

Social media can support healthiness of older people

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The use of social media by older people can offer valuable additional support in cases of sickness and diseases, new research from the University of Luxembourg has shown.

In a new publication, Dr Anja Leist from the University's Research Unit INSIDE, concludes that possibilities for a systematic application in clinical practice seem promising.

With the rise of user-friendly devices such as tablets and other web-enabled devices, older adults now engage in social media, such as online social networks, discussion boards, and online forums, more frequently. The evidence for the large potential of social media use in clinical practise had not been systematically investigated until now.

The review of existing studies by Dr Leist, associated with the Technology and Ageing Working Group of Professor Dieter Ferring, explores the manifold intervention possibilities, such as designing web sites to provide information on [hip fracture prevention](#) where older adults can also discuss their experiences.

Besides the potential for clinical practise and other positive consequences in everyday use of social media, the researchers also addressed the possible [negative consequences](#) of social media use.

With the successful use of a computer or web-enabled device, older adults report enhanced feelings of control and self-efficacy, but social

media provides even more benefits for older adults.

"For me, it was interesting to learn that there is evidence for a large potential of social media in clinical practice. Older adults can use social media to access health-related information and engage in patient-to-patient or patient-doctor conversations. There are many online forums where people in difficult [life situations](#), such as informal caregivers of a spouse with [dementia](#) or individuals with depression, can exchange thoughts as well as receive and provide social support. Other positive consequences are that lonely older adults can overcome [loneliness](#) through contact to family and friends and other users with similar interests," says Dr Leist.

However the negative consequences of [social media](#) use for [older adults](#) have yet to be investigated and literature from related fields show the potential for possible pitfalls. Some examples are access to harmful information and misuse of personal data. Other negative effects have been shown to be unfavourable social comparisons due to overly positive self-representations of others displayed in [online social networks](#).

Dr. Leist raised the point of the lack of clarity on posthumous management of online web content, i.e. when the user has passed away. Another crucial unresolved issue is the data handling when a user develops an illness which leads to compromised decision-making ability such as dementia. With no possibility to modify online content, unless the user has agreed beforehand with full decision-making ability, inappropriate behaviour or displayed web content could pose a danger to others, but also impend the dignity of the user.

More information: Leist, A. K. (in press). Social media use of older adults – A mini-review. *Gerontology*. [DOI: 10.1159/000346818](https://doi.org/10.1159/000346818)

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