The Role of Facebook in Addressing Loneliness in the Elderly

Loneliness is one of the issues associated with aging. Older people are likely to have a reduction in their roles outside the home, lose friends and partners through death and may have limited mobility (Pinquart & Sorensen, 2001). These factors make it hard to maintain and build meaningful social connections. While there are different ways of defining loneliness, one distinction is between social isolation which is a lack of social integration and emotional isolation which is a lack of meaningful attachments (Van Baarsen et al., 2001). Although meaningful attachments are more difficult to form online, social media platforms have been found to improve social inclusion (Rolandi et al., 2020) and may be beneficial in reducing the loneliness of social isolation. However, whether the elderly can realise the benefits of social media depends on both their access to technology and their ability to use and understand new media forms. These factors are well known in the literature (Blažun et al., 2012; Rasi et al., 2021); however, the question remains as to where the responsibility lies for ensuring elderly can access social media technologies. While there is obviously some responsibility on the individual, community organisations and governments have also stepped up recognising the potential benefits to the elderly community such as the 'Be Connected' program in Australia (McCosker et al., 2021). However, it can also be considered that social networking sites themselves have a responsibility to make themselves accessible to marginalised groups. For elderly people, social media platforms such as Facebook may be a useful tool in reducing loneliness if the platform is both relevant and accessible to them. Rather than requiring users to adapt to the technology, this paper argues that social media sites and in particular, Facebook, have a social responsibility to provide technological affordances that make their network more accessible to the elderly

Loneliness, social networking and the elderly

Considerable research exists on the impact of loneliness on the elderly population. Factors of an elderly persons social network such as small size, lack of diversity, infrequent contact and perceived social isolation are considered health risks for depression and functional

decline (Ibarra et al., 2020). Although the impacts of loneliness and social isolation have existed for some time, these have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the need for older adults to social distance themselves from others, including their families (Hajek & König, 2021; Macdonald & Hülür, 2021). A number of interventions have been created to address the issue of social isolation in the elderly however it has been difficult to obtain sufficient research evidence to determine the effectiveness of these interventions (Gardiner et al., 2018). While it is generally agreed that technology can enable long distance relationships, very little research has been undertaken on the impact of digital technologies on social isolation and loneliness (Hajek & König, 2021). One study that did look at this area found that daily users of the internet for contact with friends and relatives (such as email, video calls and Facebook) had lower social isolation scores than non-users and non-frequent users (Hajek & König, 2021). Research into the impact of social networking sites on social isolation and loneliness in younger populations seems to be conflicted. While research has shown that Facebook usage might contribute to psychological wellbeing (Shpigelman & Gill, 2014); other research found no correlation between positive experiences on social media and reduced feelings of social isolation. On the opposite site, it was shown that negative experiences on social media was likely to increase feelings of social isolation (Hajek & König, 2021). Further research is required to determine if this finding can be applied to elderly users.

Research that does focus on technology use and the elderly mainly looks at the difficulty in accessing platforms such as Facebook (Ibarra et al., 2020). Additional research exists in the use of Facebook in people with disabilities and some of these findings may be applicable to elderly. This includes the challenges of reading a predominantly text-based platform which may be an issue with elderly people with declining eyesight. Additionally this research found disabled users held concerns about the loss of privacy associated with divulging personal information (Shpigelman & Gill, 2014) which potentially could also be a challenge to the elderly population if they are not familiar with social networking sites.

Research into social networking use by older persons and persons with a disability recognise that access to technology and the knowledge to use technology effectively is likely to be a barrier to engagement with social networking sites. The need to train the elderly on how to use computers and the internet is recognised for social networks to have a role in combating loneliness (Ibarra et al., 2020). It is not just the ability to use technology that is required but also an understanding of the broader concept of media literacy. While there are different definitions of media literacy it is often considered the ability to use, understand and create media content in different contexts (Rasi et al., 2021). However, while interventions exist to teach technology and media literacy to older populations, there is little research as to the level of understanding that exists (Rasi et al., 2021). While media literacy itself does not solve the problem of social isolation directly, it is an important factor to enable the use of technology.

Another aspect of social networking platforms is that they have not been designed with the elderly in mind. It is suggested that getting older populations to participate in the technological design process can increase their willingness to engage with the technology (Meymo & Nyström, 2017). This may in part be due to personality factors. Research shows that extroverted people are more likely to engage in social media and share their emotions openly (Mo et al., 2018) and these individual personality factors are likely to apply regardless of whether the person is of an older or younger generation. However, with the elder population, there may be a further level of complexity regarding the cultural norms they grew up with. It is possible that older people are less likely to share their feelings or personal information with strangers as that was norm in earlier decades.

While there are a range of barriers to the elderly successfully engaging with social media to overcome loneliness and social isolation, there is also a range of interventions and several areas indicated where further research would be beneficial. Whether elderly people can and will engage with social networking sites is only one side of the equation. The other side is the role of the social networking sites themselves.

The Role of Facebook

Facebook, now known as Meta, is the biggest social media network with an estimated 2.895 billion uses monthly (Backlinko, 2022). They publicly state that their mission is to "Give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together" (Meta, 2022). The reach of Facebook is global with India considered to have the highest number of users followed by the United States and Indonesia (World Population Review, 2022). This means Facebook is not only navigating the needs of different general groups but a broad cultural span as well. In 2016 Facebook came under criticism for using human curators with their own conservative biases to select the news that would should up as trending (Carlson, 2018). Facebook has also suffered criticism for fake news, filtering newsworthy images to avoid their own obscene content rules and continuing to foster political polarisation during the US presential election (Carlson, 2018). This shows the view of the world that Facebook is presenting is subjective and as such may not appeal to an older generation as it is unlikely that human curators and algorithmic filtering is aiming at the elderly as a target population.

Carlson (2018, p. 5) points out that the size of Facebook's audience "has deeper social consequences for the quality of information and political discourse the public receives." While Carlson is particularly commenting on Facebook's role in news curation, the pervasiveness of the social media platform indicates that it has a role in shaping our society not just providing entertainment. This then raises questions about the responsibilities of Facebook as a platform and what, if any, responsibility Facebook has toward marginalised groups. It is interesting that there is a lot more commentary on how companies portray themselves and their corporate social responsibility on Facebook than there is on the social responsibility of Facebook itself. Although the degree social networking companies fulfil their social responsibilities affects "numerous users and society as a whole" (Bauer, 2014, p. 261).

Social networking sites are increasingly used to disseminate information and promote institutional goals by corporations, governments and non-profit organisations (Muralidharan et al., 2011). However, while the use of Facebook by different interest groups and

corporations has been researched, there is little research on how Facebook itself frames and promotes particular discourses. This is likely due to the commercial sensitivity around the models used by social networking sites and the general lack of understanding of how Facebook operates. Further, Facebook's use of engagement to drive advertising and subsequent revenue will influence decisions about what content should be discoverable by audiences. Carlson (2018) points out this reliance on advertising does not encourage a commitment to the news (Carlson, 2018). It would seem this criterion could also be applied to various socially disadvantaged groups such as the elderly. According to the Reserve Bank of Australia (Cokis & McLoughlin, 2020) there is a pronounced decrease in consumption for households aged 65 years and over. Although the number of people in this demographic is increasing the increase in the aging population is attributed to a slowing in consumption growth in Australia over the past decade (Cokis & McLoughlin, 2020). As they are not a primary advertising target for social media sites, there is little benefit in Facebook targeting them as an audience or providing content relevant to their needs.

Social networking sites in general do engage in philanthropy through donations and Facebook in particular runs sessions to show charitable organisations how to engage with social networking (Bauer, 2014); however it is unclear whether this social responsibility influences what information is presented on the site. Another little explored aspect of social networking and the elderly is the potential for these platforms to impact the transfer of knowledge from older to younger generations. There is research to suggest that social networking sites could provide a form of informal wisdom that is passed on to younger generations through discussion forums and chat based systems (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2013). If interactions were structured to meet the needs of both the older and younger generations, these could play a role in not only combating loneliness but also increasing a feeling of usefulness. The challenge would be to find a platform that met the needs and could be utilised by both parties.

According to the United Nations (2019), in 2019 there were 703 million people globally aged over 65 and the proportion of older people is expected to rise from 9% in 2019 to 16% in 2050. It is likely that in developed countries at least, that the population of elderly in 2050 will be more familiar with social media and the internet in general than the older population of 2019. The role of social networking in combating loneliness and social isolation may well increase given increased levels of media literacy.

The issues of social isolation and loneliness in the elderly cannot wait for the population to develop a greater degree of familiarity with technology. Instead, we should be creating technology that can assist in this growing social problem as highlighted during the pandemic and the increased social isolation during this time. Barriers to social networking for the elderly are somewhat based on their media literacy as those not familiar with technology are unlikely to manage when errors occur and are potentially more likely to be preyed upon by individuals obtaining their personal details. Social networking sites, particularly Facebook, could be influential in this area. Imagine a simplified version of Facebook with a large font display and removal of gaming and other features unlikely to be of interest to the elderly. Additionally, there is the potential to have a second person on the account as a guardian to monitor online activity to prevent elder abuse. This could be accompanied by a training program to guide people through how to use the site. If older people had the option to access a simplified version of Facebook, then the networking sites value in combating loneliness and social isolation may be increased.

Unfortunately, this is all theory. While older people may become a greater target for advertising in future given the growth in population and increased media literacy, there is unlikely to be financial gain by Facebook and other social networking sites in providing services directly aimed at assisting the elderly. However, as these sites benefit from their large global reach, it would seem those benefits should come with a responsibility to those who don't make up their core advertising market.

There is an opportunity for Facebook to uniquely impact the use of technology in the older population. By making minor changes to its platform, providing media literacy education and funding further research in this area, Facebook would likely increase the use of its platform in the elderly. However, given the lower levels of spending in this population group, the driver at this time must either come from future planning for predicted growth in the older demographic or through a sense of social responsibility. Although it would seem unlikely that either of these factors would provide sufficient impetus for Facebook to make a change.

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