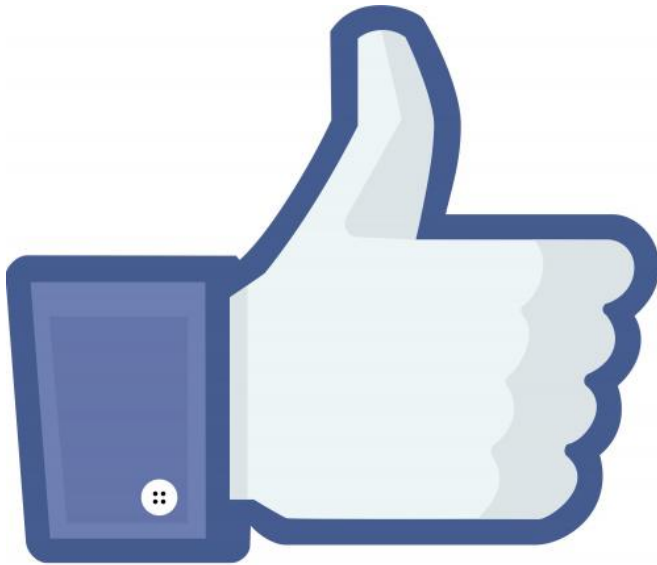


Posting, commenting and customizing on Facebook help involve, empower older adults

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Social networking sites, such as Facebook, offer tools and activities that may help older adults feel more empowered and less isolated, according to researchers.

In a study of Facebook use, older adults who posted a lot of personal stories on the social networking site felt a higher sense of community, and the more they customized their profiles, the more in control they felt, said S. Shyam Sundar, Penn State distinguished professor of communications and co-director of the Media Effects Research Laboratory. He added that the study suggests that using [social media](#) is not a uniform experience that is either all bad, or all good, but offers multiple functions for diverse users.

"People tend to think of Facebook as a black box

that either has an overall positive effect or a negative effect, but what distinguishes this study is that it makes an effort to go in and see what people do in Facebook—and that's what matters," said Sundar. "So, in other words, social media, by itself, is neither good, nor bad, but it's how you use it."

For older adults, who may be less mobile, Facebook and similar [social networking sites](#) could play a critical role in easing isolation and making them feel like they are part of a large community, according to the researchers, who report their findings in the journal *New Media & Society*.

"This is important, especially for older adults who might be aging in place, because they have mobility constraints that limit their ability to socialize," said Sundar. "And, for the last ten years or so, we've been looking into how social networking sites can enhance the social life of older adults and reduce the social isolation that they might feel. These are more fine-grained findings that say certain things you do on Facebook can give you gratifications, like fulfilling the needs for activity, having interactions with others, having a greater sense of agency, and building community."

The researchers also suggested that commenting on and responding to posts gave older users a feeling of social interaction.

Eun Hwa Jung, formerly a doctoral student at Penn State and currently assistant professor of communications and new media, National University of Singapore, who worked with Sundar, said older adults are increasingly adopting social media, in general, and are a growing number of Facebook's total membership. According to Pew research, 34 percent of Americans aged 65 years and older use social networks in 2017, an increase of 7 percent from 2016. Facebook is considered the

most popular social network among older adults, the researchers add.

Given the widespread diffusion of Facebook in this group, understanding what gratifications older adults derive from particular technological features helps designers develop better user interfaces suited for them, Jung said.

"It can improve online interactions between individuals from different generations," she added.

According to Sundar, developers of social media networks should consider the needs of this growing group of users. For example, they should create features that enhance the identity of older adults while simultaneously protecting their privacy. More features that encourage older [adults](#) to exchange and visualize messages with others could also make sites more interactive for this group.

To collect the data, the researchers recruited 202 participants—79.7 percent female and 20.3 percent male—who were 60 years and older and used Facebook for at least a year. The participants were recruited from 27 retirement centers throughout the United States.

The researchers "friended" the participants on Facebook so they could count the number of times they used the various tools in the site during the past year. The participants were also asked to respond to a questionnaire that captured the gratifications they obtained from Facebook.

Future research may look at whether these positive interactions on Facebook could lead to the enhancement of well-being for seniors, Sundar said. The researchers also suggested that the effects of other social [media](#) outlets, such as Twitter and Pinterest, as well as other mobile and wearable devices, on [older adults](#) should be investigated.

More information: *New Media & Society*, [DOI: 10.1177/1461444818768090](#)

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