

## Media Literacy and Senior Adults' navigation to social media: Practices, Participation and Challenges

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### Abstract

Social media platforms are no longer limited to digital natives, but include digital immigrants too. The senior generation also navigates into social media and has a fair share of participation as well. Therefore, the impact of new mediated spheres has targeted not only youngsters but all age groups, though the user experience, contribution and struggles vary based on their digital competencies and media literacy. Popularly, social media is studied and viewed as something related to youngsters who are born in the digital age. The senior generation is equally important, but the practice patterns, participatory aspects, and their challenges in mediated platforms need to be explored as the transition from conventional to digitalized media has made them make some changes. They also need to step forward to adopt media literacy, whether self-taught or assisted, as formal adult media literacy options are limited. This paper studies the ways adults use social media, specifically senior adults, how they participate in interactive mediated spheres, their struggles and vulnerabilities having insufficient skills, their media literacy level, and how they tackle the issues. For that, in-depth interviews have been conducted with twenty-five senior adults and data has been transcribed and analyzed through content analysis. The findings allow us to conclude that most senior adults also navigate into the digital space and use one or more social media platforms. Their purpose, using patterns, contributions and challenges are different, and insufficient media literacy options limit their choices to tackle their issues in mediated spaces. It's an exclusive phenomenon to design, include and engage this particular age group in media literacy programs and assist them in developing digital competencies.

Keywords: Media literacy, adult media literacy, senior adults, digital literacy, social media, social networking sites

### Introduction

Since early times, people have been connected through media, which has been transformed along with the evolution of mankind. Similar is the case with tools, techniques, and practices for both communication and leisure activities. When Tim Berners-Lee set up the foundation of the World Wide Web (WWW) at CERN in 1989, the initial purpose was to exchange information among scientists that became accessible to ordinary people. Now, it's a part of our everyday life not just to exchange information; rather, it has reshaped almost all spheres of life, including sociocultural, political, economic and technological aspects (Allen, 2012; Berners-Lee, 1996). It proved to be just a start as, since then, technological advancements have kept on bringing new reforms. Over time, not only the communication and information technologies brought big reforms, but human practices, participation, and challenges have also evolved.

As the World Wide Web keeps on offering more and more over time and is changing the dynamics of traditional media too, new media offers interactive platforms and encourage presumption, like the concept offered by Alvin Toffler back in the 1980s, which combines both producers and consumers (Grinnell, 2009; Ritzer et al., 2012). Social media is one of the most popular aspects of the web, although there are multiple definitions and understandings of social media. According to Carr and Hayes (2015), social media is a collection of internet-based platforms that enables users to interact with each other and to present themselves whenever they want with both limited and larger viewers. It is not just a collection of platforms that offers a new place for society to socialize, but the content being created, shared, used, and recreated also adds value. At the same time, people take their everyday life to social media, so it cannot be separated from offline space (Miller et al., 2016). This new fusion of online and offline space has engaged different age groups and affects all of us, as social media is a multi-dimensional industry where multi-layered services and functionality cause ongoing growth and expansion among the masses (Sanasi et al., 2021).

With the evolution of technology, not only has social media expanded in terms of tools, techniques, and usage, but their popularity has rapidly increased too. Not just the overall social media, but the content is also evolving, and everyone can find something of interest (Kong et al., 2020). In a study conducted a decade back in 2012 on social media users, it was found that youngsters are more inclined to social media as compared to older adults and are more active on different social media platforms (Duggan & Brenner, 2013). According to Cray (2014), social media is a gateway to setting new expectations of 24/7 that include timelessness, social identity, the urge to be updated, fear of missing out, and continuity. It's important to consider that social media is not limited to a particular activity or platform; rather, they are a combination of multiple platforms with their specifications, features, and target audience (Buzeta et al., 2020).

A recent report conducted in the US by Barnhart (2022) highlights that 31% of Facebook users lie between the age of 25-34, 42% of users aged 18-29 on Twitter, 58% of LinkedIn users aged 25-34, and 48% of Snapchat users aged 15-25. That implies the fact that most of the social media content is not aimed at senior age groups. A few questions arise here: how do people from senior age groups use social media platforms with content that's not specifically targeting them? What's their motivation or need to join social media platforms? Are they able to comprehend the content there? What kind of issues do they face, and how to cope with them? Many of the questions are unanswered both in theory and practice on how to assist underrepresented or untargeted media users. A solution could be to educate senior people about this new space because the effective, safe, and productive use of social media is equally important to all age groups (Livingstone et al., 2005).

When it's about educating people, many researchers recommend the need for media literacy for both the present and the future (Erstad, 2015). Most of the popular debates also consider media literacy to educate people and making sure effective use of media. According to Zainab (2019), literacy has been defined and understood differently around the world. But the definitions of literacy refer to the ability to read and write only. For a long time, UNESCO used to define literacy as a reading and writing capability. Then it was updated around 1958. From 1978 onwards, they had to move towards a more functional understanding of literacy, which is defined as "the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts" (Robinson, 2014; UNESCO, 2021). Even then, many countries define literacy as reading and writing only. But such a type of literacy is no longer sufficient, and it was never enough back in time. Freire and Macedo (1987, pp.108) described literacy as a

creative activity that engages “critical comprehension of reality”. Overall, instructional technology has revolutionized both formal and informal learning. Learning is neither limited to textbooks nor classrooms. It’s an ongoing process that is reshaped because of technological development. The ASSURE model of instructional design describes what’s required to be literate in this mediated age (Smaldino et al., 2019), but still, it’s not used worldwide. The reasons could be a lack of awareness, skills, and knowledge required to implement it.

It should also be noted that learning doesn’t just happen in a formal setting or a physical classroom anymore; it’s moved to a learning management system, which shows how the media constructs the basis for the new learning patterns (Cope & Kalantzis, 2013). Lai and Thai (2021) conducted a study in Thailand among South and Southeast Asian social media users to see the role of social media in language learning and cultural integration. It is found that no matter if someone is engaged actively or passively in social media, it has an impact on them. Overall, new media has enabled people to learn at their own pace, choice, freedom of space, timelessness, and diverse environments with excessive resources. At the same time, it’s not always intentional learning and exposure. When the source of information is changed from written to multimodal, literacy needs to be redefined, and parameters to consider someone literate need to be upgraded. New media forums are much more than learning platforms; they are parallel spaces where the users integrate their offline traits, practice, and agendas (Boyd, 2014). That means that the challenges and vulnerabilities in offline space just do not end; instead, they move into new media, as Boyd’s study showed.

## **Literature review**

Media Literacy is defined as the ability to access, analyse, evaluate, and create media content in a variety of ways (Buckingham, 2005; Hobbs, 2019; Livingstone, 2003; Potter, 2010; Rasi et al., 2019). The ability to access is the first prerequisite, defined as not only the ability to acquire a computer device but also the quality of access to media technologies, tools, materials, and services. The quality of media access depends on numerous factors, including financial resources, time, technical competencies, and governing cultural rules regarding media use. The second requirement of being media literate is to be able to understand and analyse the media content. It requires specific skills to interpret media content, and many institutions all over the world have included the teaching of analytical skills for media content interpretation as part of their curriculums. Evaluation of media content means the ability to understand the social, political, historical, and cultural context in which the specific media content was produced, which is not a simple task. It requires specific background knowledge and skills to evaluate such media content. The fourth and last prerequisite of media literacy is content creation. Not all definitions of media literacy incorporate content creation as a prerequisite for a person to be known as media literate. However, teaching the skills for content creation is the need of the hour as ICT is expanding, and people learn better about media by actually creating content (Livingstone, 2003). So, one cannot be considered media literate if unable to create content. Content creation helps to structure a message, consider the target audience, analyse the tools and techniques, foresee the potential impact and make it as effective as possible.

Hobbs (2019) used the term media education as a synonym for media literacy, which she refers to as all the dimensions in which learning about media content occurs. So, media literacy is not only confined to the sharing of information through spoken or written words, but it also includes signs, symbols, graphics, multimedia, pictures, videos, etc. The rise of digital technologies has developed a new point of interest for scholars and educationists, which is digital literacy. Hobbs defines digital literacy as the ability to find, understand, analyse, create and communicate digital information on various social networking sites.

Moreover, media literacy begins at an early age at home, and it is a lifelong process that happens over time (Jenkins, 2003). Livingstone and Thumim (2003) mentioned that children could also acquire media literacy by incorporating media literacy education into formal institutions' curricula. However, senior adults can't acquire media literacy in the same way. Media literacy cannot be learned in days, as it is a much more complicated process than it seems. Media literacy research focuses mainly on children and young people's use of the media. Adults, specifically older adults, received much less attention in this regard. Media literacy among older people is also important for social relationships and cognitive functioning. As they are at the age where they need the ability to obtain and access health-related information and services, and for that, they must understand media, e-services, safe navigation, and potential output that saves time, money, and energy (Oh et al., 2021; Rasi et al., 2019).

Alcala (2014) highlights that if the focus is on the age variable, then it can easily be observed how the use of the internet varies among different age groups. The usage of the internet is higher among the younger generation as compared to the older generation. There is a generational digital divide based on the differences in accessing and analysing media content, which depends on several factors. It seems difficult to integrate older people into active, participatory, and advantageous use of digital media because these people are digital immigrants, as they didn't acquire skills for efficient use of digital media. Alcala was of the view that if researchers intend to study media literacy among older people, then they need to consider age variables that further include early retirement age, pensioner age (independent life), handicapped (dependent life), and others. However, Oh et al. (2021) refer to factors other than age, like economic well-being, health condition, and behaviours, that should also be considered to see the impact, correlation, and prospective scope that can help in policymaking too.

In the context of older people's use, practices, and challenges towards digital media, old adults are defined as being 65 years or older (Rasi et al., 2019). However, the present research observes the practices and challenges of media usage among senior adults aged 50 or above. The study was carried out in Wah Cantt, Pakistan. Wah Cantt is a comparatively small city in Pakistan, around 30 km from the capital, Islamabad. It has been officially acknowledged as the most educated and the cleanest city in Pakistan, and has an area of 10.26687 km<sup>2</sup> with a population of 380,103 (2017). It has about a 96-100% literacy rate with multiple public and private educational institutions, according to the official record of Cantt board Wah Cantt (Cantonment Board Wah). This study helps us to see the social media integration of senior adults in one of the most literate cities in Pakistan. The sample population employs senior adults near their retirement age, people with health issues, and people who have married children or children living in different cities or countries. Interviews were conducted with the sample population in May 2022. The reason is that there is little or no comprehensive research regarding media literacy practices and challenges of this age group of senior adults outside Europe and beyond (Rasi et al., 2019) and this research will fill this pertinent gap. This study employed a snowball sampling technique to collect data, which is a convenient non-probability

sampling technique in which the researcher recruits the first subject on their own. The first subject then finds the first wave of the sample, which in turn chooses the second wave, and so on. This way, the snowball grows as the sample expands in the form of waves (Etikan et al., 2016).

A similar research has been conducted by Rasi et al. (2019) investigating how to foster digital media literacy among senior citizens by conducting a systematic review of the existing literature. The study findings suggested that although senior citizens employ a variety of digital media practices, they use digital media less or differently than children and younger people. This research also discussed older people's inability to analyze and evaluate media content, like the ability to distinguish between true and fake online news. They concluded that a need-based approach is required to consider older adults as active and participating citizens. Also, media literacy interventions should target older adults in different life roles, like teachers, leaders, caretakers, parents and experts, etc.

Oh et al. (2021) also investigated digital media literacy practices among older adults by conducting a systematic review of already available literature. Their study reveals that the number of older people using digital media is increasing exponentially. Inclusion and active engagement of older adults in digital media practices are becoming more important with time for the propagation of health-related information and other services. Most of the research focused on older people's difficulty with the acceptance and adoption of digital media, implying that they are less capable of using digital media platforms than younger people. They suggested that heterogeneity in user ability should be considered while investigating digital media literacy in older people.

When it comes to senior adults' experiences of different social sites, there are several studies conducted as Ozgur (2021) discussed WhatsApp groups' experiences of Turkish senior adults, particularly the Baby Boomers Generation (1946-1964), by conducting semi-structured interviews. According to him, WhatsApp is not just a messaging app, but it has evolved into a proper social media site. As senior adults progress into the retirement age, their need to understand and adopt digital technologies increases. Senior adults found it convenient to stay in touch with friends and relatives from different cities or countries through WhatsApp groups. Older adults don't feel isolated, as they have constructed a virtual social circle over WhatsApp groups. Jung (2016) also investigated senior adults' use of Facebook and concluded that senior adults use Facebook, particularly for social bonding, curiosity, and staying connected with friends and family. This study reveals that after the addition of message-based features, senior adults' use and participation on Facebook increased considerably.

However, senior adults' use of YouTube varies slightly from their use of WhatsApp and Facebook, according to a study conducted by Sayago (2012). His ethnographic study on senior adults' YouTube practices found that, unlike the younger generation, YouTube is not a preferred social media site for senior adults as they use it occasionally. He is of the view that senior adults' use of YouTube is not driven by how popular a video is, but is influenced by their own preferences. Their use of YouTube is mostly limited to consumption instead of content creation.

Older people have a lot to benefit from social media sites than any other age group because they are more susceptible to isolation and loss of social life due to retirement (Lehtinen et al., 2009). Research regarding social media literacy among senior adults is very little. Ariyachandra (2009) investigated the social media literacy of elderly people by conducting semi-structured interviews. It was found that most people of this age group haven't even heard of Facebook, but are willing to learn. It also highlighted that senior adults

don't use social media sites as of now, but this trend is going to change shortly when Baby Boomers become part of the senior citizens' population and become digitally active participants in their communities. This is what happened, and we can clearly observe an increase in the number of older adults as time passed using social media platforms for various reasons.

Most of the earlier research focused on the media literacy of the younger generation, preferably university students in Pakistan (Abbasi, 2020; Ahmmad, 2022; Arooj, 2019). There is little or no research regarding digital media practices, participation, and challenges faced by older adults in Pakistan. This research will fill this pertinent gap as it investigates the social media navigation of senior adults of Pakistan, their role, participation patterns, their media literacy level, and their routine challenges in cyberspace. There are no sufficient studies conducted on this specific area, though it's important to focus on the underrepresented groups in order to establish a balance in communication and information-oriented societies, plan and initiate media literacy.

Most of the research done previously considering senior adults and media literacy variables incorporated systematic review of the existing literature. The present research investigates the variables of senior adults in the context of media literacy by conducting semi-structured interviews.

### **Research Objectives**

This study aims

- To investigate the navigation of senior adults to social media with their uses, experiences, challenges
- To find out if senior adults have media literacy skills for a smooth journey into social media spaces
- To provide some basis for upcoming research and media literacy programs for senior adults

### **Research Questions**

RQ1: How do senior adults navigate into the mediated space of social networking sites?

RQ2: What kind of barriers are faced by senior adults on social networking sites?

RQ3: What sort of formal or informal media literacy do they have to smoothly navigate social media?

### **Methodology**

This study utilizes a qualitative methodology with primary data collection by direct sources. The data is collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with 25 senior adults in Wah Cantt, Pakistan. The focus age group of the sample is 50 years and above for this study. So, the respondents were born in 1972 or before that. According to the World Bank (2020), life expectancy in Pakistan is around 67 years and the retirement age in Pakistan is 60, with exceptions as well, where people opt for early retirement too.

For data collection, in-depth interviews are conducted in May 2022. It's not just a question and answer session, but rather discovers more than expected outcomes and discovers new perspectives. According to Mears (2012), the data directly collected by respondents can give detailed insights and first-hand information with context. As in-depth interviews allow the interviewees to be more expressive and open up about their lives and experiences.

The sampling involved snowball non-probability sampling where researchers and the participants' convenience are preferred, but it also has a limitation, that results cannot be generalized. However, this approach is preferable for studies having exploratory purposes, data collection from the entire population is not possible and other methods are not convenient (Stratton, 2021). During this study, researchers recruited the first few subjects, which then helped in acquiring further subjects. Some were unwilling and some were hesitant to share more about their social media usage. Moreover, during this study, it was preferred to consider the willingness, flexibility, and convenience of the respondents too. The demographic details are provided in table 1. Representatives of both genders participated, but no non-binary person could be approached (Table.1). When it comes to the educational background, the locality which is chosen is an urban area and considered the cleanest and has around 96-100% literacy rate (Cantonment Board Wah).

Table 1: Demographic and Relevant Details of Respondents

<b>Particulars</b>	<b>Numbers</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Age (years)		
50-55	14	56
55-60	11	44
Gender		
Men	15	60
Women	10	40
Language Proficiency		
Urdu & Regional languages only	02	08
Fluent in English & Urdu	09	36
Urdu & basic English	14	56
Education		
None	00	00
Middle/Secondary School	06	24
High School/Some college	05	20
Undergraduate	06	24
Graduate or above	08	32
Work Status		
Working	12	48
Retired	08	32
Unemployed	05	20
Devices in Use		
Smartphones	20	80
tablets	02	08
Laptops/ PCs & phones/tablets	03	12
Social Media Applications in Use		
None	00	00

Facebook Only	00	00
WhatsApp Only	04	16
YouTube Only	00	00
Facebook, WhatsApp & YouTube	19	76
Other platforms too.	02	08
Purpose of using social media		
News, leisure, socialization, fighting Boredom, fear of isolation	17	56
Connecting with friends and family	06	24
Business activities	02	08
Support system		
Self-help	03	12
Kids	17	68
Friends, family, or peers	05	20
Formal/informal media literacy		
None	21	84
Proper understanding	00	00
Consider it as technical literacy	4	16

Source: Own Creation based on collected data

## Findings

During interviews, senior adults shared their experiences regarding their use of social media networking sites. For this particular qualitative research, mainly open-ended questions were asked, along with a few close-ended questions. The majority of the participants were not used to such an activity, so their responses were precise. They also had multiple questions regarding the use of this study.

The data collected through interviews has been transcribed and then translated into English from Urdu, which was the actual interview language. Since, the respondents were fluent and more comfortable in Urdu. The initial interviews were conducted in Urdu. The transcribed data has been analysed through thematic analysis as defined by Braun and Clarke (2006) and organic themes emerged through data. For the sake of analysis, organic themes emerged through data. The primary coding and analysis are done by the first author and reviewed by the second and third authors. The whole data has been reviewed multiple times to make sure rich thematic patterns emerged. The whole analysis has gone through six phases, which include developing familiarity with data, developing codes using keywords and also sentences to find repeated patterns among the responses. Later, codes are reviewed, arranged, and collected together, identifying major common themes in the data. By reviewing the themes, the ones having more supporting data and repeating patterns are refined. Some similar themes are combined into major themes like challenges, etc.

Finally, it has been assured through defining themes properly that themes are not inclusive, but rather distinct in nature and meaning. After defining themes, the final report is produced. It is believed that the analysis refers to all diverse aspects of data collected by senior adults. It represents overall findings in such a way that senior adults enter into the digital space, their activities, difficulties, understanding of media literacy or any digital literacy experiences and issues. The findings reveal insights from the lives of a comparatively underrepresented population; senior adults' practices, participatory attitudes, and challenges that they face during their navigation into social media space.

A summary of the results from the perspective of senior adults is discussed below under different themes. The results prove that most senior adults mainly use Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube. Only a few of them heard about Instagram or other social networking sites.

### **Reasons provided by senior adults for joining social media networking sites**

#### *To Stay connected with their Family Members*

As referred to the data mentioned in Table 1, some of the respondents shared that the reason for joining social media networking sites was to stay connected with their loved ones residing in different cities or countries. One of the respondents shared that "I never used social media sites, nor was there any plan to come here and learn how to use these sites until my son left for another country for work purposes. I asked my younger daughter to make my Facebook account and add my son there to keep in touch with his daily activities. This has made me miss my son less than I anticipated."

Another respondent shared that "I was using a smartphone just for making and receiving calls, nothing else. I got my WhatsApp and Facebook accounts made only to view and share pictures and videos of my grandchildren that live in another country". Another respondent shared, "I made my first account back in 2016, and added my kids, relatives, and colleagues. It helps us to get to know each other. Sometimes, I post our family pictures". Another important thing to notice here is that most of the respondents said that someone else from the family made their Facebook accounts, which clearly shows senior adults' lack of technical competencies and digital media literacy.

The results from these interviews make it evident that senior adults use social networking sites differently than younger generations. Like the younger generation, senior adults neither feel pressured nor interested in sharing their pictures every other day. As one of the respondents said, "I share quotes and prayers on my social media. I do not share my pictures so often though, there is no particular reason for that."

#### *Using Social Networking Sites to fight Boredom*

Almost 56% of the respondents shared that they joined social media sites either due to fear of isolation after retirement or boredom. They said that after spending many years of their lives working, they had nothing to do after retirement, so they joined WhatsApp groups and Facebook. One of the respondents said, "I was never part of any WhatsApp group, nor did I know of any such thing until my daughter made one by adding my work colleagues and friends. This helped me to connect with my friends who are mostly retired now. We discuss our daily life activities and reminisce about the good times we spent together."

Another respondent shared, "After my retirement, my kids installed Facebook and YouTube on my phone. Now, I use WhatsApp as well. I exchange morning greetings and good night wishes with my friends and family of my age group. But youngsters do not exchange such greetings daily. I watch political and religious programs on YouTube and sometimes, it leads me to entertainment too. I do not mind, as it helps me to spend my time well."

#### *Online Businesses*

Some of the respondents shared that they found social networking sites very beneficial in terms of expanding their businesses. Due to COVID-19, a lot of businesses had to adapt to the online space. One of the respondents shared his experience: "I never wanted to use social media and used to consider it as a time waste, but during the COVID-19 lockdown, we had to move our business to an online space on my assistant's suggestion. Since then, social media have proved to be a great tool to expand our business and get more orders. Although there are still some issues that I cannot handle on my own. Sometimes, there are fake orders too. My assistants help me to verify them."

Most of the senior adults from the sample of this particular research are educated enough, as referred to Table 1, to handle online businesses. But they were still reluctant due to their traditional approach. But once someone helped them to join, they got hold of it in no time. One such male respondent who has a bachelor's degree shared his experience, "Although I have been using social networking sites for quite some time mainly for socializing and entertainment purposes, I never knew that I could use Facebook and YouTube for expanding my business. Due to the Covid-19 lockdown, my son made a business page on Facebook and a business channel on YouTube for me. Regardless, I'm enjoying every bit of it, and I'm handling it on my own now."

#### **Content Consumption of Senior Adults on Social Media sites**

As per the data mentioned in Table 1, almost 76% of respondents use WhatsApp, YouTube, and Facebook on their smartphones. Most of the female senior adults from this research sample said that they mostly watch homemaking videos, cooking videos, and television shows on YouTube and Facebook. One of the respondents shared her experience: "I don't use YouTube much, but when I do, I watch recipe videos, and then I try those recipes for my family. This helps me to stay active and have some kind of hobby." Another female participant shared: "I watch television shows on YouTube if I miss watching them on television for whatever reason. I like watching dramas on YouTube due to the minimal number of ads." Upon asking whether they comment on such videos or do they have any know-how about the number of likes/dislikes a particular video got, almost all of them said that they don't ever comment or don't even bother going through the comment section. One of them even said that she didn't even know that there was a comment section on YouTube.

Most of the male senior adults in this particular research, upon asking what type of content they consume on social networking sites, said that they mostly watch cricket match clips or highlights either on Facebook or YouTube. Some of them said that they watch political discussions and news on these social sites and even actively comment on such posts and videos. "I am a huge cricket fan, and YouTube has made it very

easy for me to watch clips and highlights of my favorite matches. It is easy for me to watch the best moments of my favourite cricketers. I have joined many Facebook pages related to cricket and I keep myself updated with all the happenings in the cricketing world. I even comment on some videos as per my liking." Another participant shared, "I mostly watch political news and discussions on Facebook and YouTube. In fact, after having a smartphone, I rarely watch television. I used to watch news programs on TV, but after joining Facebook and YouTube, I have access to all types of political news and I can even give my opinion in the form of comments. I have followed my favourite anchors and news journalists on all the social networking sites, so it's easier for me to stay updated with all the recent events."

### **Challenges in using the social media networking sites**

Some senior adults hesitate to adopt digital media sites due to the fear that they won't be able to navigate through them. "When I first came on Facebook, I asked my son to make my Facebook account and teach me how to use it. I feared that I wouldn't be able to get a hold of Facebook, that's why I avoided having my account here", said a participant.

Learning the technicalities of the social networking sites is slow among senior adults as they might willingly not want to learn depending on the reason that they rarely live alone in Pakistan, where other younger members at home are available to help them in online activities. "I usually just scroll down. Sometimes, I share Facebook posts with my kids, friends, or family on WhatsApp, and sometimes, Facebook doesn't allow me to share. Same, I do not understand how to download videos. My kids do it in no time and I always ask them to do it for me. For pictures and posts, I take screenshots and that's easy."

Senior adults don't have any idea about how the privacy settings on social networking sites work. They don't know how to avoid irrelevant posts from the feed, and how to keep their content private from people on their friends' list or public. One of the respondents said: "Usually, my kids help me when it comes to joining or privacy settings of my social media accounts. It's something that needs to be super user-friendly, as we all need that. It's important. But I do not know why it's placed back and users like me cannot find settings as easily as we come across irrelevant content." Senior adults said that even if they try changing their privacy settings on their own, they are unable to find it on their accounts. Almost none of the interviewed senior adults were able to tell about the privacy settings of their accounts. That's why they have to take help from younger members.

A fair number of respondents feel that social networking sites keep the majority of users in mind; the younger generation while creating content, and think that there isn't sufficient content available for senior adults on social networking sites to enjoy. One of the respondents shared his experience, "I feel left out. I feel social media networking sites' content is younger generation centric. There are not many things to explore for us on social media sites." Another respondent said, "I think youngsters use different types of language or terms, and they can understand each other well. Many times, I fail to comprehend the slang, abbreviations, and memes used on social media. It makes me feel that I am missing out on something."

As can be easily expected, the majority of senior adults in Pakistani society are not well-equipped with the way the younger generation uses the Urdu language in the English alphabet. This practice makes it difficult for senior adults to understand the content. "Language has been an issue for me. I am fluent in Urdu and

basic English too. But when people write Urdu in the English alphabet, that confuses me. I always make mistakes there. I know people use the English alphabet to write Urdu because it's easier to type in English. There is a need to make user-friendly Urdu typing feature". Here, it's notable that 32% of respondents having higher levels of education as shown in table.1 have no issue with language in general, but when it comes to Roman Urdu, specific terms, and short forms used on social media, they also face problems at that time.

Some senior adults shared their concerns regarding the irrelevant or suggested posts that appear on their newsfeeds. "On Facebook, suggested videos, posts, and pages annoy me. I do not know how they appear on my feed. Most of them are irrelevant and inappropriate. There is useful content, but such obscene content creates issues for both young users and people like me who do not have any interest". They also shared that pop-up ads irritate them, specifically, inappropriate ads. One of the respondents shared his experience by stating "Many times, ads pop up and if I am sitting with family or friends, it embarrasses me. Initially, I did not know how to close it. So, I usually close the app itself or close the browser. Why do they show inappropriate content in suggestions, if people are interested, they will search for it?" They questioned the algorithm of these social networking sites and said that they should make it simple to avoid getting such ads. Many times, they don't even know how to stop seeing such ads on their newsfeeds.

The interviewees also reveal their annoyance with social networking sites changing their layouts and features every other day. One of the respondents shared, "I joined Facebook so early back in 2010. Since then, there are off and on changes. It's good to improve services and features, but changing the whole layout too often is insane. I get used to one layout and it changes the whole thing. It annoys me. Another challenge that senior adults face is the font of such sites. "The font of the written text and the colours are not user-friendly, specifically for us senior adults. At times, we are unable to read such long posts because of the size of the font".

Results from these interviews support the previous research that social networking sites have the younger generation as their main target audience and design content by keeping in mind their likes and dislikes. This further excludes senior adults from actively engaging and participating on social networking sites.

Another major challenge faced by senior adults as observed by this study is that senior adults are unable to identify the truthfulness of online news. Most of them believe every news piece published on such social networking sites. Most of the time, they share fake news without verifying its truthfulness. "Excessive information is challenging for me. It's hard to decide what's real and what's fake. There could be some filters to separate information posted by authentic sources and anyone."

### **Understanding of Media literacy and relevant experience**

Participants were asked about their understanding and if they ever had any experience with media literacy-related activities. None of them had any formal or informal experience except some assistance from kids, peers, friends, or acquaintances. A respondent said "When I was a student, there was no concept of social media or the internet, even computer science was not taught in my school. But now, even toddlers are using media devices".

Another mentioned, "I do not know what's there to learn, they signed up for me. If it does not work properly, I ask my kids. They resolve it quickly, and it starts working again". Most of them confuse media literacy with technical knowledge only without concerning critical skills, assessing content, optimizing usage, content creation, safety, privacy, surveillance, data breach, scams, etc. It's important to consider that the respondents are literate and living in an urban area, but still, they have no knowledge of media literacy to smooth navigation into digital space.

## Conclusion

This study highlights the prevailing practices, participation, and challenges of senior adults on social media. It has been found that most senior adults started using social media quite late. Many of the respondents said that initially, they were reluctant to navigate into this new space while assuming it was something for youngsters only. Now, senior adults' reasons for joining social media include the desire to stay in touch with friends and family, to be well-informed, and as a leisure activity. While a few use social media because of their professional needs too. Previous researchers studying the practices of senior adults on social networking sites concluded that senior citizens use social networking sites as a means of acquiring healthcare information among other content (Ariyachandra, 2009; Rasi et al., 2019; Oh et al., 2021). However, this study does not support the previous findings, as none of the interviewed senior adults had any information regarding online healthcare setup. This is probably due to the reason that social networking sites rarely have online health care information or setup for senior adults in Pakistan.

Social media have been assumed as a youth-oriented platform, but now, social media platforms have fair participation from senior adults too. Their practices of participating in social media revolve around sharing their kids' or grandkids' pictures or family photos and old memorial photos as well. Other than that, sharing religious content, quotations, and some are limited to scrolling the content. The data also reveals that senior adults face some challenges and sometimes end up clueless, having no idea to deal with inappropriate content, suggested content, pop-up ads, layout changes, language barrier, Roman Urdu (written with Latin letters), excessive content, fake news, sensational headlines, downloading, sharing, privacy, setting, incapability to differentiate among authentic and fake content, verification of data, understanding algorithms. Around 76% of respondents use Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp (Table. 1). That means they are less inclined to more visual social networking sites such as Snapchat, Instagram, and similar platforms.

Based on the data gathered to know their media literacy status, it has been found that most senior adults have no initial media literacy knowledge or skills. According to table 1, none of the respondents had a proper understanding of media literacy. Around 84% denied any experience of formal or informal media literacy, while others confused it with technical skills only. Many times, kids sign up and assist their parents. They try to learn technical aspects and navigation but have no knowledge of cybersecurity and vulnerabilities and never tried or found a chance to be media literate.

The results also entail that senior adults rarely use digital media to create content. The majority remain confined to accessing, trying to understand, and sharing content. Creating content is the fourth prerequisite

of being media literate (Livingstone, 2003) but the present study concludes that senior adults hardly use social networking sites to create content of their own.

This study also concludes that although senior adults have a lot to benefit from social networking sites, they are a less active and less engaged group due to a lack of digital literacy. There is a continuous struggle going on to convince elderly people to use social media networking sites more productively. Keeping in mind the results of this study, it can be said that most of the content on social networking sites is youth centric. The content of social networking sites should be tailored according to the users' competencies and calibre. Senior adults should be as involved as the younger generation, and social networking sites must cater to their needs.

However, this research has certain limitations. The sample size is not wide enough to generalize, and the study is conducted in an urban area of Pakistan having the highest literacy rate, which adds a limitation, as people having lower literacy rate and struggling for necessities in far-flung areas of Pakistan may use social media differently.

Secondly, the participants were not used to such studies or surveys regarding social media usage and experience. The researchers had a hard time convincing senior adults for interviews, as they were reluctant to share their experiences. They showed curiosity and asked various questions that revealed their interest in new ideas and innovations. But some of them were too brief to answer. A separate focused group study could be conducted to dig more into the same topic.

Moreover, this research is focused on the digital media literacy of senior adults and their integration into social media as a whole, which limits the researchers to discussing senior adults' practices on each social media site separately.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the results and the critical reflection around them, some recommendations for practitioners, social media professionals and researchers were developed, which are as follows:

- Social media platforms need to work on a user-friendly interface not just for young users, rather for senior adults too, but off-and-on changes in layout may not suit all age groups.
- Social media content creators should consider this particular group too, as it seems underrepresented and could be a productive niche for content creators.
- Literacy forums actively focus on introducing media literacy in schools for kids and must consider designing media literacy programs for adults and senior adults too.
- Future researchers can work on providing workable solutions on how to improve senior adults' use of social networking sites and optimize them.
- It is suggested that another study with a large sample size in different regions of the country can provide more data to not only understand but to help in designing a national media literacy plan for senior adults.

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