

New Media use in Everyday Life of Aged People: A Study in Kolkata

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ABSTRACT

The use of new media has been much highlighted be it for socialization, elections, business or peer to peer interactions and so on. It has added renewed dimensions to our existing social relations, i.e. speed and interactivity. Much has been written about youth and the use of new media. However, little is known about how ageing population use new media in the everyday life and their familiarity with the technology and adaptability with such technologies. This paper makes an attempt to explore the usage of new media in everyday life of ageing population in India.

Keywords: New media, ageing population, socialization, information and communication technology, social media, Internet

Introduction

New media has been much in currency in the recent times. New media technologies are abundantly used by different age groups among populations and regions across the country. These technologies have become a part of their everyday life as it caters to differing functions of their life world. Thus, one can say that everyday life becomes a media life whereby different age groups live considerably and spend considerable amount of time with media technologies. Present day youth spend quality time with social media. Be it for chatting, socialisation, seeking information or connecting to distant places, new media becomes a major tool for connecting with the larger world. Since India is becoming a society of youth, hence most of the energy is invested on understanding the role of new media among youth. Besides youth, other age groups also use new media tools, although the reasons may be different. However, little is known about how aging population use new media in their daily lives and their familiarity with the technology and adaptability with such technologies. My paper attempts to explore ways to understand the possible usage of new media in the daily lives of the ageing population. It evaluates existing literature at hand to critically interrogate the possible ways to connect the use of new media and older adults. The study will help in evaluating some core probabilities such as in what ways technology can help prevent and alleviate isolation and loneliness amongst older adults? What is its potential for enabling them to develop and retain social connections and actively participate in their communities, both key components of happiness and wellbeing?

Most definitions of new media have focused on their technological features. Other classificatory methodologies define new media as those communication technologies involving computers that allow interactivity among users. It is a well-known fact that new media has an overwhelming impact on the users however the users can always make their own choices of using them. New media comprises of email, websites and mobile communication and interestingly all these different modes of communication have their own characteristics. *These different modes of communication are subjected to different socio-economic conditions of use, not every individual in the society may use new media technologies. Thus the impact of new media is pervasive in respect to societies where they are employed* (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006). New media, which can be defined as converge of the conventional media like the newspaper, television and radio in one digital device, play a significant part in everyone's life. It offers the scope of immediate interaction between participants that in turn minimises the level of isolation. The reach of new media extends beyond entertainment and workstations. Education, law, banking systems, politics, health care, etc. are dependent on information and communication technology systems and possess the capability to affect anyone who is dealing with any one of the activities or services. Not much attempt has been made to understand the relationship between new media and the society.

According to 2011 census data, aged people (60 years and above) constituted around six per cent of the total population of the country. The demographic transition that is taking place is exceptional. There has been a general increase in the trend of younger generation moving away from home for higher educational or work opportunities. This factor apart from the changing concept of joint family to nuclear family implies increased isolation of the ageing population.

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Amid all these changes taking place in the society new media technology can be considered as one of the ways to scale up solutions and joining the gaps between generations and offer help in the existence of the aged people. It would be interesting to study whether new media can be of any help in eradicating or dealing with any of the problems faced by an older person in his daily existence. The term Gerontechnology was coined in a study by Minichiello and Coulson which means a possible connotation between technology and the ageing process (Minichiello & Coulson, 2005). Through this term, an assumption can be made that there exists a association between the older adults and the technology tools.

Era of Modernisation and Aged in India

Old age has become a complex phenomenon. Prolongation of life expectancy has given rise to an alarming increase in the numerical strength. Challenges and opportunities exist in the process of ageing but proper care adds life to years for the elderly people. While analysing some of the studies dating back to the past decade of 1990s, it has evolved that with the changing dimension of the Indian societies, smaller nuclear families have no place for the old people (Dandekar, 1996; Biswas, 1999; Dave, 1999). All these changes tend to make them feel dejected and lost. Hence, it definitely needs a complete approach to study the older adults and the problems faced by them in their daily existence. Loneliness may vary from person to person and at different circumstances. Empirical studies on variables such as depression, self-consciousness and self-esteem among the older adults are needed to be done as there is prevalence of several negative attitudes and beliefs related to ageing and the aged in the country. Changing family structure caused by urbanization, dominance of individualistic as well as materialistic values are some of the reasons subsidizing to low self-esteem and depression among the ageing population. An aged person faces various problems in daily life including social, economic, medical and psychological. Main problems studied in the aged people irrespective of gender and economic status is general weakness, sickness, poor-eyesight, etc. (Dandekar, 1996; Gore, 2000). Economic dependency, social isolations are other major problems faced by the older people. The studies done on the problems faced by the aged in rural and urban areas help in critically analysing and understanding the numerous effects that explain the daily life of older adults in India. Thus, from the analysis of the existing literature it can be stated that a number of changes occur with the onset of ageing process and a linkage exists

between the problems like social, psychological, physical and financial faced by the older adults.

New Media and Ageing People

In a contemporary society, the increasing importance of new media cannot be understated. In other countries, social scientists have recognized the use of new media technologies in the everyday lives of older adults (Karavidas, Lim, & Katsikas, 2005; Selwyn, 2004; Ke, 2015). For instance, study on effects of computers on older adults by Karavidas, Lim, & Katsikas (2005) on the effects of computers on older adult users suggested that computer knowledge has impact on life satisfaction within retired older adult computer users in the US. Age is and will continue to be an important factor in determining people's use of information and communication technologies. Another study on information aged or older adults use of information and communication technology in everyday life in UK (Selwyn, 2004) points out that information communication technologies can be a provision towards giving aged people the information tools they need to participate in the decision-making structures which affect their daily lives and helping people use these new media technologies to deal with their everyday problems. A significant study done in China noted the growing popularity of social media among the aged specifically in urban areas (Ke, 2015). One more study on the acceptance of information communication technology for online banking by the older adults in India showed that older adults are not comfortable using the online banking services as they are anxious about the safety of the transactions done online (Ammu & Panicker, 2013). Unfortunately, academic studies are quite limited in this particular area of new media and ageing people in India and very little do we know about the nature or particular use and purpose that new media can serve in the daily lives of ageing population.

Older adults can benefit from computer usage by having the tasks of everyday life simplified provided if they receive appropriate training and information on computer use and its application in daily life. With the advent of new media, the world is changing intensely. The technological processes have been making the world starkly independent as well as interconnected. With new media having a transformative impact on the way people live and work today, it can be presumed that it has tremendous potential to improve the quality of later life by forming social networks to deal with the issue of social isolation, empowering those living alone as well as enabling civil participation. Digital inclusion

plays a crucial role in building a fair and equitable society. Technology is no longer an extra option rather it needs to be ensured that everyone in later life is able to realise the benefits of the new digital age. As indicated by Rogers (2003), personality could play a role in technology adoption. Madden, (2010) reported that in the past few years the number of older adults have increased and older users have been specifically enthusiastic about embracing new networking tools. Study by Selwyn (2004) has noted that even though the transition to technology may be difficult for some elderly people yet they anticipate adapting to the new media technology in the future as it will benefit them. Hence, it may be realistic for the aged people to think about needs they expect encountering and how new media technology and internet might support them in fulfilling such needs. Inputs by Bowling Green State University (2015), argues that though new media technology could significantly increase independence for aged people yet they are still less likely to adopt the same as compared to their younger counterparts for various reasons ranging from uncertainties about its benefits to an overall lack of comfort. This study further states that the relationship between age and outlooks towards new media is also chiefly negative that is, as the age increases, their negative attitudes towards technology is likely to increase (Bowling Green State University, 2015).

For the young people, usage of new media technology in daily lives is a common factor. Computers and other new media tools are determined as a province of younger generations however these technological tools represent immense socialising opportunity for the older adults too especially those who have been living alone (Reifova & Fiserova, 2012). However there are certain setbacks too and motivation of learning computers and smart phones is one primary focus. It is difficult for an older adult to get used to the the new media technologies as is rightly stated by Reifova & Fiserova, (2012) in their study that *"having spent their entire life without computers, the older adults usually do not see the benefit the new technologies could bring them immediately "only" at retirement."* New media can be an empowering tool benefiting and improving the quality of life even for the aged. However, certain contradictions do exist. As Selwyn (2004) in his study points out that *"it is misleading to conceptualise older adults as nonusers or highly empowered silver surfers as older adults' use of computers more basic and mundane."* New media offers many prospects to improve the ageing process in several areas including education, health, finance, social, etc. Like for instance, in the

health care sector, new media can play a major role by offering health education and awareness on preventive strategies. Interestingly, in case of new media the ease of access and dissemination of information leading to continuous learning can be one of the factors enabling the older adults to think of re-connecting in the digital way. The basic new media tools such as mobile phones with medical alert systems can be lifesaving paving the way for immediate help. Technology has become pervasive in the concept of daily life and if implemented properly can help the ageing population in diverse ways (Mitzner, et al., 2010). Lack of positive creative role in the society post retirement can have an impact on the status of the aged. Here, new media can come to the aid providing the platform for social role giving them back the sense of self-pride, self-esteem and self-worth.

Empirical Findings

The number of older adults living alone in Kolkata city has increased in recent times (Basu, 2014). The childless and the spouseless elderly and those with children living abroad or in other parts of the country are forced to live alone. For this study, few old age homes in Kolkata were randomly chosen that have their own promotional websites. A set of questions were asked to management staffs such as: Do you have Internet facilities for the residents? If yes, then do you have instructor? Do you need any extra money for providing such facility, etc.? Among them only three answered that they have Internet facilities for the residents. In the first old age home visited as part of the survey it was found that even though they have the facility of internet for the residents but they do not have any instructor to teach any resident. The ratio of internet using older member seems relatively less. For instance, two out of nine members use internet and computers, although mobile phones are used by the majority. In the second old age home, one small computer café inside the premises have been observed. Among all the residents there, very few residents (around three of them) usually use video links (e.g. Skype, Google hangout etc.) to talk to their families or children living away. Interestingly, some of the residents claimed that their children have bought them laptops recently allowing them to be in touch with them at any time within the comfort of their room. For the residents who do not have laptops or lacks the knowledge on how to use the Internet, the old age home has provided them with instructor who helps them in learning on how to use the Internet. Mobile phones are however used by almost everyone. A resident of

around 92 years of age uses mobile phone only. She said she speaks to her friend or some distant relative who calls her occasionally. The management of the old age home encourages their residents to visit the in-house Internet cafe and learn how to use Internet. The management also suggested that most of the members living in this particular old age home have retired from prestigious jobs holding high positions and hence already possess the knowledge of computers. The residents gave an idea that they prefer the old age homes for after care. The observations helped in constructing the opinions and attitudes of the old people regarding digital inequalities that have challenged the pre-conceived notion that older adults lack digital skills. From the responses derived it has been found that there exists a high awareness related to the benefits and significance of new media among the older adults. If enough support and motivation can be provided to them then there stands a possibility of generating interest among the aged to become digitally independent.

Conclusion

The advent of new media has ensured a distinct relation which otherwise is witnessed in the relationship between technology and society. Earlier forms of media technology were uni-linear and used users as passive audience. On the contrary, the use of new media not only enhances interactivity but also claims to empower the subjugated population. To be specific, most of the ageing population today live in a better environment, although much has to be done in comparison with earlier times. Today, the ageing population in cities have access to new media technologies and remain constantly in touch with their progenies. In a way it can be said that new media can play a role in enriching lives of the older people by providing the purpose and scope for creative productivity.

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