

Social media decreases loneliness for older adults, research finds

March 19 2013

(Medical Xpress)—Social media can be an effective tool for decreasing loneliness for older Australians according to new research conducted at the University of Sydney.

[Social isolation](#) can pose a significant problem for older adults especially for those who are house-bound, says Professor Robert Steele who led the Connecting Older Adults research project.

Professor Steele says while technologies are increasingly assisting older Australians to reside longer in their homes, there is also a flip side: an increased risk of loneliness or isolation. He says the year and a half long research project aimed to determine if [social media](#) use could provide benefits for older adults in relation to loneliness and [social engagement](#).

Professor Steele, Head of Discipline and Chair of the Discipline of [Health Informatics](#) at the University's Faculty of Health Sciences, said that in commencing the project, he was additionally interested in such questions as do cost, [privacy concerns](#) or lack of interest or [self-efficacy](#) in using the technologies pose significant obstacles to older adults utilising them.

The Connecting [Older Adults](#) project was funded by the Department of Family and Community Services and was carried out with collaboration from peak seniors community bodies, the Australian Seniors Computing Clubs Association and Council on the Ageing NSW.

The study involved 150 [participants](#) aged 55 and over with the majority aged 65 and over. They were provided with only brief training in three social media technologies, Twitter, [Facebook](#) and Skype, prior to a six month trial period.

"The results we have are very interesting and supportive of these technologies" reported Professor Steele. Standardised scales were used to measure loneliness, such as the 20 item UCLA loneliness scale, pre and post the trial period. Results showed a highly statistically significant decrease in loneliness when comparing pre-trial data to post-trial data, for participants who started using the social media technologies. The majority of participants also reported that the use of technologies help them to be more connected and engaged with the community.

"In post-trial data we also wished to further determine the views of the older adult participants to determine their possible continued future use of the technologies or otherwise and other indicators of their perceptions of the technologies" says Professor Steele. A number of results strongly supported the effectiveness of the technologies: approximately 80 percent of respondents indicated they would continue to use the social media technologies after the end of the trial, and approximately 65 percent agreed or strongly agreed that the technologies were easy to use. This suggested that even providing short training sessions may be effective in overcoming technology barriers.

While the researchers expected costs to be a possible barrier in using the technologies, surprisingly over 90 percent agreed or strongly agreed that the technologies were affordable to use, and even a majority indicated that they considered the use of the social media technologies would be a factor in enabling them to live independently at home for longer.

Other interesting results showed variation between pre-trial views and observed participant behaviours. In the pre-trial data collection,

Facebook was initially viewed negatively by a number of participants with quite a few of the participants declining to participate in Facebook training for this reason. However based on the post-trial data, of the three technologies Facebook emerged to be the most frequently used by the largest number of participants, followed by Skype, and with Twitter being the least used technology, and by the smallest number of participants.

Provided by University of Sydney

Citation: Social media decreases loneliness for older adults, research finds (2013, March 19)
retrieved 26 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-03-social-media-decreases-loneliness-older.html>

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