

# Silver surfers forgotten in social media boom

September 18 2013, by Chris Norval

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Older people embrace social media if it fits their needs. Credit: Menno van der Sman

Social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter are an almost ubiquitous part of most young people's lives after just a few years of existence. But the enthusiasm with which they have been adopted by this group has not been mirrored in older generations.

In the UK, Ofcom [estimates](#) that 92% of online 16-24 year olds have created a profile on a social networking site, compared to just 25% of

online adults over 65.

This lack of uptake reflects a wider problem. [Figures released by Age UK](#) yesterday show that there are just four areas in England in which the percentage of older adults online outnumbers those who are offline. The [charity](#) has called on the government and [local authorities](#) to take action to help address the problem that people over a certain age are the least likely to take advantage of online services.

Social networking sites can be a useful platform for communication and interaction and older people have been shown to be particularly keen to use them to share pictures with family.

Research in the past has suggested that [intensity](#) of Facebook usage is linked with greater [life satisfaction](#) and decreased loneliness. Using these services to connect with children or [grandchildren](#) who live far away, for example, can help adults who feel disassociated with family events.

But research shows that older adults have different concerns to the young when they decide whether or not to join up. Because these sites often don't address these concerns, potential older users are excluded from the benefits they offer.

There are a number of potential reasons why fewer adults over 65 use [social networking sites](#). While factors such as not having access to a computer or the internet do exist, many older adults make a conscious decision not to. This can often be due to concerns over privacy, issues with finding important features or settings on such a site or the fear of receiving abusive messages from other users. Younger people who have spent their formative years getting to grips with technology often take these issues in their stride but many older adults see the risks outweighing the benefits.

While social networking sites designed specifically for people over 55 or 65 do exist, they are often not met with great uptake, and some do little to address the issues and concerns being faced by their target users.

The choice of whether or not to use a social networking site is entirely up to the individual and, of course, there are potentially other complex issues. These include whether a grandchild would want to connect to their grandparents through a medium commonly used as a method for self expression during teenage years or whether an older adult can really benefit from online communication if none of their friends or acquaintances use it.

Nevertheless, developers can attempt to create the best possible online environment for users if they choose to set up a profile. Sites can be made more inclusive by following [age-related development guidelines](#), using appropriate terminology and running usability studies with potential users.

Working with older adults has thrown up a number of possible options for making [social networking](#) sites more inclusive. These recommendations are currently being researched and the findings will allow developers to avoid many of the common barriers that older adults face. Early usability studies are promising, and findings are due to be published in the near future. Older users could be made more comfortable using these sites if privacy settings are closed-off by default, so their information is not automatically broadcasted. A greater emphasis on reassuring users that suitable security measures are in place is another option, as is making sure that reporting other users is a simple process.

Understanding users is an important step in developing the best possible websites for people. Taking into account these design considerations can reduce the barriers that [older adults](#) face, creating a more inclusive

website. By investigating how we can improve these sites for older users, we can provide an online environment where a wider range of people can feel comfortable communicating and sharing content with family and friends, if they choose to do so, with implications for life satisfaction and [loneliness](#).

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Source: The Conversation

Citation: Silver surfers forgotten in social media boom (2013, September 18) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-09-silver-surfers-forgotten-social-media.html>

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