

Overcoming Loneliness in Old Age: The Use of Communication Technology in Nursing Homes

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Abstract: *This study explores the utilization of communication technology to alleviate loneliness among elderly residents in nursing homes, specifically at UPTD Pelayanan Sosial Lanjut Usia Tresna Werdha Natar, Lampung Province. As internet usage increases in Indonesia, older adults remain significantly underrepresented among users due to generational gaps in digital literacy. Through a community service project, this initiative sought to enhance elderly well-being by teaching them to use communication platforms like WhatsApp for maintaining connections with family and friends. The intervention included workshops, device usage training, and practical simulations aimed at reducing social isolation and fostering emotional support. Using a qualitative method, the study interviewed 29 elderly residents aged 70–79. The results revealed that 85% of respondents reported reduced feelings of loneliness after learning to use WhatsApp, noting improved emotional well-being and increased communication frequency with family members. Social virtual activities such as group chats and online events further engaged the elderly and contributed to their mental health. The findings underscore the critical role of nursing home staff and family support in sustaining elderly participation in digital communication. This project concludes that communication technology, when supported by structured training and emotional reinforcement, can be an effective strategy for enhancing the quality of life among the elderly in institutional care.*

Introduction

Indonesia has experienced a significant surge in internet usage in recent years, reflecting rapid technological advancement across the nation. This growth has affected many sectors, including communication, education, and social interaction. However, despite the widespread penetration of internet technology, the elderly population remains largely left behind in terms of digital inclusion (Sumarsih & Kp, 2023). In 2016, elderly internet users in Indonesia accounted for only 2% of the total internet population. This shows a glaring disparity between generations. The elderly are often less exposed to technology and therefore lack the digital literacy necessary to navigate the internet and digital devices effectively. This generational gap presents a major challenge in ensuring equitable access to technological resources (Walentina, 2023).

One key factor contributing to this gap is the lack of training and support available to older adults in learning how to use communication technologies. Unlike younger generations who grow up in the digital era, older individuals may find it difficult to adapt to the fast-paced changes in digital tools (Luas et al., 2025). As a result, they are more likely to experience technology-related anxiety and hesitation. In 2016, Indonesia had approximately 132.7 million internet users. However, the distribution of internet use across age groups was not balanced (Mustaqilah, 2024). The majority of users—around 78%—were aged between 25 and 34 years. While those aged 35 and above also contributed to internet usage, their numbers were not as significant as those from younger demographics.

The uneven distribution of digital technology usage across age groups demonstrates the need for targeted intervention. Communication technology can be a powerful tool to bridge social gaps and reduce isolation, particularly among the elderly (Hikhmat & Kp, 2025). This requires inclusive programs and support systems designed specifically for older populations. Recognizing this, the government, especially in Lampung Province, has placed increased focus on promoting the use of communication technologies among older adults (Setiyowati, 2025). The local government seeks to ensure that the elderly are not excluded from the benefits of digital development. This includes better access to information, social engagement, and health services.

The UPTD Pelayanan Sosial Lanjut Usia Tresna Werdha Natar has taken active steps to improve the quality of life for elderly residents. By promoting the use of communication technologies, the institution aims to enhance access to health information, create better lines of communication with family and caregivers, and foster a sense of social connection (Rahman, 2023). Technology, when applied correctly, can significantly reduce feelings of isolation among the elderly. Communication platforms like WhatsApp allow older adults to stay in touch with family members and participate in virtual social activities. This engagement is essential to their emotional well-being and mental health (Fitri, 2020).

Providing the elderly with proper training and access to technology helps them stay connected with the broader community. It also empowers them to participate more fully in their own care and decision-making. With increased confidence in using communication tools, the elderly can maintain meaningful relationships and reduce loneliness. This community service initiative at UPTD Tresna Werdha Natar serves as a model for how technology can be used to address social and emotional challenges faced by the elderly. Through education and ongoing support, this program demonstrates a commitment to reducing loneliness among the elderly by integrating communication technology into their daily lives.

Method

Community service through the utilization of communication technology at UPTD Pelayanan Sosial Lanjut Usia Tresna Werdha Natar requires a structured and comprehensive approach. This method is intended to ensure that the implementation of technology is effective and has a positive impact on the well-being of the elderly (Ati et al., 2024). Elderly individuals, defined as those aged over 60 years, are often no longer able to earn a living independently or meet their daily needs (Ratnawati, 2017). This study focused on “madya” elderly individuals aged 70–79 years. It used a qualitative approach, conducting in-depth interviews with 29 nursing home residents to understand their experiences using WhatsApp to communicate with family and friends. The research employed the “uses and effects” theory, which explains the relationship between mass communication and the effects it has on media users (Suryanti et al., 2024). The first stage of the community service method involved preparation and planning. This began with a needs analysis at UPTD Tresna Werdha Natar to identify the communication technology requirements of the elderly. An initial survey was conducted to determine the specific needs, followed by the formulation of a service program plan detailing objectives, target groups, schedules, and necessary resources. This activity was carried out on Wednesday, June 26, 2024.

The second stage was the implementation of an interactive workshop. The workshop allowed elderly participants to directly practice using technology with the guidance of instructors. Each participant used their own device, and the session was designed to be hands-on. To create a relaxed and engaging learning atmosphere, an icebreaking activity was conducted at the beginning. The workshop lasted for two hours, from 3:30 PM to 5:30 PM local time. During the technology implementation phase, participants were encouraged to use their devices independently for practical exercises. The community service team guided them from the basics, ensuring that UPTD Tresna Werdha Natar provided adequate internet access to support their activities (Asmaria et al., 2025). This phase also included the introduction of communication applications such as WhatsApp, Zoom, and telemedicine apps. The

application simulation allowed the elderly to practice communicating with family members and healthcare providers, ensuring they felt confident and comfortable using the technology. The use of these tools not only aimed to improve digital literacy but also served as a strategy to enhance social connections, reduce isolation, and support the emotional well-being of the elderly in institutional care.

Result

Based on the findings of the study, the majority of respondents reported an increase in the frequency of communication with their families after using WhatsApp. They felt more connected and experienced greater emotional support as a result of regular interaction with their loved ones. WhatsApp was perceived as a user-friendly application, even by elderly individuals who were not familiar with technology. Its features—such as text messaging, voice calls, and video calls—enabled them to stay in touch with people they care about, bridging the distance that often leads to loneliness (Akbar et al., 2024).

Approximately 85% of respondents reported a decrease in feelings of loneliness since they started using WhatsApp. The ability to communicate more frequently with family and friends made them feel more valued and loved, enhancing their overall emotional well-being. Some nursing homes organized virtual social activities through WhatsApp. These included discussion groups, online classes, and virtual family gatherings. Such activities encouraged elderly residents to remain socially active and mentally engaged.

The technical support provided by nursing home staff played a crucial role in helping the elderly use WhatsApp effectively. Staff members who offered basic training on how to use the application significantly reduced the technological barriers that often deter elderly participation. WhatsApp proved to be an effective tool for reducing loneliness among nursing home residents. The increased frequency of communication and social interaction helped elderly users feel more connected and less isolated from their families and communities.

Although many elderly participants benefited from using WhatsApp, some encountered technical challenges. Continuous training and support from nursing home staff were essential to ensure that all elderly residents could make the most of this technology. Virtual social activities organized through WhatsApp offered valuable opportunities for the elderly to remain engaged and feel included in social life. This had a positive impact on their mental and emotional health, contributing to a sense of purpose and belonging.

The role of the family was also fundamental in supporting the elderly's use of technology. Families that maintained consistent communication via WhatsApp helped

to ease feelings of loneliness and promoted the emotional resilience of their elderly members. Overall, the integration of communication technology like WhatsApp into the daily lives of the elderly in nursing homes represents a promising approach to combating loneliness. With appropriate guidance and ongoing support, digital tools can play a significant role in improving the quality of life for older adults.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the significant role that communication technology, particularly WhatsApp, can play in enhancing the emotional well-being of elderly residents in nursing homes. Increased communication with family and friends led to a notable improvement in the respondents' psychological state, especially in reducing feelings of loneliness and isolation. This aligns with previous studies that emphasize the importance of social connections in maintaining mental health among older adults. WhatsApp's ease of use was a critical factor in its successful adoption by the elderly. Despite initial challenges in navigating digital applications, the elderly participants demonstrated adaptability when provided with proper guidance and support. The simplicity of WhatsApp's interface and its familiar features such as text, voice, and video calls made it more accessible, even for users with minimal prior exposure to technology.

The qualitative interviews revealed that regular use of WhatsApp encouraged stronger emotional bonds between the elderly and their families. Frequent interactions helped the elderly feel more loved, respected, and connected. This emotional reinforcement not only reduced loneliness but also instilled a sense of relevance and inclusion in the digital age. Moreover, the structured training provided by nursing home staff played a key role in overcoming technological barriers. When staff offered continuous support, the elderly felt more confident and less intimidated by the idea of using smartphones and communication apps. This underscores the importance of having a dedicated support system when introducing technology to vulnerable populations.

The study also found that the implementation of virtual social programs through WhatsApp enhanced the elderly's social involvement. Activities such as discussion groups, online classes, and virtual events enabled them to interact beyond immediate family, fostering a sense of community and active participation. This contributed positively to their mental stimulation and emotional satisfaction. However, not all respondents had a smooth experience. Some continued to struggle with technical issues, especially in operating features like video calls or sending multimedia messages. These challenges highlight the necessity of continuous and patient training programs, as well as designing elder-friendly interfaces in communication technologies.

The involvement of family members was equally crucial. Families that made consistent efforts to communicate via WhatsApp significantly improved the emotional states of their elderly relatives. These findings suggest that technological tools are most effective when both the user and their support network are actively engaged. The research also supports the “uses and effects” theory, where the elderly not only use media like WhatsApp for functional communication but also derive psychological benefits from such usage. The media’s effect on their well-being, including reduced loneliness and enhanced emotional connection, validates the theory’s application in this context.

From a policy perspective, the study suggests that communication technology should be incorporated into elderly care strategies at both institutional and government levels. Programs that promote digital literacy among the elderly should be prioritized, particularly in nursing home settings where residents are at higher risk of social isolation. In conclusion, this study demonstrates that communication technology, when implemented with adequate support and training, can significantly improve the quality of life for the elderly. WhatsApp served not only as a communication tool but also as a bridge to emotional healing and social engagement. Future initiatives should continue to explore innovative ways to integrate technology into elderly care, ensuring that no one is left behind in the digital age.

Conclusion

The results of this community service initiative demonstrate that the strategic use of communication technology, particularly WhatsApp, significantly contributes to reducing loneliness and enhancing emotional well-being among the elderly in nursing homes. This aligns with theoretical reflections from the uses and effects theory, which emphasizes the influence of media use on individual experiences. The success of this program highlights the importance of digital literacy training and ongoing support in facilitating meaningful social interactions for older adults. It is recommended that similar initiatives be adopted more widely by social institutions and local governments to promote inclusive digital participation, thereby improving the overall quality of life for the elderly.

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