, and nearly 1 in 3 are already 60+ in Japan, Italy, Germany, and Finland (United Nations, 2015). Given their growing size and large political and financial influence, there are numerous stakeholders that have a mission or incentive to support older adults.

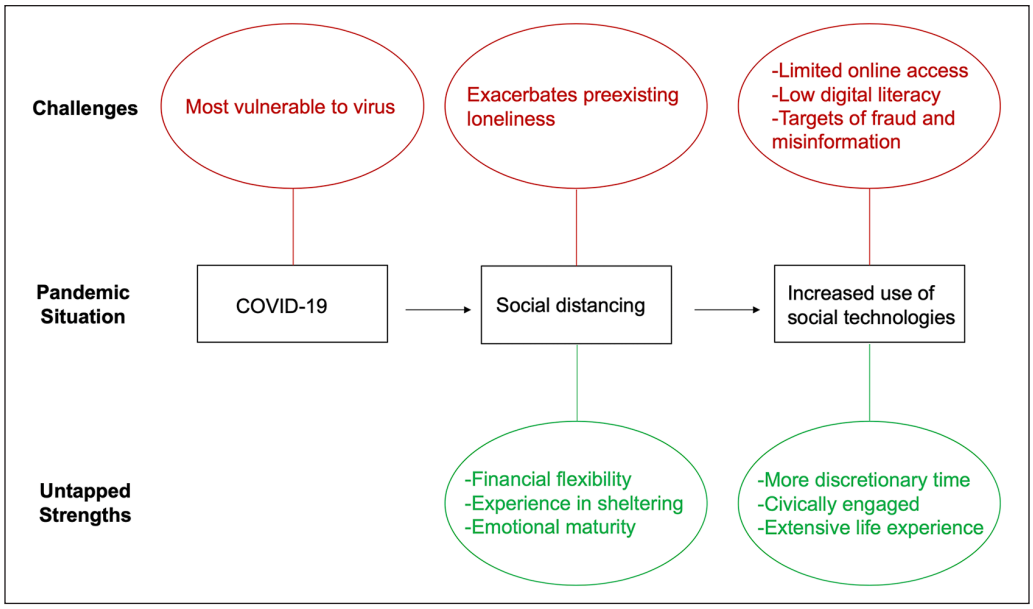

Figure 1. Older adults and social technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

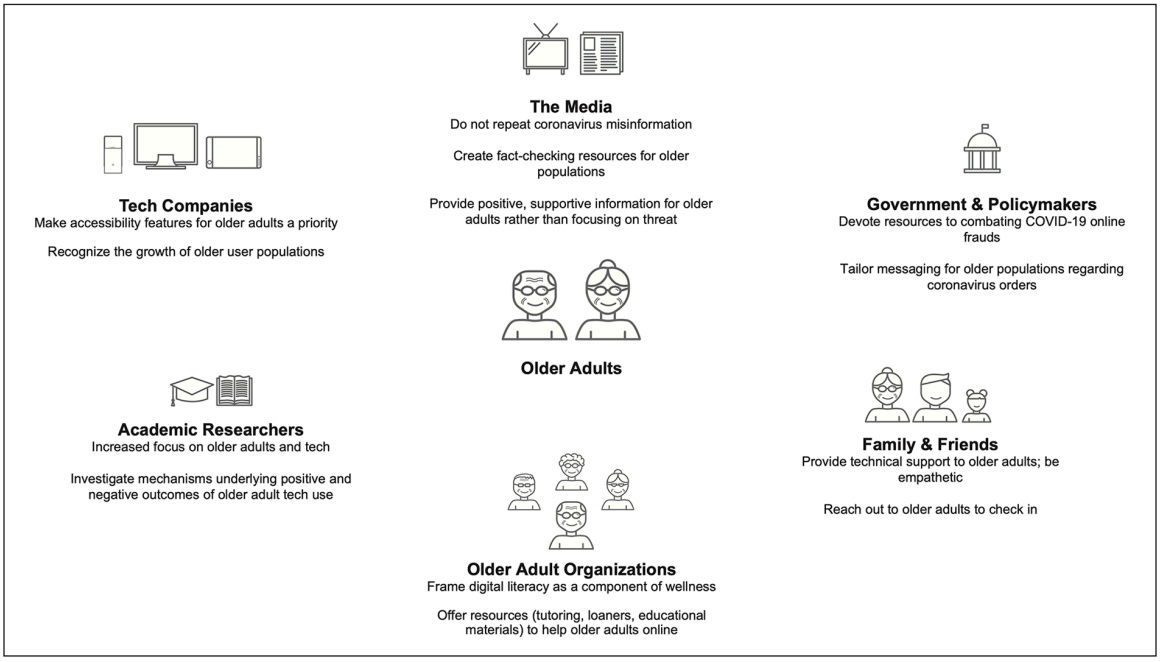

Figure 2. Recommendations for supporting older adults in using digital media during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our Recommendations

We close with recommendations for what these key stakeholders can do to support older adults in their use of digital media during the current pandemic (see Figure 2 for a summary of these recommendations).

At the forefront of resources available to older adults are family and friends. Family members and friends of older adults should try to reach out to them as often as possible, even if just to say hello and ask how they are doing. These lightweight social touches can be incredibly important during a time in which older individuals have to stay physically isolated. Moreover, family members should try to provide technical support to older loved ones who may be using new devices or platforms during the pandemic to stay connected. Prior research shows that older adults tend to be tepid when it comes to asking their (grand)children for help with technology (Tsai et al., 2017), making a supportive, patient, and proactive approach by younger family members crucial.

A variety of important stakeholders can help make the current information environment one that is safe for and supportive of older adults. For instance, governmental organizations which have helped fight elder frauds in the past should focus on the rapid influx of scams and falsehoods surrounding COVID-19 that are targeting older individuals. As older adults face significant health risks related to the virus, policymakers should provide supportive communication and resources for older adults as we move toward re-opening. Relatedly, media organizations should make an active effort to de-bunk coronavirus myths and should create fact-checking resources specifically designed for older individuals.

Technology companies should make accessibility by older adults a key priority in future development. For some social media platforms, such as Facebook, this is especially important as the majority of their new user growth is driven by individuals 65+ years (Schaffel, 2018). In addition, several organizations exist whose goal is to serve and support older adults, ranging from local community centers to large national organizations (e.g., AARP [the United States], AGE [Europe]). These groups can use their platforms to support older adults' use of digital media, by providing resources like technology tutoring, loaner devices, or educational content about new platforms and online safety. More generally, these organizations should frame digital literacy as a component of wellness—evidenced maybe now more than ever given the need to use technology to stay connected during the coronavirus pandemic.

Finally, academic research is critical to helping support older adults in improving digital literacy. Future work should focus more on research questions involving older adults and technology. Little is presently known about the specific mechanisms underlying positive (e.g., enhancing feelings of social connectedness) and negative (e.g., sharing misinformation) outcomes of older adults' digital media use. Advancing our understanding of these mechanisms is critical for practitioners and other stakeholders to know what levers they hold in supporting older adults online.

Conclusion

The challenges and strengths discussed in this essay are not unique or limited to these times but will persist into the future. Because of the speed of technological advancement, experts predict that challenges faced by older adults in using technology will endure even as today's older adults are replaced by baby boomers and so on for generations to come (Hanson, 2011). Moreover, the scope of the challenges is global. Misinformation is a serious concern in developing nations and new democracies (Sanchez, 2019) and extant research suggests that difficulties surrounding older individuals' technology skills and experience are present in countries around the world, such as China (Xie, 2007), Australia (Boulton-Lewis et al., 2007), Portugal (Neves et al., 2013), and Hungary, the Netherlands, and Switzerland (Hunsaker et al., 2019). However, while the challenges are global, so too are the strengths. Older adults are a growing demographic worldwide who are civically minded, financially resourced, and possess a breadth of life experiences and variety of entities who can support them in their use of technology. Overall, the goal of helping older adults live prosperous online lives is an important one, as not only can older adults themselves benefit immensely, but a more confident, able, and well-supported older online population means richer discourse, more diverse perspectives, and an invigorated sense of community for everyone.

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