

Embracing digital spaces: How older immigrants are navigating the infodemic

April 8 2024, by Natalia Balyasnikova and Claire Ahn



Agism not only undermines the capabilities of older individuals, it also isolates them from the digital discourse. Credit: Center for Ageing Better

Occurring in tandem with the COVID-19 pandemic, another crisis was quietly escalating and unnoticed by many—[an infodemic](#) characterized by an overload of information, much of it misleading or false. Though concerns of an infodemic started before this time, and can occur with any issue or event, the phenomenon has become so widespread that the term was included into Merriam-Webster's 2020 list of "[words we are watching](#)."

Indeed, since the onset of COVID-19, the public has been exposed to an overwhelming amount of information, often contradictory, about the virus, basic health and safety protocols, efficiency of vaccines, conspiracy theories and exaggerated sensationalist news clips.

Amid this chaos, a common stereotype emerged, painting older adults as [primary actors for the spread of misinformation online](#) in the infodemic. This narrative, however, does not recognize the complexity of the issue and unjustly labels a group that, in reality, can demonstrate a remarkable desire to be engaged in navigating the media landscape.

As we progress through the [United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing](#), a global initiative aiming to improve the lives of older people and their communities, we are prompted to reevaluate our perspectives on media literacy practices of older adults.

Shattering stereotypes

Contrary to assumptions that seniors are [technologically averse](#) due to accessibility issues and other factors, many older adults now [show remarkable agility](#) in navigating [digital media](#). In search of the most recent news, older adults turn to sites like Facebook, WeChat and YouTube over more traditional sources of news.

This shift is not just about convenience but speaks to seniors' recognition of the evolving nature of the digital landscape and the need to stay informed and connected.

Contrary to the prevalent notion that age hampers older adults with navigating the digital landscape, one of the real obstacles is [agism](#), prejudice and discrimination against people based on their age.

During COVID-19 pandemic, [agism intensified](#), especially on social media. Agism not only undermines the capabilities of older individuals, it also isolates them from the digital discourse. That exacerbates their vulnerability to the very misinformation ecosystem they are accused of perpetuating. For older immigrants, the issue is ever more pressing.

We need to combat the agist stereotype that older adults are simply victims of the infodemic or passive consumers of digital media, and avoid limiting their digital access or curating their digital news feed. Such actions undermine older adults' autonomy [and are agist](#).

Instead, we need to recognize that older adults are engaged citizens, earnestly learning how to decipher the complex digital and media environment. Teaching new skills that will support them in this endeavor [can be empowering](#). In fact, learning in later life is one of the pillars of active aging.

Older immigrants

Yet, there is a frequently overlooked segment of the older population: older immigrants. There must be better understanding of the ways they [navigate digital spaces](#) and the challenges they face in the ongoing infodemic. Older immigrants often experience significant [social isolation](#), [loneliness](#) and [housing insecurity](#). These can be down to factors like their age, foreign language skills and the degree of support they get

from the community and family.

It is within these contexts, among others, that they have to learn how to navigate the complex digital landscape. Regardless, even while facing multiple barriers, older immigrants often turn to internet spaces for a number of reasons, such as staying connected with friends from home countries, access to important information, and also for leisurely activities. In fact, access to digital technology [is an essential component for most older immigrants' well-being](#) and learning about it is [especially meaningful](#).

The challenge is to create targeted interventions that effectively dismantle some of the barriers older immigrants face to ensure that all media is accessible and beneficial. It is also important to ensure they are developing important critical digital literacy skills. To do so, we first need to understand how older immigrants engage with media on various digital platforms.

Older immigrants' media use

As educators and researchers in education, we know that the processes of [immigrant](#) seniors accessing digital news is anything but monolithic. A common stereotype is that many older immigrants rely on their first language and do not, for example, speak English when residing in Canada and hence do not engage with English-related media.

In our work we have seen that many older immigrants are in fact engaging with news sources in both English and their native languages. Older immigrants also do not immediately believe all information they came across, but share palpable concerns regarding the authenticity of information.

Many older immigrants seeking information across various media types

are driven by the wish to support their communities. Such community focus suggests there is potential for learning initiatives aimed at bridging digital and linguistic divides as well as empowering [older adults](#) to take on educational and leadership roles within their own communities.

What we see is an opportunity to invest in peer-driven digital and critical media literacy training, especially as it pertains to discerning the reliability of various sources and understanding the nuances of how information is presented across different media spaces.

Older immigrants actively engage in understanding something that is relevant to them and their lives, and also [readily apply their new knowledge](#).

It is paramount to pay attention to how the desire to learn and share knowledge can be leveraged to combat an infodemic, especially as more and more older immigrants attempt to navigate their ways through a complicated online world to stay connected with communities and families, and current with diverse issues that impact societies across the globe.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Embracing digital spaces: How older immigrants are navigating the infodemic (2024, April 8) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-04-embracing-digital-spaces->

[older-immigrants.html](#)

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.