From High Connectivity to Social Isolation: Communication Practices of Older Adults in the Digital Age

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Abstract

Few studies have shown how older adults cope with communication in an age of social media where many people are in constant contact with one another. To address this, we have studied the current living and communication practices of twelve older adults using in-depth interviews and home tours. Our findings illustrate a range of routines including a preference to stay away from new technologies; high degrees of connectivity and social media acceptance; withdrawal from heavy communication to explore newfound 'me' time; and, a lack of reciprocation in communication that caused a degree of isolation.

Keywords

Aging Adults, Elderly, Communication, Families

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

General Terms

Design, Theory, Human Factors

Introduction

Many people want to stay in contact with their family members and friends [4,5,7]. For example, grandparents often want to see their grandchildren grow up, parents want to know about the well being of their adult children, and relatives want to know the health state of their aging family members [4,5,7]. Gathering this information is easy to do when family members live close to one another or are able to use modern-day technologies, such as email, video chat, or social networking sites [5]. However, not all family members find it easy to use such technologies and some do not have access to them. This leaves certain individuals "out of touch" and isolated from their family members.

One particular group that often faces this challenge is older adults. Many older adults do not have access to modern day technologies or, if they do, they simply find them difficult to use. This problem is exacerbated for those with physical or cognitive impairments. As a result, many older adults report feelings of loneliness and an increased longing to communicate or interact with family or friends [1,6]. With the proliferation of smartphones, ubiquitous access to communication technologies, and the prevalence of social media for connecting with family and friends, it is likely that older adults face increasing challenges in interacting with their younger family members who use such technologies. Yet few studies have actually examined to see if this is actually the case and how older adults cope; notable exceptions include [2] and [3].

This paper explores a cross section of older adults with varying technical know-how to understand how they participate or do not in an era of instant access via the Internet and mobile phones, and the ever-connectedness found in social media applications such as Facebook and Twitter.

Study Methodology

We conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with twelve older adults from Western Canada where all lived within or near Vancouver, BC. Participants ranged in age from 55 to 83 years old, though the majority were less than 75 years of age. Interviews lasted between ninety minutes and two hours. Following this, participants led us on a tour of their homes where they were asked to show us areas where they communicated with others, either in person or using technology.

Participants used a variety of methods to stay connected with their family and friends. Within these results, we saw four main themes emerge, depending on the participant: a preference to stay away from new technologies and thereby rely on in-person and phone exchanges; an acceptance and heavy usage of new technologies; withdrawal from heavy communication to explore newfound 'me' time; and, a lack of reciprocation in communication that caused a degree of isolation.

1: Basic Technology Usage

Several of our participants described communication routines that relied on limited technology usage in order to connect with family and friends. While this is seemingly a typical stereotype of older adults, we saw interesting nuances in the ways that these participants managed to engage in face-to-face communication through acts of helping out their families. These individuals were not socially isolated or lonely because

they made extra efforts to interact with their family and this was generally reciprocated.

For example, one of our participants, whom we call Sherri, primarily uses her home phone to communicate with her family and friends. She calls her children at least once every few days, if not daily, and even has weekly phone conversations with her grandchildren, who are college-aged and study away from home. Sherri is normally on the phone during early afternoons, once she has completed her morning routine, but is always up for a phone conversation. She is always aware of what is going on in the lives of the people she communicates with due to her social nature. Beyond the phone, however, Sherri does not use other communication technologies because she does not know how to work them.

2: Constant Connectivity

We also had several participants who actively made use of 'new' technologies to stay connected with family and friends. This included using a smartphone, social media tools like Facebook, or video chat systems like Skype to communicate with others. But this is not to say that they too didn't enjoy face-to-face communication or phone conversations. In addition to such exchanges, they simply had another dimension of technology usage that went above and beyond what we previously described. Such technology usage was despite the fact that these participants often still feared new technologies. For them, a high degree of connectivity was a way to avoid social isolation.

For example, Nancy is in her early 60's and lives with her husband. Nancy's communication routine with her family centers around her Blackberry. She received it

two years ago from her husband after he won it in a contest. Neither knew how to use it at the time, but, two years later, it has fundamentally changed the way Nancy connects with her family. At first, Nancy cautiously used it as she slowly learned its features. Now, without it, she would feel lost. Nancy uses text messaging to stay in touch with her grandchildren and daughter, Facebook to keep in touch with her extended family, and Twitter to stay in contact with her son.

3: Spontaneity and Autonomy

The routines that we described previously were just that, routine. The participants would go about the same communication activities according to a flexible yet somewhat structured pattern. In contrast to this, we also saw participants who purposely preferred a life of spontaneity. These individuals did not like to be tied down to commitments to meet with people to talk in person or on the phone and instead preferred to take advantage of their newfound 'me' time. They still kept in contact with their family and friends, but there was a strong preference to be unstructured in doing so. They even enjoyed their solitude.

For example, Rosa is also in her late 60's and lives with her husband who is a retired librarian. Her immediate family members, including her parents and only sister, have already passed away and she has no children of her own. Rosa keeps in touch with most of her friends through email because it is more convenient for planning and easier to reach more people at once. She also has phone chats with them. However, she doesn't try to stay up-to-date with their life and happenings. If she happens to connect with them, she is interested to "catch up," but if she doesn't, she is not concerned. Rosa also likes to meet with people and converse in

person, though she won't plan to meet her friends on a certain day, or at a certain time because this would go against her need for autonomy.

4: Isolation and a Lack of Reciprocity

Up to this point, all of the participants we have described have managed to maintain connections with their family members and friends and there have not been any strong concerns about reciprocity of communication. That is, most of the communication has been two-way. Yet we also saw participants experience challenges in this regard and become socially isolated as a result. In some cases, this was complete isolation from nearly all family members. In other cases, it was isolation from a particular set of family members, though there was still some connection with others.

For example, Eddie is a divorced man in his 60's. He lives on his own and is a father to three adult children and three step-children who all live in the same city as he does. His mother is in her 90's and also lives in the same city. Eddie uses Facebook to read what others are doing and also for direct social interaction where he typically initiates communication by sending messages to others or commenting on status updates. He is (nearly) constantly trying to stay aware of others and stay connected. Eddie has learned over the years that in order to connect with his children, he must adapt his communication methods to suit their preferences; this gives him the best opportunity for a response from them. Despite his large efforts to stay connected, Eddie's communication is most often not reciprocated by his family members.

Conclusion

Together our results show that older adults have a range of needs when it comes to communicating with family and friends. Some are willing to use new technologies to stay constantly connected and others are not. This suggests a range of design needs for communication technologies for older adults.

Acknowledgements

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