Ageing in a Digital World
The Research Team

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Overview of this presentation

• Provide an overview of background literature
  • Loneliness & social isolation
  • Loneliness, social isolation, & technology use
  • The digital divide

• Introduce our study
  • Phase 1
  • Phase 2

• Discuss the implications of our findings
Loneliness and social isolation

Loneliness:
A subjective experience in which there is an unpleasant emotional response to a perceived discrepancy between the number or quality of relationships a person desires and those they have (de Jong Gierveld, 1998)

Social isolation:
Characterised as being an objective state which considers the integration of an individual in their social environment, such as the frequency of social relations and social networks (Victor, Scambler, Bond, & Bowling, 2000)
Loneliness, Social isolation, and technology use

For older adults, keeping in touch with friends and family is often seen as one of the most important reasons for being online (Age UK, 2015)

Some evidence supports the use of technology in reducing loneliness through increased social support, social connectedness, and reduced social isolation (Chen & Schulz, 2016; Chopik, 2016; Cotton, et al., 2013; Tsai et al., 2015)

In contrast, other studies found that communicating through technology has no effect on levels of reported loneliness (e.g. Burholt, et al., 2020; Slegers, et al., 2008)
Loneliness, Social isolation, and technology use

Relationship between loneliness and technology is both bidirectional and dynamic (Nowland, Necka & Cacioppo, 2018)

Relationship dependent upon outcomes of technology use according to:

Displacement hypothesis (Kraut, et al, 1998; Nie et al., 2001; Nie et al., 2002; Valkenberg & Peter, 2007b)

Stimulation hypothesis (Gross, 2004; Valkenberg & Peter, 2007b)
The Digital Divide

But what about those who cannot access technology or choose not to do so?

Digital divide = The gap that exists between individuals using technology and those who aren’t using technology

There are a number of factors that increase the likelihood of digital exclusion:

• Socio-economic status
• Education level
• Age
• Gender
• Health status
Project aims

This study aimed to explore older adults’ experiences of using technology (including social media) to connect with others. Specifically, this study aimed to understand:

- Motivations for, and preferences towards, using digital devices and social media as a tool to connect with others
- The impact of self-reported loneliness or social isolation on motivations for, and preferences towards, using digital devices and social media
- Factors that enable or prevent older adults accessing, or using, digital devices and social media to connect with others
- The impact of self-reported loneliness or social isolation enabling or preventing older adults accessing, or using, digital devices and social media
Phase 1 Method

• Design:
  • A mixed methods two-phase exploratory sequential design was adopted for this study

• Procedure:
  • In line with this design, we collected qualitative data initially using semi-structured interviews

• Participants:
  • Aged 65 or over and currently using digital devices or social media to connect with others
  • 20 participants were interviewed in phase 1
Phase 1: The Interviews

Semi structured interviews were conducted with our participants, either face-to-face or over the telephone.

The interviews explored the individual’s own perspectives, developing insights into the motivations, facilitators, barriers and general experiences of using technology.

We analysed our interview data using Thematic Analysis, adhering to the six steps set out by Braun and Clarke (2006).
Phase 1 Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technology as a tool for social engagement</th>
<th>Technology as a connector</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>The importance of the visual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Technology as supplementary rather than a replacement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitators and barriers of technology use</td>
<td>Perceived self-efficacy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fear</td>
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<td>Culture and communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social capital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physical functioning</td>
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Technology as a tool for social engagement
Technology as a connector

“I mean a lot of them are from a long, long, way away and you’re not likely to see them. I mean there is one in [another country]. So yes, it’s nice just to get some news” (P010)

“[My children and I don’t] communicate too often, but with a WhatsApp family page and things we throw things at each other [...] My son is abroad at the moment, we’ve been hearing about him. He works abroad quite a lot, so he keeps in touch that way” (P017)

“Unless there is a possibility of some connection, some point of it then I don’t care. I don’t need thousands of so-called friends” (P003)
Technology as a connector

“But [I use Facebook] just to keep a check and see exactly what they are all up to you know, otherwise I just don’t know what is happening and I do feel a bit cut off” (P002)

“A lot of people seem to communicate a lot via technology, rather than actually communicating directly and meeting up [...] and that can be quite isolating, especially for older people, I think [...]” (P011)

“[Technology] has it’s uses but you do have to watch yourself otherwise you could sit all day on social media and never get out of the house” (P007)
Importance of the visual

“I mean it’s the visual. If you’re having a conversation with someone and you can see their face and see the response and the smiles and the rest, it just adds something, doesn’t it? [...] And the same with the telephone you can find out that you have an argument starting that wouldn’t be there if you could see the twinkle in the eye” (P012)

“My son says, he wants them to keep contact with us as well, so they don’t forget who their grandparents are” (P005)
Importance of the visual

“My daughter has problems with the youngest one, she gets very upset because she can see you but she can’t touch you. So, we tend not to do FaceTime a lot, but it is there if you need it” (P004)

“FaceTime. I’m not very keen on it because I have too many wrinkles [...] I am not keen on FaceTime, no, unless I am all made up” (P001)
Technology as supplementary rather than a replacement

“More crucially is not allowing technology to be the be all and the end all. There is that need for people to always have people” (P020)

“My granddaughter is pregnant, the baby is due anytime now so there is sort of a running commentary going on all the time [...] I find that good, but I do find sometimes you’ll get a text message when a phone call would have been nicer” (P013)

“You don’t want to be intruding if you’re ringing up you don’t know, is it a good time or whatever. So, in those instances you can send an email or something on Messenger and then when they’re ready, they can respond. So that’s a good thing” (P016)
Facilitators & Barriers to technology use
Perceived self-efficacy

“To be honest I just didn’t have patience with [my desktop computer]” (P002)

“I mean I never ever for one moment thought I was thick, but by gum, I’m beginning to wonder because I just can’t take it in at all” (P002)

“Actually, it has to be said that technology now flies over my head, I used to keep up with it but now... [...] it has to said, technology has flown past me to a certain extent” (P011)
Fear

“When I had the computer, I was really sort of nervous. I was thinking it would all crash or cease up or something would go terribly wrong with it, but that’s not a fact is it? It’s very rare that you sort of go badly wrong. You can usually sort things out. There is a little bit of fear I think of new technology particularly with the older age group” (P013)

“I don’t want everyone to know what I am doing, when I am doing it kind of thing. I think we’re more cautious” (P002)

“One thing you do sort of wonder about the technology, how many people can hack in and get to know your business. I’m very wary about internet banking for instance. I don’t quite trust that at the minute” (P013)
“I mean I know that there is this thing with Twitter that I am not involved in. I don’t tend to post. I read posts from other people” (P006)

“People being very nasty. Sexist, racist, homophobic, you know, in the end I just cut... I came off that group. Even though I’m missing out on some bits and pieces, it just wasn’t worth it” (P006)

“If they send me a text or I send them a text, it can be very abrupt and misinformed” (P008)
“Somebody bought me a [iPad] and then I felt obliged to use it. I don’t think I would have bothered buying one for myself” (P002)

“I have a grandson who has just recently moved to London who knows more or less... keeps me up to speed on things” (P009)

“I can always pick up the phone and say, ‘What’s all this? How does this work?’ I’m not afraid to ask the family, but I do tend to sort of ask them to show me how to do it rather than experiment” (P012)
Physical Functioning

“Then I’m having a problem with my eyes at the moment, I’ve got to have cataracts done so I find the tablet better to see as well” (P001)

 “[The iPad] is bigger for my fingers” (P008)

“Yes, you can see my hands there. Not good. I think I can get a bigger [smartphone] than this. But this was the one at the time. I can just about manage this. I mean my spelling is sometimes dreadful and I know that I have missed the keyboard, so I double check that all the time” (P018)
## Summary of Phase 1 findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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Phase 2

• Findings from Phase 1 informed the development of an online survey for Phase 2

• This survey was disseminated across the UK using the Qualtrics survey project team

• 410 participants (65+ and regular technology users) took part

• Social isolation and loneliness were determined using:
  • The Lubben Social Network Scale
  • The De Jong Gierveld Loneliness scale

• Analysis ongoing – watch this space!
What do these findings mean?
Technology for social connection

• Individuals primarily used technology to maintain meaningful offline relationships with people they already knew. Social technology was used predominantly as a way to enhance existing connections, as opposed to escaping the social world and withdrawing.

• Of all online communication, visual communication was of great importance, as it was most reminiscent of face-to-face communication.

• Technology was an important tool for social connection and allowed individuals to connect with friends and family when this was not possible. However, this tool was supplementary and not a replacement for face-to-face communication.
Biopsychosocial barriers to online social connection

**Bio**
- Mobility issues
- Persistent pain
- Visual barriers

**Psycho**
- Perceived self-efficacy
- Fear
- Attitudes to communication

**Social**
- Social capital (initiation and throughout)
- Culture around communication

**Socio-economic status**
**Gender**
**Health status**
**Education**
**Age**
Implications for COVID-19

• Lockdown has meant we can’t meet up with friends or family so many of us are relying on technology a lot more than usual.

• More people than ever will be really embracing technology.

• However, it’s important to remember that not everyone can get online and those without access to these technologies could be struggling more so with feelings of loneliness and social isolation.

• This pandemic has highlighted inequalities for so many people and we must remember that this new digitally-centred world isn’t achievable for everyone.
Promoting Digital Inclusivity

• Digital technology (especially visual technologies) improves the frequency of social connection, especially to connect with those living geographically dispersed.

• Biopsychosocial facilitators/barriers to digital exclusion should be considered upon development of guidance in using technology for social connection.

• Regular technology users should not be overlooked, and access/hills should not be assumed. This will help to maximise the regular use, minimise the potential to disengage, and promote the use of technology for social connection.
Limitations to the study and Future Research

• This study did not include participants who are ‘digitally excluded’.

• There is an absence of diversity in both phases, with both phases predominately involving older adults between 65-75 years old and white British participants.

• The aim of Phase 1 was to explore the use of technology for social connection. We did not measure loneliness or social isolation.

• Future research should consider these limitations.
Conclusion

Technology was mostly used as a way of maintaining and enhancing existing social connections.

Technology is a welcome tool for social connection but is supplementary, not a replacement.

Older technology users are not one homogenous group - even those with access and skills experience different biopsychosocial barriers when using technology for social connection.
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• We would like to thank the participants who took the time to tell us their stories, and those that took the time to complete the survey. We would like to thank and acknowledge the expertise provided by Qualtrics in distributing the survey, and also by Amrita Singh, the technical sound expert who produced the podcast accompanying this report.
“Ageing in a Digital World” is available to listen/download:

- Spotify - [https://open.spotify.com/show/3YaugSTw5wTNCujhTZSTug...](https://open.spotify.com/show/3YaugSTw5wTNCujhTZSTug...)


References


Thank you!

Questions?

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