Elderly social connectedness through social media platforms: a scoping review

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Abstract

Social connectedness is a fundamental human right and plays a significant role in the well-being of the elderly. Lack of connectedness is related to higher rates of mortality and morbidity. The emergence of COVID-19 and its associated social/physical distancing has brought the importance of social connectedness for human health and well-being, especially for the elderly, into a sharp focus. Globally, the adoption of social media platforms to create connectedness has been increasing across all age groups, including older populations. However, not all elderly can use these social media platforms to connect with their significant others. Using a scoping review, the study highlights the concerns for social connectedness among the elderly in an era where the COVID-19 pandemic continues to wear away all elements of in-person social connectedness. The study describes emerging concerns as the elderly attempt to establish and sustain the much-needed social connectedness through social media platforms. The study suggests functional approaches to dealing with these concerns to improve the well-being of the elderly.

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Introduction

In order to control the COVID-19 pandemic, most countries have designed and implemented some of the strictest forms of restrictions on social gatherings in modern history (Javis et al., 2021; Salman et al., 2021). These restrictions, including lockdown and social distancing regulations, require individuals, especially the elderly, to avoid social gatherings and interactions with family members, friends, and other members of society.

The elderly population tends to already suffer from high levels of loneliness (Fakoya et al., 2020; Savikko et al., 2005) and thus are at double risk of loneliness and isolation during the Covid-19 pandemic. Since the elderly report significant levels of loneliness and isolation, these restrictions may negatively impact their physical and psycho-social health (Brooke & Jackson, 2020; Venkatesh & Edirappuli, 2020). Research shows a significant relationship exists between social isolation and loneliness (Cheng et al., 2020; Tomova et al., 2020) and that both social isolation and loneliness have detrimental effects on individual well-being (Hwang et al., 2020; Kasar & Karaman, 2021). Social connectedness is essential to the very survival of human beings, and the introduction of restrictions robs the elderly, in particular, of the much-needed social support they receive from social connectedness (Arthur-Holmes & Agyemang-Duah, 2020).

In Ghana, the elderly connect with society through various sources of social networks. These include relatives, friends, spouses, and neighbors. The elderly interact and receive care by connecting with these social networks (Arthur-Holmes & Agyemang-Duah, 2020; Nukunya, 2003). Some studies show that social interactions are linked to reduced depressive symptoms among the elderly (Asante & Andoh-Arthur, 2015; Cruwys et al., 2013). More recent studies establish a positive correlation between higher levels of social connectedness and lower stress levels and worries among COVID-19-positive patients (Humphrey et al., 2022; Nitschke et al., 2021).

Defining social connectedness is beset with several challenges as some ambiguity exists in determining what constitutes the concept. Concepts such as collective self-esteem, social engagement, belongingness, and social integration or social support are used interchangeably with social connectedness (Register & Herman, 2010; Cohen, 2004). However, in the current review, social connectedness is considered "an opposite of loneliness, a subjective evaluation of the extent to which one has meaningful, close, and constructive relationships with others (i.e., individuals, groups, and society)" (O'Rourke & Sidani, 2017). Social connectedness provides support when dealing with negative emotions, such as feelings of distress and worry, especially in times of uncertainty (Zaki & Williams, 2013). Generally, social connectedness has been associated with decreased rates of depression (Cruwys et al., 2013; Saeri et al., 2018), decreased risks of cognitive decline (Ertel, 2008), mortality (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010), and greater longevity (Umberson & Montez, 2010).

Social interactions and networks are essential to successful aging because they provide security, familiarity, and embeddedness in a continuously changing environment (Carragher & Ryan, 2020; Wiles et al., 2011). Studies have shown that social connectedness is indispensable for the well-being of the elderly (Ashida & Heaney, 2008; O'Rourke et al., 2018). The World Health Organization (2007; 2015) describes social connectedness as the backbone of "age-friendly societies." Accordingly, elderly individuals who report a robust social network, social participation, and connectedness report better mental and physical health (Ermer & Proulx, 2019). Conversely, elderly individuals who rely on irregular outside contacts through social programs and community activities risk mental health problems (Armitage & Nellums, 2020; Venkatesh & Edirappuli, 2020).

Social media use may have positive and negative impacts on individual well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic (González-Padilla & Tortolero-Blanco, 2021). Simon et al. (2021) found a positive association between social network sites and psychological and social well-being. Social network sites provide constant social interaction and participation opportunities, regardless of physical abilities and mobility (Chen & Li, 2017). Limited research exists on the potential benefits of social media platforms for the elderly population (Barbosa et al., 2018; Ryan et al., 2017).

The elderly form about 6.7% of Ghana's population (Ghana Statistical Service [GSS], 2013). With improved healthcare, increased life expectancy, and reduced birth rate, it is estimated that the elderly population may increase to about 8.6% of the total population by 2030 (Ghana Statistical Service [GSS], 2013). A recent study on seniors aged 65+ from 2010-2020 indicates that the elderly population in Ghana is 976 000 (Sasu, 2021a, in press). This trend requires an acute focus on the well-being of the elderly in Ghana's population (Kpessa-Whyte, 2018). This requirement comes at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic, with its social/physical distancing restrictions, continues to define the medium of social interactions in our society.

Amegbor et al. (2021) found that deprivation of social connectedness could induce ill health in Ghana's elderly population in Ghana. For example, Tsiboe (2021) indicates that Ghana's elderly

population with disability experience loneliness, hunger, and suicidal thoughts during the COVID-19 pandemic. Tsiboe (2021) blames these health threats on the strict restrictive measures (including social and physical distancing and lockdowns) that kept family caregivers away from the elderly populace.

As virtual platforms increasingly become substitutes for social connectedness through physical gatherings, social media platforms have received wide publicity. Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Zoom, and Twitter are popular platforms used to keep close social connections with others. Individuals, including the elderly, resort to these platforms to cope with the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic (Casanova et al., 2021). Given the vulnerability of the elderly populace, it is probable to expert some concerns about using these social media platforms. Unfortunately, studies demonstrating the concerns of the elderly population in the use of social media platforms to connect with significant others are lacking.

This study probes the relationship between elderly social connectedness and social media platforms among Ghana's elderly populace. The current study contributes to the understanding of how social media platforms could enhance elderly social connectedness among Ghana's elderly population. The thrust of the study is that appropriate social media platform patronage enhances social connectedness, which can potentially improve the mental health of elderly individuals. The findings in this study will provide evidence-based recommendations for supporting the elderly in using social media platforms in a pandemic situation.

Methodology

This qualitative study interprets available literature on how social media platforms enhance social connectedness among the elderly in Ghana. The study (1) identifies areas of current and future research, and (2) suggests concerns that need addressing for elderly individuals to appropriately utilize social media platforms to improve social connectedness in Ghana. The qualitative-interpretative approach was deemed most appropriate for these outcomes because it is exploratory and focuses on breadth rather than depth. This paper summarizes the state of the current literature on elderly social connectedness through social media platforms. It identifies gaps that will provide direction for future research regarding social media platforms and elderly social connectedness in Ghana.

Research design

The conduct of this scoping review followed Arksey and O'Malley's five-stage scoping review framework (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005), refined with the Joanna Briggs Institute methodology (Peters et al., 2015). The primary aim was to capture how elderly social connectedness and social media platforms are categorized and explained in the literature. Focusing on review papers (of any type) rather than primary literature alone is an efficient way of doing this. The review included the following five key phases: (1) identify the research questions, (2) identify relevant studies, (3) select studies, (4) chart the data, and (5) collate, summarize, and report the data.

2.1. Identifying the Research Questions

This review aimed to explore the concerns of the elderly as they use social media platforms for social connectedness. According to Arksey and O' Malley (2005), it is best to start with a broad review area to determine what is available in extant literature. The authors of the current review are aware of the existing research on social connectedness and how social media platforms enhance it. However, most of the research comes from western contexts. The research questions are: (1) how is social connectedness related to the mental health of the elderly in Ghana? (2) how do social media platforms aid social connectedness for the elderly in Ghana? (3) what challenges do elderly users experience as they use popular social media platforms in Ghana?

2.2. Identifying Relevant Studies

The search terms used were as follows: ["social connectedness," "social connection," "social support OR social networks"], ["social media platforms," "digital platforms"] ["the elderly in Ghana," "seniors," "the aged"] ["challenges of using social media platforms in Ghana," "factors that hinder usage of social media platforms in Ghana"]. The conditions for including literature were peer review, English language, and publications between 2000 and 2022. This scoping review aimed to identify the most recent and relevant articles; therefore, the authors opted to exclude older publications. Relevant manuscripts and articles must have measured the study's social connectedness among the elderly population. In addition, reports on article/book reviews were excluded from the study to ensure primary data analysis.

Databases

Four databases were used in this review based on the topic area: Pubmed and Web of Science, ERIC (education research), PsycINFO (psychological research), and Sage Open (research in behavioral and social sciences communities). Overall, 57 articles and related literature were found using the above search terms and databases.

Selecting Articles

Two reviewers performed the data extraction and appraisal independently, with an a priori study protocol. The study protocol included the following requirements: Only primary studies, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses on the key terms (and the connection between them) were considered.

Charting the Data

The fourth stage was organizing the selected articles' data. Microsoft Excel was used to categorize the data into author(s), title, publication year, source of literature, and key findings.

Collate, summarize, and report the data.

In the last stage, the authors organized the findings into themes. Priority was given to the results based on relevance to the research questions. These themes are social connectedness and the mental health of the elderly, social connectedness through social media platforms in Ghana, and social media platform challenges of the elderly in Ghana. Scoping reviews help synthesize research

evidence and are often used to categorize existing literature in a field.

Results

Table 1. Aggregate Data on Scoping Review

Research Question	Title	Source of literature	Authors	Year of Publication	Findings
How is social connectedness related to the mental health of the elderly in Ghana?	Social frailty and depression among older adults in Ghana: Insights from the who sage surveys.	Research on Aging, 43(2), 85-95.	Amegbor, P.M., Kuuire, V.Z., Yawson, A. E., Rosenberg, M. W., & Sabel, C. E.	2021	Social connection improves the well-being of the elderly
	Reaching older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic through social networks and Social Security Schemes in Ghana: Lessons for considerations	Journal of Gerontological Social Work, 63(6-7), 699-701.	Arthur-Holmes, F., & Agyemang-Duah, W	2020	The covid-19 restrictions have robed the elderly of social connections
	2010 population and housing census report: The elderly in Ghana	Ghana Statistical Service	Ghana Statistical Service	2013	Elderly population in Ghana will increase from 6.7% to 8.6% in 2030
	Aging and demographic transition in Ghana: State of the elderly and emerging issues	The Gerontologist, 58(3), 403–408.	Kpessa-Whyte, M.	2018	Prioritize well-being of the elderly
	Interventions to address social connectedness and loneliness for older adults: a scoping review	BMC Geriatrics, 18(214), 1-13	O'Rourke, H.M., Collins, L., & Sidani, S	2018	Social media platforms improve elderly well-being
	Differential associations of social support and social connectedness with structural features of social networks and the health status of older adults	Journal of Aging Health, 20, 872–93.	Ashida, S., & Heaney, C. A.	2008	Social connection is essential to the well-being of the elderly
	Economic and social impacts of the media	National Bureau of Economic Research, 21360.	DellaVigna, S., & Ferrara, E. L.	2015	The elderly use social media platforms for educational, economic, and entertainment purposes
How do social media platforms aid social connectedness for the elderly in Ghana?	Interventions to address social connectedness and loneliness for older adults: a scoping review	BMC Geriatrics, 18(214), 1-13.	O'Rourke, H.M., Collins, L., & Sidani, S.	2018	Social connection is critical to the well-being of the elderly
	Most used social media platforms in Ghana as of the third quarter of 2020.	URL: https://www.statista.com/statistics/1171534/leading-social-media-platforms-ghana/	Sasu, D. D.	2021	Popular social media platforms in Ghana are WhatsApp (83.9%), Facebook (70.8%), YouTube (69.7%), and Instagram (56.3%)
	Online support for the elderly – why service and social network platforms should be integrated	Procedia Computer Science, 98, 395-400.	Boll, F., & Brune, P.	2016	Social media platforms enable elders to establish and maintain social networks
	Double-edged sword? Ghanaians see pros, cons of social media, want access but not fake news	Afrobarometer Dispatch (366), 1-12.	Sanny, J. A-N., & Selormey, E.	2020	Elderly usage of social media platforms in Ghana is 6%
	A social-media study of the older adults coping with the covid-19 stress by information and communication technologies.	*Human aspects of it for the aged population: design, interaction and technology acceptance*, Springer, 346-364.	Khalili-Mahani, N., Sawchuk, K., Elbaz, S., Hebblethwaite, S., Timm-Bottos, J.	2022	The elderly consider social media platforms as inadequate and temporary remedy for social connectedness
What challenges do elderly users experience as they use popular social media platforms in Ghana?	Social media and senior citizen advocacy: an inclusive tool to resist ageism?	Politics, Groups, and Identities, 3(3), 558-571.	Trentham, B., Sokoloff, S., Tsang, A., & Neysmith, S.	2015	Unfriendly social media working environment for the elderly
	Why do people spread false information online? The effects of message and viewer characteristics on self-reported likelihood of sharing social media disinformation	PLoS ONE, 15(10), 239-266.	Buchanan, T.	2020	Information on social media platforms can misinform and confuse the elderly
	Problematic social media use and perceived social isolation in older adults: A cross-sectional study	Gerontology, 66, 160-168.	Meshi, D., Cotton, S. R., Bender, A. R.	2020	Frequent use of social media platforms may induce addiction among the elderly
	Elder fraud	URL: https://www.fbi.gov/scams-and-safety/common-scams-and-crimes/elder-fraud	Federal Bureau of Investigations	2020	Elderly fraud includes romance scams, tech support scams, government impersonation scams, lottery scams, and family/caregiver scams

Discussion

Social connectedness and the mental health of the elderly in Ghana

Generally, gleaning through the literature, a positive relationship has been established between social connectedness and well-being among the elderly (Cruwys et al., 2013; Saeri et al., 2018). Concerning the elderly in Ghana, the importance of social connectedness to their well-being cannot be overemphasized. Recent studies have shown that without adequate social connectedness, the elderly wallows in loneliness, negatively affecting their functioning (Amegbor et al., 2021; Tsiboe, 2021). According to Gyasi et al. (2019), while loneliness increased the risk of psychological distress, family contacts and social participation of the elderly decreased the chances of experiencing psychological distress.

Considerable research indicates the essence of social and family supports to the psychological well-being of the elderly (Gyasi, 2019). Connecting with their peers and increased neighborhood engagements are excellent sources of support and relief for the elderly in Ghana (Gyasi, 2019). In sub-Saharan Africa, and specifically in Ghana, urbanization and modernization have threatened the communal nature of the populace and the extended family system that benefitted the elderly (Gyekye, 2003; Nortey et al., 2017). Studies have shown that the elderly struggled to maintain social connections with family members, friends, and neighbors, especially during the lockdown period of the COVID-19 pandemic (Kovacs et al., 2021; Pérez-Escoda et al., 2020). Asante & Andoh-Arthur (2015) reported that loneliness, stress, and depression among older people were associated with a breakdown in social connectedness, mainly due to the restrictive measures instituted by the government during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Social connectedness through social media platforms in Ghana

The proliferation of social media platforms in Ghana offers alternative ways for the elderly could connect socially with their significant others. Some of these platforms also offer commercial services that relieve the shopping needs of the elderly. A study by Sasu (2021b) shows that WhatsApp (83.9%), Facebook (70.8%), YouTube (69.7%), and Instagram (56.3%) are the popular social media platforms in Ghana. Although there is an indication of a surge in the use of these social media platforms in Ghana (Sasu, 2020b), research is yet to indicate the percentage of the elderly

among these users. The closest study focusing on age differentiation among users of social media in Ghana indicates that individuals aged 56+ account for 6% of the social media users in Ghana (Sanny & Selormey, 2020). Since the elderly are part of the 56+ age group, it is assumed that they are part of the 6% of the social media user population in Ghana. Accordingly, it is expected that they will be using some of the popular social media platforms in Ghana.

Appropriate use of social media platforms among the elderly has improved their general well-being. Through social media platforms, the elderly can maintain and establish social support networks (Boll & Brune, 2016, 395). They can connect with distant relations, maintain peer contact, and form new friendships. Social media platforms provide varied information that elderly individuals could utilize to serve their educational, economic, and entertainment needs (DellaVigna & Ferrara, 2015). They can articulate their views about civil and religious issues through these platforms. The boost given to establishing and sustaining these social support networks creates social contacts that enable the elderly to avoid loneliness (Khalili-Mahani et al., 2022).

Social media platform challenges of the elderly in Ghana

Some factors can inhibit elderly individuals' use of social media platforms. Popular social media platforms have in-built software that enables members of online communities or social networks to respond to the posts of others. Elderly individuals who have an acute craving for acceptance may be depressed upon seeing that their posts or blogs attract fewer reactions in the form of *likes* and *views.* Those who receive favorable responses to their posts or blogs may stay glued to these platforms and neglect other essential personal and social duties. Some elderly individuals may be addicted to the entertainment outlets on these social media platforms (Meshi, Cotton, & Bender, 2020, 160).

Again, social media information can be misleading and confusing (Buchanan, 2020, 239). There are varied web contents in various contexts. Information on health, education, economic, religious, sociopolitical, and personal issues abound. Sometimes, web content in the same context may be contradictory, confusing the elderly. Elderly individuals with underlining cognitive issues such as dementia may not only misunderstand such information but may also be discouraged from accessing it.

Further, the surge in cyberbullying on social media platforms is another setback to the elderly use of these platforms. Some social media platforms require a sort of self-disclosure to create user accounts before one can use them. Frequently, this information is hacked and used against its owners. The elderly are vulnerable to such abuse. Phishing/elder fraud scheme is another way scammers abuse unsuspecting users. These scammers impersonate legitimate individuals and organizations and use these identities to obtain personal and financial information from victims. Some of these are romance scams, tech support scams, government impersonation scams, lottery scams, and family/caregiver scams (Federal Bureau of Investigations, 2020, n. p.). Elderly individuals who are familiar with such practices may consider themselves susceptible and may not get involved in any of the social media platforms.

Moreover, most software applications on these social media platforms are not friendly to the elderly population (Trentham et al., 2015, 558). They may require sophisticated computer applications that are unfamiliar to the elderly. Some social media platforms have applications that often require updates, which may be elusive to the elderly user. Even the language of communication between younger and older users may complicate matters for the latter. Younger users have mastered functional jargon and abbreviations that make chats on these social media platforms more accessible. Due to the generational gap, jargon and abbreviations may be misunderstood by elderly users. Thus, elderly individuals can be discouraged from continued use of social media platforms.

Implications and Conclusion

The desire to improve the mental health of the elderly during the Covid-19 pandemic requires that elderly individuals are motivated to use social media platforms. First, setting timelines and ensuring they are adhered to can help avoid addictions to these social media platforms among elderly users. These timelines can regulate the times that elderly individuals use these platforms. Secondly, family members and government must offer services that protect the elderly from all forms of cyberbullying. One way to achieve this is to establish secure web environments that can be used to satisfy the social needs of the elderly. Another way to fend off these scammers is to provide regular education to elderly individuals who use these platforms.

A similar measure can help elderly users of social media platforms sift web content to obtain appropriate information for the proper contexts. Secondly, software developers must consider the web needs of the elderly population. Social media platforms that do not require sophisticated applications are more likely to appeal to the elderly population than those that do. Thirdly, younger users who subscribe to groups and fora with elderly users must be considerate when using jargon and abbreviations. This measure will not only avoid miscommunication but also create an atmosphere of serenity and acceptance for elderly users. The findings of this study highlight the critical role social media platforms play in elderly social connectedness. In a restrictive pandemic situation, social media platforms offer a substitute where elderly individuals can receive assistance against isolation, loneliness, depression, and stress. Elderly individuals need help using social media platforms to maintain social connectedness without in-person interactions and gatherings.

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