Obstacles to Social Media Adoption in Older Adults

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What are the factors associated with social media use?

Understanding Social Media Use is a big and new question. Websites like Facebook and Twitter have only recently become popular. Further, they are much more popular among younger people compared to older people. But as people begin to use them to communicate with each other more and more, it is important to understand what types of factors may encourage or discourage use among older adults.

This study gathered the opinions and attitudes of 124 older adults, ages 60-90, who use the internet. In that group, 44% also reported using social networking websites at least occasionally. Below are the factors that are associated with both interest in using social networking websites in the future and with actual amount of use.

Perceived Usefulness is one key predicting factor. When older adults feel that social networking websites are useful, they have more interest in using them in the future and use them for more hours during the week. Usefulness is measured in terms of how much an individual thinks the website can be used to meet certain goals, like communicating with family and friends. Social networking websites have more value for users when those users can communicate with people they care about.

Perceived Ease of Use is another factor. Just like usefulness, ease of use also correlates with interest in using social networking websites and hours of use. Ease of use relates both to how easy it is to get a website to do what you want it to do and also to how easy it is to use social networking websites. As all participants in this study reported using the internet, it was important to understand both types. In this study, both factors were related to interest in and use of social networking websites. When participants felt social networking websites weren’t difficult to use, they were more likely to use them.

Social Pressures also play a role in patterns of use. Social networking websites aren’t much fun if you can’t connect with other people you know. And, especially when family members use social networking websites to share things like photographs of grandchildren, there are often social pressures for joining and using the websites. This was supported by the results of this study. Participants who felt more social pressure to join and use social networking websites were more interested in using the websites and reported spending more hours using them. It would seem that using social networking websites is a lot more enjoyable when you can connect with people you care about.

Trust of Social Networking Websites is also important to consider. News reports, especially this summer, frequently featured information about the dangers of sharing information online. Though all social networking websites offer privacy controls so that users can restrict who views the information they share, these settings are often difficult to navigate and use. In this study, trust in social networking websites was also associated with greater interest in using the websites. Perhaps those users who already use social networking websites are more inclined to trust them.

Negative Views on Social Networking Use is also important to consider. It is quite common to hear that social networking websites are a waste of time, that their use is unimportant or frivolous, and that they are addictive. Especially as these websites become a common way to communicate, it’s not surprising that we would learn of some negative consequences associated with their use. In this study, participants who felt that social networking website use was associated with negative consequences were less likely to report interest in using the websites in the future.

Demographic Variables are also important to consider. For example, does gender play a role in interest in social networking websites? What about age or amount of education? In this study, no differences were found between men and women. Both reported using social networking websites in roughly equal percentages. Similarly, there was no correlation found between years of education and interest in using social networking websites. Age, on the other hand, was negatively correlated with interest: the older the participant, the less interest in social networking websites.

Advice on Social Networking Websites and Older Adults: If you want to use social networking to reach out to older adults, the best advice is to consider how your encouragement can emphasize the above factors. For example, you should indicate how useful and easy it is to use social networking websites. Further, emphasize that social networking websites are not for connecting with strangers, but instead are best for communicating with family and friends. And make sure to talk about privacy! With the proper privacy settings enabled and some common sense about what information is shared, there is no risk in using social networking websites. Using these guidelines, you should increase your chances of success.

Social networking website use among older adults is growing, so position yourself to take advantage!

Your Help is Needed! to complete future studies to help us understand more about new communication technologies. Many questions remain about how changing preferences for certain ways of communicating (texting, cell phones, social networking websites, and so on) may affect things like intergenerational communication.

If you are interested in participating in future research on these types of topics, let Michael Braun know. You can email him at michaelbraun@wisc.edu or call him at 608/301.5321.