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BRIEF REPORT

Australian older adults' views on using social media for reducing social isolation and loneliness in hearing impaired older adults: A community conversation

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Abstract

Objective(s): The objective of this study was to conduct a community conversation to identify the views of the community members when designing an online community using Facebook to support the psychosocial well-being of hearing-impaired older adults.

Methods: A community conversation was held with 40 older adults aged more than 60 years. The participants were divided into groups of five and asked to discuss three open-ended questions. The researchers facilitated the discussions.

Results: The overwhelming response from this group was that they did not use Facebook or social media as a tool for social connection and did not see the benefits of social media applications. They preferred phone calls or in-person events to maintain their social relationships.

Conclusions: Implications for areas of future research and interventions that target loneliness in older adults are discussed.

KEYWORDS

hearing loss, loneliness, social isolation, social media

1 | INTRODUCTION

In 2019, hearing loss was estimated to affect approximately 1.5 billion people globally, with 62.1% of those affected being above 50 years.¹ The Australian hearing loss prevalence data in 2017 suggests that more than three million

60 years and older adults have a hearing loss in their better ear.² Untreated hearing loss increases the risk of social isolation,³ loneliness^{3,4} and depression.⁵ During the Covid-19 pandemic, mental and psychosocial well-being worsened in older adult populations in Australia.⁶ This was likely due to the social isolation policies introduced,

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which temporarily removed in-person communication (the primary form of social and family engagement) for many older adults.

Online communication has been proposed to decrease loneliness and social isolation in older populations⁷ and would be effective in situations where in-person contact is not possible. Social isolation is a quantifiable variable referring to a limited number of social connections.⁸ In contrast, loneliness refers to the subjective feeling of being lonely,⁸ which could be either social loneliness resulting from the perception of a small social network or emotional loneliness resulting from the perception of a lack of emotional support.⁹ Community groups using social media (Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, etc.) for those with similar experiences (i.e., hearing loss) could increase social engagement and networking and meaningful relationships where members can sympathize with some of the experiences of other users. This could help address the social and emotional loneliness experienced by a subset of older adults with hearing loss.

With this in mind, we conducted a community conversation to identify the community's views on creating an online community specifically for hearing-impaired older adults to support their psychosocial well-being. Facebook was chosen as, in Australia, 55% of older adults used social media apps in 2020, with 97% of them using Facebook for their online social networking.¹⁰ The online community/Facebook group aimed to reduce social isolation and loneliness through increased community engagement with others with hearing loss.

2 | METHODS

We conducted a community conversation with 40 people aged 60 years or older to find out their views about creating an online community to support the psychosocial well-being of hearing-impaired older adults. The community conversation design (Consumer and Community Involvement Program, 2020) was used as a means of incorporating community involvement into ongoing and future research efforts. This methodology entails summarizing findings from key stakeholders in conversational settings and is primarily driven by the stakeholders themselves. This ensures that current and future research direction is driven by the communities they are likely to affect.¹¹ We planned to incorporate the feedback from the community conversation when designing the contents of the Facebook group/online community. They were asked:

1. When designing a Facebook Page for older adults, what features should be included and excluded?

Practice Impact

Our results suggest that a significant portion of older adults are disinclined to use Facebook to foster social connections. This has implications for researchers in the field of ageing, hearing loss, social isolation/loneliness and mental well-being. Ascertaining characteristics of specific sub-populations that would benefit from social networking sites to combat social isolation and loneliness and investigating alternate interventions for those who do not desire social media/networking sites interventions is required.

2. How can the Facebook Page be designed to be more user-friendly for older adults?
3. What weekly topics should be discussed on the Facebook Page relevant to older adults?

Participants were divided into eight groups of five participants and given 15–20 minutes to think about the questions and write down their answers. Three experienced researchers (Audiology, Psychology and Ageing) facilitated discussions in each group. All written responses were collated and tabled (Table 1). After the table feedback, the facilitators worked together to determine the key pieces of information identified across the tables. The thematic analysis method was used to identify the common themes across the participant groups. This project was approved by the University of Western Australia Human Research Ethics committee (2021/ET000487).

3 | RESULTS

The most prominent feedback received from older adults was that many of them and their peers did not use the Facebook platform. Of the 40 participants, 4 used Facebook sparingly to keep up with family members. Those who had Facebook were not interested in joining the online community. Those who did not have Facebook were not interested in creating a Facebook account specifically to join an online community. The participants wrote down the following reasons for not using or wanting to join a Facebook group:

- “I don't have the use for it”, as their friends and family also did not use Facebook
- “I don't want to know what's going on in everyone else's lives.”
- “I don't have a computer/internet access.”

TABLE 1 Collated answers from community conversations with older adults.

What to include and exclude in a Facebook group for older adults?	Topics to include weekly.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Link to National Older Adults Australia website • Do not use the terms “older person” and such variations –they can be viewed as condescending 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make it easier to navigate Facebook • Consider that very few older adults have/ use Facebook • Educate those who do not use social media on how to get involved • Any instructions provided by researchers should be clear and not too wordy to avoid confusion • Facebook language should be clear and not obscure • Keep the layout simple –do not keep changing it • Hearing loss • Importance of getting hearing aids adjusted regularly • More information about ageing • General information about life and the world around us – how to not get stuck in the “getting old” zone • The link between mobile phones and hearing aids (i.e. Bluetooth) • Where to get help • Information on how to manage hearing aids (e.g., changing batteries) • Real-life experiences, stories from other older adults with hearing loss

Note: Please contact DJ (dona.jayakody@uwa.edu.au) for dataset queries.

- “I’m not social media adept.”
- “I mainly use email to contact my other friends.”
- “What if someone steals all my information? Can’t everyone see my information?”

The main feedback from our participants was that they did not use Facebook as a social media platform, were unlikely to use it in the future, and were not interested in creating a Facebook account specifically to join an online community. They did not see the value of using Facebook for social connection, preferring to contact their family and friends by phone. Many community conversation contributors perceived social media negatively. They also expressed a lack of confidence in using social media and a lack of understanding of navigating it safely and securely.

4 | DISCUSSION

Findings of this community conversation revealed that many older adults are disinterested in using Facebook/ social networking sites to promote social communication.

These findings align with other research - despite older adults’ increased internet and social media uptake, they maintain an ambivalent or negative attitude towards it.¹² The main barriers to older adults using social media for communication seem to be: concerns about privacy issues, fear of inappropriate content, lack of understanding regarding the purpose and benefits of social networking sites, a perceived lack of social conduct in online communities, a lack of comfort with online self-disclosure, a perceived lack of personal relevance (e.g., if friends/family were not already participating), and a perceived lack of control.^{13,14}

Due to COVID-19-related restrictions, older adults may have encountered extended periods of social isolation, loneliness and mental health distress; hence, addressing these psychosocial outcomes is crucial.⁶ Even though many older adults perceive social media for communication negatively, some evidence suggests that the relationship between social media communication and loneliness is mediated by perceived social support and social contact.²⁰ These findings indicate that some older adults could still benefit from social media communication to reduce social isolation and loneliness.

With these and other findings, further investigation is needed for (i) determining which specific older populations would be receptive to and/or can receive benefit from social media community groups to address social isolation and loneliness, (ii) what type of social media would be amenable to them, (iii) methods to improve technological literacy, and (iv) methods to improve perceptions of social media for networking where appropriate. Various researchers have proposed the following strategies, which primarily deal with the latter two points:

- Social networking sites should be better presented, explained and promoted to older adults to motivate this population to use them.¹⁵
- Workshops should be developed to teach older adults about social networking and to give them a chance to practice and use these websites in a safe space with expert support available.¹⁵
- The provision of free computers, internet connections, and a 3-month training program in social media applications may help older adults to develop more

positive attitudes towards technology and to increase their engagement and competency in social networking activities.¹⁶

- Social networking applications need to consider system support, interface design and navigation to help older adults to view these applications more positively.¹⁷
- The use of a touch-screen device rather than a desktop computer may assist in making social networking activities more user-friendly for older adults.¹⁸
- Social networking applications for older users could be designed using a service-oriented approach, which considers support services and user experience rather than just the physical design of the device.¹⁹

While our community conversation got helpful feedback from participants for the questions asked, the consensus and opinions among participants on the undesirability of using digital technology, getting or using Facebook for a community group provided us with several areas of interest for further research and community involvement in social networking sites usage/interventions among older adults experiencing loneliness, (i) determining what social media platforms/networking sites (Facebook, WhatsApp, etc.) are desirable for older adults as a potential tool to improve their well-being, (ii) determining how these social media platforms/networking sites could be better constructed for their needs, and (iii) ways of addressing their concerns where possible (e.g., increasing technical literacy and confidence, privacy concerns).

5 | CONCLUSIONS

It is essential to accept that online social networking is not for everyone and may not add value to the lives of every person; however, it is helpful for those interested in learning new technologies, building online social connections and also receiving social support through online social media/networking sites.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article. However, Prof Leon Flicker is an Editorial Board member of the *Australasian Journal on Ageing*.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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