Connecting with others during COVID-19: Older adults' use of social media and visual tools

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The impact that COVID-19 has had on social isolation has been unprecedented. During this time, many of us have turned to technology to enable us to remain connected to our family, friends, colleagues, and neighbours. Whether social distancing, in self-isolation, or 'lockdown', so many people are now relying on various forms of technology for communication – specifically through visual communication tools. Whether this is using WhatsApp to send photographs, using Facetime to video call, scrolling through our social media feeds, or passing time creating content to share with others on TikTok – many people are spending a substantial part of their time using technology. We have even seen virtual bars 'opening' on Facebook with live entertainment, and an influx of screenshots boasting virtual birthday parties being held on Zoom.

We recently carried out a study, funded by the British Academy/Leverhulme Trust, to explore older adults' experiences of using technology (including social media) to connect with others. The first phase of this two-phase study involved interviews with 20 older adults (65+ years old) from across the UK, all of whom regularly used digital devices and social media. These findings significantly highlighted the importance of technology and social media for social relationships, specifically visual communication tools.

This study was conducted before the onset of COVID-19, and interestingly, individuals primarily chose to use technology to keep in touch with family and friends who they did not have the opportunity to see face-to-face, such as those living in other areas of the country, or abroad. Participants also described the benefits of technology as increasing the regularity of communication with friends and family: *"[My children and I don't] communicate too often, but with a WhatsApp family page and things we throw things at each other. We've been hearing about my daughter's holiday. My son is abroad at the moment, we've been hearing about him. He works abroad quite a lot, so he keeps in touch that way".*

One participant who described himself as "*almost housebound*" before COVID-19 due to being a carer, found social media to be a useful way to connect with others, and without it would no longer get to socialise with those outside of his own home. He describes the informality of social media, and rather than contacting someone with a purpose, it is a space in which he can simply greet others and be greeted himself: *"social isolation is one of the big problems and to know that there is someone that you can just greet and say something to when you get up in the morning is helpful".*

During COVID-19 we are unable to communicate face-to-face and many of us are therefore relying more and more upon technology to keep in touch with others. Whilst the telephone is an accessible form of communication for so many, the participants within our study specifically described visual online communication as a way to keep in touch with one another when face-to-face communication was not possible.

People spoke about how seeing one another, felt like they were '*really*' getting a sense of how someone was feeling and connecting with them on a deeper level than they could be using telephone or other means of online communication that do not involve this real-time visual element. One participant described the importance of seeing others when talking to them: *"I mean it's the visual. If you're having a conversation with someone and you can see their face and see the response and the smiles and the rest, it just adds something, doesn't it? […] And the same with the telephone you can find out that you have an argument starting that wouldn't be there if you could see the twinkle in the eye".*

Individuals also described how speaking to their family using video calling technology was important so that their younger grandchildren did not forget about them. Whilst technology was viewed as the next best thing to face-to-face communication, and in current times, is the only other alternative to allow us to communicate with others, it was not always a positive experience to speak with younger grandchildren. Sometimes it led to grandchildren being upset as their grandparents weren't there in person and were unable to touch their grandparents despite being able to see them.

On the whole, participants described the benefits of online communication in allowing them to connect with their family and friends and maintain a relationship. But what about those who don't have these technologies to use? Whilst the number of older adults using the internet and social media has notably increased across UK, USA, and Europe over the last decade, older adults are still less likely than all younger generations to use the internet and social media. Individuals in our study described their own concern for those without digital skills, or access to digital devices, which creates a divide between "*those that can and those that can't*". They recognised the benefits they experienced due to their own use of technology and were concerned for others without access: *"A lot of people I know that are older than me, around my age and older than me, they don't have computers […] so yeah, I think a lot of older people become more isolated because as other younger people tend to use a lot of computers and a lot of phone messages, and I think older people can become quite isolated".*

The overall message from this research study was that even people for who use technology on a regular basis, technology was still only a tool for social connection, a welcome tool, but only a tool, and it certainly wasn't a replacement for face to face communication. However, during COVID-19, it must be a replacement for face-to-face communication, and the best available way that we can remain connected with friends and family. This study demonstrated the importance of staying connected through these means, specifically through visual communication. However, for many, this is not an option, and many individuals, including older adults, do not have access or skills to use these technologies, or social media platforms, relying heavily upon the telephone. Social media allows older adults the choice of communication and to be able to 'see' their family members.

To find out more about this study, the podcast "Ageing in a Digital World" is available to listen/download on the following platforms:

Soundcloud: https://soundcloud.com/user-589740502/ageing-in-a-digital-world

Spotify: https://open.spotify.com/show/3YaugSTw5wTNCujhTZSTug

iTunes: https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/ageing-in-a-digital world/id1506615062?i=1000470663608

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