

CABS podcast

Does technology actually connect us?

Dr. Verina Waights, Dr Hannah Marston, Dr Ann Mitchell and Professor Emeritus Shailey Minocha:

DR VERINA WAIGHTS: In today's world, smartphones, laptops, and other digital devices are generally regarded as indispensable for connecting with others. But what does the evidence say? I'm Dr. Verina Waights, co-chair of the Open University's Center for Aging and Biographical Studies research group. That's CABS for short. And you are listening to our podcast exploring this important topic.

Joining me today are three colleagues from CABS, and together, our research expertise spans a wide range of related disciplines. Let's start by introducing ourselves and the specific areas of our research. Just a couple of sentences, please. Hannah, would you like to go first?

DR HANNAH MARSTON: Thanks, Verina. Hi. My name is Hannah Marston. I'm a senior research fellow in the School of Health, Well-Being, and Social Care, and I've been conducting gerontological research for just over two decades now.

DR VERINA WAIGHTS: Thanks, Hannah. Now Ann.

DR ANN MITCHELL: Hello. My name is Ann Mitchell. I'm an honorary associate for the Open University. And my research interests include health and social care needs, as well as looking at resilience among ethnic minority individuals living in the UK as well as internationally.

DR VERINA WAIGHTS: Thanks, Ann. And now Shailey.

ProfEmer SHAILEY MINOCHA: Thanks, Verina. My core expertise is in the design and evaluation of user-facing software systems, with a focus on usability and user experience. I investigate the factors that affect user adoption of technology-enabled systems.

DR VERINA WAIGHTS: Thanks, Shailey. And my research includes the impact of technologies in green spaces such as parks on people's well-being. As you heard, our research spans a wide range of perspectives, which we will now explore. Hannah, will you start off by outlining how technology is connecting people together?

DR HANNAH MARSTON: Thanks, Verina. Technology has an opportunity to connect people, and we saw this during the pandemic. Whether this is with family, friends, or even community, social groups, networks, or even in some instances, dating apps. During the pandemic, I led a COVID dating app project, and this was primarily an online survey, but we also interviewed a small handful of older people, well, I say older middle aged people, ranging from 40 to 55 years old.

Some of the responses from the online survey noted that they did bubble with the person that they'd been communicating with. And because there was a sense of social isolation, loneliness, they may have not even met up with the person that they'd been talking to. And what they did note from the survey, and all the survey responses were anonymous, was that they did break the law and they met up with that person as their bubble.

We all know that there was restrictions in place across the UK, and that varied depending on the region or the county. But what we do see is that during the pandemic and through the qualitative work from these interviews, loneliness and a sense of connection was certainly felt a necessity.

Conversely, technology can also play a throw in the area of age friendly cities and communities. And myself and colleagues have posited in different position papers in 2019 and 2020 how

technologies such as the internet of things and other devices such as smartphones, video game technology, can benefit households individuals across all age groups. Age-friendly cities is not just about old people. It's about all generations. Thank you, Verina.

DR VERINA WAIGHTS: Thank you, Hannah. Ann, would you like to come in here?

DR ANN MITCHELL: Yeah. Thank you, Verina. I would like to start with looking at the era of computers, especially the rise of smartphones and tablets has also enhanced the way in which people share their stories. Storytelling has a long history globally. Many Indigenous communities traditionally share oral stories to pass their cultures on from one generation to the next.

In recent years, there has been a growing trend, especially in Western societies, for people to share stories about their experiences of life events, trauma, grief, or ill health to help people newly facing these issues, their families and friends, to understand what it is like to live with these issues and the strategies that they have developed to cope. Making digital stories and sharing them online increases their availability to wider audiences, thereby informing carers, health and social care professionals, and workplaces. Thank you, Verina.

DR VERINA WAIGHTS: Thank you, Ann. However, the opportunities Hannah and Ann have described rely on people being able to join in. Yet surveys show that the percentage of the UK population owning a smartphone declines with age from 100% of young people to only 77% of those aged over 65.

This decline is unlikely to be because older people use a home computer instead because home computer use declines with age too. Our research shows the reasons for not owning a device are diverse, ranging from costs of devices and provider contracts, lack of broadband or mobile coverage, to concerns about privacy, identity theft, or doing something wrong, so the device doesn't work anymore.

Also, updates mean that just as some older people become comfortable with their device, everything changes, and there is limited support available to help them. Another challenge is that some family carers and home care workers don't feel they have the digital skills to help relatives or clients chat to people, joining leisure activities, or access services online. Hannah, I think you've also done some research in this area.

DR HANNAH MARSTON: Yes. Thank you, Verina. Yes, through some more COVID research, I and colleagues, we looked at technology use and digital practices during the pandemic across 13 countries and in 11 languages. And there's this notion that younger generations are tech savvy. They have the digital skills, the literacy, but that's not always the case.

And I think it should be local governments, policymakers, organizations should be mindful that not everybody across the different age cohorts may potentially have the relevant skills. And it's not just an issue or a concern or a challenge for older people but also younger people, younger generations. And also, this relates to literacy in general. And if people are trying to access government information, we've seen this digital transformation through the pandemic, then we need to ensure that everybody has the digital skills, irrespective of whether they use social media, communication platforms like WhatsApp or smartphones.

And when it comes to using or accessing these websites, filling in forms, being able to understand what is required of them, those are the pivotal issues that need to be addressed. Thank you.

DR VERINA WAIGHTS: Thank you, Hannah. Shailey, are there any other technologies being used to connect older people with their relatives or caregivers?

ProfEmer SHAILEY MINOCHA: The use of digital health technologies, such as health variables and sensors within the house, can help to connect older people with families and caregivers. For example, enabling the family to remotely track the health data, the mobility, the location,

and physical well-being of their loved ones and to intervene if required, such as encouraging their parents to be active if the health data is showing lack of activity.

Movement sensors can help to detect their loved ones' movement or lack of it or if they have left the house and haven't returned back after an abnormally long time. Another example, Verina, is a kettle sensor. So if somebody doesn't switch their kettle at a time that they normally do, it suggests that the routine of the person who is being cared for has changed, and it could be the first indicator that something is not right.

DR VERINA WAIGHTS: Thank you, Shailey. But what about people's need for face to face contact? In our recent project, people said going to local green spaces like parks, walking under trees in nearby streets, or growing food and flowers in community gardens was vitally important for their mental health and companionship.

One woman said, if I haven't been out, I know I'm on a downer. And another described how when she's walking in a nice park or sitting on a bench, everybody talks to you, which is really good. Ann, would you like to come in here?

DR ANN MITCHELL: Thank you, Verina. Yes, I would. Speaking now as a mental health specialist and researcher, I'm very aware that people's mental health can also be helped when they develop their story face to face or online with people in a similar situation. Individuals in my research found sharing their stories created a sense of togetherness, where they supported each other to develop resilience to cope with life's challenges.

One person said, this group made me feel strong, proud, and motivated to find a garden job. Sharing their individual mini movies online helped others in their town in South America to cope better with their challenges. And their increased self-confidence enabled them to take action to resolve some of the town's issues, such as starting a youth club to reduce teenage pregnancy and substance abuse.

DR VERINA WAIGHTS: Anne, that's lovely to hear. Shailey, there is much research evidence showing that loneliness adversely affects the physical and mental health of older people. Can you briefly tell our listeners what a chatbot friend is and its impact on older people's loneliness.

ProfEmer SHAILEY MINOCHA: Yes. Recently, artificial intelligence or AI chatbots are being suggested as digital companions for combatting loneliness in older people. AI-enhanced chatbots are natural language conversational interfaces, or they may even present as digital avatars on the screen with human faces, voice, gestures, body language, and even facial expressions to simulate human-like connections.

But AI systems are not sentient. They are just imaginary friends that can't feel, and they don't have any real emotions, care, or empathy. The synthetic AI-based conversations confirm they seem to comfort, and they offer patience too, but they are unlikely to offer challenging counter narratives. So early research is suggesting that chatbots make their users feel good and engaged in the short term as AI is always listening. It's validating. It's always there. And it's offering pretend empathy.

DR VERINA WAIGHTS: It sounds as though chatbot friends make good companions, Shailey.

ProfEmer SHAILEY MINOCHA: Yes, Verina. But in the long term, older people may become emotionally dependent on AI chatbots and detach themselves from reality and from the complexity of human relationships that have friction and judgment. So technology can play some role in mitigating loneliness, and as we've seen, it can even act as a bridge for human contact. But it is not a replacement for face to face human conversations, which are more meaningful, they are more empathetic, and they also improve human resilience.

DR VERINA WAIGHTS: Thank you, Shailey. There's much to reflect on here. So I'd like each of you to tell our listeners the main assumption about technology connecting us that you would most like to challenge in one sentence please. I'll make a start.

Technological aids are going to become more and more important in many arenas as societies age globally. They can only ever be adjuncts, not replacements, to human interactions and contact. Hannah?

DR HANNAH MARSTON: Thank you, Verina. From an age-friendly cities and communities perspective, digital skills and literacy are critical. For example, local authorities are to deploy technology to facilitate the service care provision crisis at the moment. But also, we must not forget finance is key. This has been shown in a recent UK validation paper of the age-friendly cities and communities questionnaire.

And in this paper, myself and Verina and colleagues have recently established that finance not only in the UK, but more broadly through other validation studies by other colleagues across Europe, Russia, Israel, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan, that finance associated to the eight topics of the age friendly cities framework developed by the WHO is vital in this sense.

DR VERINA WAIGHTS: Thank you, Hannah. And Ann?

DR ANN MITCHELL: Thank you, Verina. From a mental health perspective, technology has opened up a new frontier. The different devices like smartphones and tablets have provided new ways of accessing help, monitoring patients' progress, and increasing understanding of mental well-being.

Whilst technology offers opportunities, there are concerns in relation to the various apps being used. Although apps are appealing and user-friendly, more information is required regarding their effectiveness. Just a note of caution. Regulation, guidance, and privacy are needed to prevent them from causing harm to people with mental health issues. Thank you.

DR VERINA WAIGHTS: Thank you, Ann. And Shailey?

ProfEmer SHAILEY MINOCHA: Technology is seen as a panacea for combating loneliness, but it's paramount for us as researchers of aging to influence policy makers and employers, that just as we prepare people for financial and legal affairs for later life, preparations for aging, such as maintaining good health and physical movement and developing social connections within the community as well as online connections, should start early in our lives as these measures are vital to alleviate social isolation and loneliness in later life.

DR VERINA WAIGHTS: Thank you, Shailey. From our conversations today, people's relationship with technology seems more nuanced than we might have first thought. Smartphones and laptops have an important place in society, connecting people with family, friends, professional services, and leisure activities, and sharing stories online can help people's mental health and develop resilience.

But not everyone has the opportunity or skills for using these devices, which creates or exacerbates existing societal inequalities. Today's rapid expansion of AI may further enhance the opportunities for connecting people and help to combat isolation and loneliness. But there are inherent dangers when people only have chatbot friends.

However, these devices cannot replace interactions with other people in person or the joy and well-being that engaging with nature can bring. We would love you, our listeners, to join in the conversation. What part does technology play in your life? Does AI feature at all? Leave us your thoughts in the comment.

If you are interested in contemporary issues and debates on aging, please join in the CABS public seminar series and the Open University free online courses following the links in the description box. Thank you to my colleagues, Hannah Marston, Ann Mitchell, and Shailey Minocha, for joining us today. I am Verina Waights, and you are listening to the Does Technology Actually Connect Us CABS podcast. Do join us next time for another thought provoking debate.