



Bo Xie

A Double Burden of Exclusion? Digital and Social Exclusion of Older Adults in Times of COVID-19

Alexander Seifert, PhD,^{1,*} Shelia R. Cotten, PhD,² and Bo Xie, PhD,^{3,4}

¹Center of Gerontology, University of Zurich, Switzerland. ²Department of Media and Information, Michigan State University, East Lansing. ³School of Nursing, University of Texas at Austin. ⁴School of Information, University of Texas at Austin.

*Address correspondence to: Alexander Seifert, PhD, Center of Gerontology, University of Zurich, Pestalozzistrasse 24, 8032 Zurich, Switzerland. E-mail: alexander.seifert@uzh.ch

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has excluded older adults from a society based on physical social contact. Vulnerable populations like older adults also tend to be excluded from digital services because they opt not to use the internet, lack necessary devices and network connectivity, or inexperience using the technology. Older adults who are frail and are not online, many of whom are in long-term care facilities, struggle with the double burden of social and digital exclusion. This paper discusses the potential outcomes of this exclusion and provides recommendations for rectifying the situation, with a particular focus on older adults in long-term care facilities.

Keywords: Aging, COVID-19, Digital inequality, Exclusion, Internet

The current COVID-19 pandemic has affected vulnerable populations disproportionately. In particular, it has excluded older adults from in-person contact with others in society. Older adults are at high risk of COVID-19 and often experience critical courses of the disease due to multiple morbidities and pre-existing conditions (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020). As such, they must shelter in place and maintain physical distance from others during this pandemic. These behavioral changes will likely affect older adults' social ties and quality of life. At the same time, older adults are less likely than younger people to be able to take advantage of the opportunities enabled by modern information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as smartphones, tablets, and high-speed internet services. This is because older adults tend to opt not to use the internet, cannot afford internet access or ICT devices, lack technologies with which to use video-chat apps to virtually connect with people, or lack the skills to use ICTs even if they do have access. For older adults in long-term care facilities

(LTCFs), physical or cognitive limitations may prevent them from even being able to use ICTs at all on their own without assistance from others. Within older adults, significant variation exists in ability, willingness, and access to use ICTs. We focus on older adults in the community and those in LTCFs to illuminate key challenges *each group* may face during COVID-19 and other similar situations.

Older adults who are frail and are not online struggle with the double burden of social exclusion. This missing participation also influences whether older adults can access online services and content, such as health information, digital social events, social networking, and online shopping. A recent U.S. survey from March, 2020 found that only 20% of individuals aged 65 and older living in the community reported participating in an online social gathering or virtual party with friends or family (Vogels, 2020). Non-participation in the digital world may lead older adults to feel social exclusion during times of physical distancing (Xie et al., 2020).