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Are older adults networked individuals? Insights from East Yorkers' network structure, relational autonomy, and digital media use

Hua Wang ^a, Renwen Zhang ^b and Barry Wellman ^{c,d}

^aDepartment of Communication, University at Buffalo, The State University of New York, Buffalo, NY, USA;

^bSchool of Communication, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, USA; ^cNetLab Network, Toronto, ON, Canada; ^dSocial Media Lab, Ryerson University, Toronto, ON, Canada

ABSTRACT

Networked individualism is a critical concept about the transition of the societal shift from geographically bounded local groups to the contemporary network society comprised of sparse, permeable, and dynamic communication networks. An underlying assumption about networked individuals thus far in the literature is that they are at a younger age. There are fears that older adults have been left behind in this transition to networked individualism. In this study, we are the first to inquire to what extent – and in what ways – are older adults networked individuals. Using in-depth interviews with 41 older adults living in the East York area of Toronto, we used a combination of quantitative coding, thematic analysis, and individual profiling to analyze their social network structure, relational autonomy, and digital media use. Our findings render a rather complex and nuanced picture, showing three types of older adults along the spectrum of networked individualism: networked individuals, socially connected but not networked individuals, and socially constrained individuals. Although most participants are socially connected, those who are networked individuals actively manage and navigate multiple, diverse, and non-redundant social networks. Digital media use is neither necessary nor sufficient in qualifying a person as a networked individual as the great majority of East Yorkers – even if not networked individuals – integrate digital media into their everyday lives.

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Networked individualism; older adults; social network; network structure; relational autonomy; digital media

Introduction

The transformation of social structures in society has captured researchers' fascination for generations, with the long-lasting debate about 'The Community Question' concerning the relationship of large-scale societal shifts to social networks (e.g., Hampton, Lee, & Her, 2011; Hampton & Wellman, *in press*; Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Wellman, 1979). In this line of intellectual pursuit, four waves of studies in the East York area of Toronto have been conducted since 1968 to examine the intersections of personal relationships,

CONTACT Hua Wang  hwang23@buffalo.edu  Department of Communication, University at Buffalo, The State University of New York, Buffalo, NY 14260, USA

social activities, and technology use (e.g., Quan-Haase, Mo, & Wellman, 2017; Quan-Haase, Wang, Wellman, & Zhang, *in press*; Quan-Haase, Williams, Kicevski, Elueze, & Wellman, *in press*; Wellman, 1979; Wellman et al., 2006; Wellman & Tindall, 1993; Wellman & Wortley, 1990). The first three waves of the East York studies showed that North Americans remained socially connected despite continuing lamentations about the death of community (c.f., Gee, 2018; Putnam, 2000; Turkle, 2011).

A significant concept that has emerged from these East York studies is *networked individualism*: the critical transition of the societal shift from ‘door-to-door’ to ‘person-to-person’ – from geographically bounded local groups to the contemporary network society comprised of sparse, permeable, and dynamic communication networks (Wellman, 2001a, 2001b). Rainie and Wellman (2012) further explicated the triple revolution (i.e., the network, internet, and mobile revolution) as fostering networked individualism that discussed how individuals use digital media such as personal computers and mobile phones to manage their communication activities and to weave together their social networks. While socially connected individuals navigate streams of emails and text messages when browsing through Facebook updates and shared photos, networked individuals add to this by maneuvering through multiple social circles for different purposes.

Typically the image that pops up in one’s mind may well be a young person. In other words, there is an underlying assumption that networked individuals are at a younger age. There are fears that older adults have been left behind in this transition to networked individualism (see the review in Quan-Haase, Williams, et al., *in press*). They have been consigned to age in place, clutching the long cords of their landline phones as their networked society swirls around them. However, the societal turn to networked individualism has increased the ability and need of older adults to reach beyond local and close groups of family and friends to connect with diverse networks and engage in an active social life. Although there has been research on older adults’ media use for social connectivity (e.g., Hargittai & Dobransky, 2017), to our knowledge, we are the first to inquire: *to what extent – and in what ways – are older adults networked individuals?*

We first review networked individualism that highlights the defining characteristics that we use as evaluation criteria for identifying potentially networked individuals in our analysis. Then, after describing the study participants, data collection procedure, and analytical approaches, we report the results along with illustrative examples. Finally, we link findings from quantitative coding, qualitative themes, and selected individual profiles to discuss our contribution and offer recommendations for future research.

Literature review

The shift from people being embedded group members to networked individuals has been a major phenomenon in North America since at least the 1950s. In those bygone times, a person’s community normally consisted of a relatively small number of social ties, densely connected, and organized around the home, workplace, and local activities (Hampton & Wellman, *in press*; Wellman, 2001a; Wellman & Leighton, 1979). People spent most of their lives surrounded by family, relatives, neighbors, and friends who shared not only similar backgrounds and beliefs but also similar jobs and hobbies. Most connections were strong ties with whom people were in regular, often daily, contact. The home

telephone and the family car were the first technological innovations that allowed many to connect beyond their local groups (Wellman & Tindall, 1993).

With the introduction of widespread personal car ownership, dual-job households, and later the internet and mobile phones, many North Americans have developed multiple social networks for different purposes, each of which contains only a portion of their lives (Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Wellman, 2001a, 2001b). Many of these partial networks have overlapping membership; some do not. Rather than being tied to the locale, relationships often span many kilometers, and may contain transcontinental and even trans-oceanic members. Rather than being homogeneous in socioeconomic status or ethnic background, they often embrace a diverse populace (Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Wellman, 2001a, 2001b). Therefore, a defining characteristic of networked individuals is having multiple, partial, and diverse social networks where the fluid connections afford them the ability to navigate through their everyday activities with different people for different purpose.

In addition, having multiple networks means that networked individuals have some relational autonomy in organizing their social relationships and interactions (Wellman, 2001a, 2001b). They need to be the managers and negotiators in their multifaceted social worlds (Burt, 2017; Rainie & Wellman, 2012, *in press*). They reach out to reconnect with old friends and distant relatives; they introduce people to one another; they are open to meet new friends and explore unknown territories. Therefore, another defining characteristic of networked individuals is that they play an active role in weaving together the social fabrics of their everyday lives.

The rapid growth of digital technologies such as the internet and mobile phone has accelerated social connectivity (Boase, 2008; Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Wellman, 2001a, 2001b). Digital media has helped adults in North America to remain in active contact with sizable networks of social ties near and far; they have allowed them to seek out information and secure social support when making important decisions (Rainie, Horrigan, Wellman, & Boase, 2006). Digital media has become crucial for family members to keep in touch and coordinate quality time together (Kennedy & Wellman, 2007). Heavy internet users generally have more friends than lighter users, and also across different types of friendship (Wang & Wellman, 2010). Therefore, the third defining characteristic of networked individuals is that they actively use digital media to connect with their social networks.

But while people are connected by digital media, are they networked? Not just anyone living in a contemporary society becomes a networked individual, even with pervasive technologies to help them stay connected anywhere anytime (Hampton, 2016). People can use digital media to keep in touch with traditional family groups and neighbors, even if they are not networked individuals as they appreciate the social affordances of digital media and utilize their communicative features to maintain their social networks. Networked individuals can be adept at leveraging the advantages of these communication technologies to network more effectively. They can reach an entire group simultaneously, overcome the barriers of time and space, and discover new life experiences.

Large national surveys and in-depth interviews have provided evidence of networked individualism (Boase & Wellman, 2005; Hampton, 2016; Hampton et al., 2011; Rainie & Wellman, 2012; *in press*; Wellman et al., 2006). However, older adults were often a minority in these studies and lumped together with other age groups in the analysis of general trends. Are older adults different from others in the nature of their social networks and

digital media use? There is a parallel track of research on the danger of social isolation and digital inequality for older adults (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008). Older adults have continued to be portrayed as embedded in traditional neighborhood communities rather than in vibrant social networks, slow to adopt digital media (c.f., Haight, Quan-Haase, & Corbett, 2014; Quan-Haase, Wang, et al., *in press*; Quan-Haase, Williams, et al., *in press*). They face challenges of declining social circles, chronic conditions, limited mobility, and physical impairment that can easily lead to loneliness, depression, and even dementia, especially after retirement, losing a spouse, and living alone (Cornwell & Waite, 2009; Cotten, Anderson, & McCullough, 2013; Holt-Lunstad, Smith, Baker, Harris, & Stephenson, 2015).

Older adults have the potential to be networked individuals as more are flocking online and expanding their experience with digital technologies (Quan-Haase, Williams, et al., *in press*). With digital media seeping into every corner of people's everyday lives, older adults may feel encouraged or pressured to join the *zeitgeist* and use the internet and mobile phones. Moreover, the enhanced connectivity afforded by these digital technologies may bolster older adults' feeling that they continue to matter - that they are acknowledged and appreciated by others (Francis, Rikard, Cotten, & Kadylak, 2017).

We began our study with a broad inquiry asking: *Are older adults networked individuals?* Based the literature reviewed above, we break it down into three specific research questions:

RQ1: Do older adults have multiple, partial, and diverse social networks?

RQ2: Do older adults exercise relational autonomy as they navigate their social networks?

RQ3: Do older adults rely on digital media to manage their social networks?

Methods

Study participants

The present article reports exclusively about the subset of 41 older adult participants in the fourth East York study. Their age ranged from 65 to 93 years ($M = 74$, $SD = 7.25$, $Median = 73$); 22 were women (54%); 18 (44%) were born outside of Canada - in Europe, the US, Asia, and the Caribbean. They had lived in Toronto between 17 and 84 years ($M = 47$, $SD = 16$; $Median = 44$), with nine (22%) having lived there their entire lives. Twenty were living alone (49%), especially those who had never married, divorced, or widowed. In terms of highest education completed, one had not finished the 8th grade (0.02%), 14 had high school diploma or vocational training certificates (34%), 18 had finished college or university (44%), and 8 had a graduate degree (20%). In terms of work status, 34 were retired (83%), although among them 17 were taking on part-time jobs or running personal businesses.

Data collection

Our data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in 2013 and 2014. For the larger project, a sampling frame of 2321 residents was obtained from a Toronto-based sampling company, of which 304 were randomly selected for recruitment

via an invitation letter that indicated the study purpose and offered a \$50 gift card for participation. Upon a follow-up phone call, 101 East Yorkers (including the 41 older adults in our analysis) agreed to participate, with a response rate of 33%. After pilot testing, trained researchers conducted the interviews face-to-face in English, which usually lasted 60–90 minutes. All interviews were recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim by a team of 14 assistants, with 59% randomly selected for quality check. We use pseudonyms that resemble participants' gender and ethnicity while protecting their confidentiality. Compared to the Canadian census data, the participants in our overall sample were more likely to be older, female, and better educated. The over-representation of older adults facilitated our analysis reported in this article.

Data analysis

To leverage the information from the in-depth interviews, we conducted three types of analysis through an iterative process. First, using quantitative coding of transcripts, we were able to extract the different types of social relationships older adult participants maintained, the kinds of social groups they engaged in, the number of digital devices they owned, and the number of communication channels they used. These descriptive statistics helped us to gauge participants' personal network structures (such as size and diversity) as well as their social interaction patterns (such as personal preference of communication channels and digital media use). More importantly, these descriptive statistics served as the indicators for our research team to identify participants who were potentially qualified as networked individuals.

Second, to stay close to the interviews, we did a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) based on the three characteristics of networked individuals identified in the literature review (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). We highlighted, labeled, and categorized participants' remarks regarding the diversity of their social networks, the relational autonomy in social activities, and the role of digital media in their social lives. Excerpts were organized by these themes and annotated with basic personal information about the participant (i.e., participant ID, gender, and age).

Third, we followed Seidman's (2006) guideline for using profiles to analyze, interpret, and share interview data. Building on the general patterns emerged from the quantitative and qualitative coding, this profiling method was particularly apt for studying 'networked individuals' because it allowed us to link the numbers and themes to understand the individual participants holistically in the context of their everyday lives. These vignettes heightened the patterns found in the numbers and themes, but also complemented them with compelling narratives about the stereotypes and counter-stereotypes of older adults living in the digital age.

Results

The combination of quantitative coding, qualitative thematic analysis, and individual profiling suggested that networked individualism functioned more as a spectrum on multiple dimensions than as a simple dichotomy among older adults. The participants' individual vignettes could show somewhat contradictory evidence at times. However, based on our evaluation of each participant's overall tendency, we roughly categorized them into

three types: (1) networked individuals, (2) socially connected but not networked individuals, and (3) socially constrained individuals. We found nearly one quarter (22%) of the participants to be networked individuals who managed a relatively larger number of diverse social networks that were enhanced by their use of digital and social media. About one-half (51%; 21/41) were socially connected but not networked individuals, who were active online and off but socializing with more or less the same groups of people. Over one quarter (27%; 11/41) were socially constrained with limited social ties and activities, and some of them had no digital media use. We report the detailed results below in the order of the three types of approaches we used in our analysis.

Descriptive statistics

We sorted participants' social relationships into five categories: close kin, extended kin, friends, neighbors, and coworkers, each having a specific set of questions during the interview. The total number of ties mentioned across these categories served as a proxy for their personal network size (*Range* = 8-60, *M* = 24.5, *Median* = 23). Our participants also mentioned a range of social groups and organizations such as church, music, sports, and book clubs (*Range* = 0-10, *M* = 2.3, *Median* = 2). These various relationships and group memberships served as a proxy for their personal network diversity (*Range* = 2-21, *M* = 8.7, *Median* = 8).

The participants owned four types of digital devices: computer, landline telephone, mobile phone, and tablet (*Range* = 1-7, *M* = 3.3, *Median* = 3). Most (90%) owned personal computers; close to a third (29%) had multiple computers, such as two desktops or one desktop and one laptop. Although almost everyone (98%) had a landline telephone at home; mobile phones were also widely owned (88%): 73% had regular mobile phones and 27% owned smartphones. Tablets were not as commonly owned (17%).

Seven communication channels were reported in the interviews: face-to-face, landline calling, mobile calling, text messaging, email, video chat, and social media (*Range* = 2-7, *M* = 4.4, *Median* = 4). We also calculated the use of five digital channels: mobile calling, text messaging, email, video chat, and social media (*Range* = 0-5, *M* = 2.5, *Median* = 2). All participants maintained social contact face-to-face, 98% still used landline telephones to call people, 88% used mobile phones for calling, 20% used text messaging, 80% used email, and 34% used social media.

Thematic analysis

Network structure

A key distinction for networked individuals is that they have multiple, partial, and diverse social networks. Some participants such as Marigold (P49, F, 93) and Paul (P84, M, 81) were socially constrained, having a limited number of social contacts with their family and close friends. However, over half of the participants had sizable networks and some degree of diversity in terms of individual backgrounds, relationship categories, and social activities. We considered them socially connected, but not networked individuals. For example, although Beverley (P2, F, 75) was active, she mostly socialized with the same friends for different activities:

The friends that I go out with are both widows and this is just part of life I think. We go out for lunch and we go to a shopping mall and we just go around to the different shopping malls and look at stuff and walk around, you sort of think you're getting some exercise and you socialize with them ... I did go to a seniors group for exercises but the two women that I go with are not as well now and they can't go so we don't go anymore.

By contrast, networked individuals connected with somewhat separate sets of people and groups, often with different backgrounds and interests. For example, Ramona (P82, F, 65), although retired and living alone, was enthusiastic about her frequent outings with many friends who shared her love for art:

I'm interested in art and a couple of them were art teachers so we would meet and we would go to art shows and so on. And there are a couple of others ... I'm a member of a dance group. I do ballroom dancing. We meet there usually on a Saturday night, and there's a tea dance on a Wednesday at a different club, so I meet up with them ... I have dual membership with a friend for the AGO [Art Gallery of Ontario] and also the theatre.

Another networked individual Duncan (P33, M, 83), despite being in his early eighties, actively participated in seven social groups that ranged from a church choir and a Tai Chi club to a local political party. He reflected:

I got to know [the politician] because I had a row with him indirectly. I wouldn't have done it if I hadn't been president of the local [political] party. So being involved with these organizations brings the opportunities to meet people.

Moreover, the less redundancy in the social networks that people were involved in, the more apt they were to be networked individuals. For example, Mark (P80, M, 65), a retired chief financial officer for an insurance company who was never married and living alone, told us:

Some of my neighbors are from Hong Kong and speak Chinese. Some don't speak English well but we can communicate ... One of my neighbors and I both go to the same French class ... I have friends I do get together and visit with individually. We go hiking and exploring ... out to dinner, out for coffee. I have other friends where we meet in a group. We are interested in similar things like jazz. I used to have a book group that doesn't meet much anymore, but we still get together in someone's yard in the good weather or meet at a pub otherwise ... I am a member of many non-profits and active in a couple of them: tennis and church. And I belong to a garden club ... I have lots of friends. I like to develop deeper relationships with the friends I have.

Relational autonomy

To address the research question about whether someone is managing their social networks, we delved deeper into the transcripts where questions were asked if the participants were playing an active role in organizing their social lives. For example, Allen (P97, M, 75) and Luisa (P69, F, 68) had sizable networks but Allen reported that he was 'just a member' showing up for events and his wife was 'more directly involved' in arranging their social activities. Similarly, Luisa said the regular neighborhood events were organized by their 'social committee' and she would 'just attend.' In other words, Allen and Luisa played a rather passive role in their social lives; they were socially connected but not networked individuals.

By contrast, networked individuals often played a more active role in organizing their social networks and activities; they were often group leaders, event planners, and network weavers. For example, Tom (P55, M, 68) was still working as a lawyer and actively participating in five professional organizations and five leisure groups. He proudly shared:

I've been the President of the Board of Directors for the [educational organization] for a number of years. Since I'm the one that does the agenda, I assume they'll have me do it again [for the upcoming annual meeting]

Similarly, another networked individual Joe (P7, M, 73) was a president of a political group and a teachers' association. He also sat on a board of directors for a community service organization. He said:

I was president of [a teachers association], and once a year there's an annual meeting and I meet various people and some of them are my friends and some of them are people I've worked with. In the community service, they have a variety of parties, and the luncheon group, we meet regularly to discuss various topics.

Networked individuals were also 'netweavers' (c.f., Littell & Fisher, 2001). They were prone to introduce their friends to each other, pass on information, and play a 'broker' role in their networks passing on information (c.f., Burt, 1992). For example, Ramona (P82, F, 65) told us:

I take the initiative, for example, I'll get the information from the AGO and I will contact [Mandy] and say well are you interested in attending this, so it's mutual you know.

Some netweavers had actively connected people who were themselves not directly connected. Duncan (P33, M, 83) explained his reason:

Because they would find each other interesting. Just getting people together for an interesting evening. It's always worked out very well.

Digital media

In this study, we sought to investigate what role digital media played in older adults' social activities and network dynamics. Only three participants - Angela (P11, F, 77), Nikolas (P40, M, 76), and Muireann (P76, F, 82) - did not use any digital media at all. We found that all the others (93%) - whether networked individuals or not - used digital media to connect with their social contacts, principally email, with an appreciable minority using newer digital apps, especially Skype and Facebook. Many were comfortable on digital media and enjoyed having a convenient and intimate option to manage their social connections and avoid missing out. However, some lacked confidence in their digital skills and were concerned about their privacy (Quan-Haase, Williams, et al., *in press*). Although some networked individuals such as Duncan (P33, M, 83) do not like using digital media, preferring to meet in person and the telephone, in practice, digital media enhanced the social functions of most older adults in four ways.

(1) Digital media supports the size and diversity of social networks

Digital media allowed the participants to function more at the center of their everyday communication activities and helped them to maintain and expand their social networks. Many actively used digital media to keep in touch with friends and family. For example,

Thomas (P68, M, 67), a networked individual, reconnected with an old friend in Malaysia via email after he found his business card:

I knew he was off as a lawyer and it popped up [online] as a lawyer, so I just emailed the address that came up, and I'd say within five hours I had an answer, 'How the hell did you find me?'

Digital media also enhanced connectivity with groups as well as with individuals. Email, in particular, enabled older adults to reach multiple recipients with the click of a button. Sending jokes and articles via email has been a common practice of the participants to keep in touch with friends. Many loved the convenience of doing multiple emails. One networked individual, Duncan (P33, M, 83), commented:

I frequently write something, words of wisdom, and will send it to twenty or thirty people. It's cheap and effective ... So people whom I wouldn't normally communicate with – the contact is enhanced by forwarding these pictures or these jokes or stories.

Facebook has also been used to arrange events and get-togethers. The publicity and interactivity of Facebook enabled older adults, especially networked individuals, to reach out to a large audience and get their feedback easily. For example, Mark (P80, M, 65) managed a Facebook page for his group and praised it:

It's a good way to get information out. On Facebook I set up an event a couple of weeks ago and got it out to a lot of people all at once.

Mark also appreciated the efficiency of online calendars:

I get in touch with people directly. I have used Doodle when some friends and I were trying to organize visiting a friend who's shut-in so we each were going to take turns. We went on the internet to say when we were available.

(2) Digital media expands the geographical reach of social networks

Many of the participants mentioned that they used digital media to communicate with family and friends living outside of Toronto. They regarded digital media as tools to increase geographic reach and contact frequency. Email and mobile phone calling were most frequently used for maintaining long-distance family and friendship ties because of their convenience, low cost, and ease of use. Some used social media such as Facebook to connect with friends dispersed around the world. For instance, An Dung (P15, M, 71), a socially connected but not networked individual, relied on mobile calling to keep in touch with his dispersed Vietnamese-expatriate siblings in Montreal, Paris, and Houston. He enjoyed email, especially group email, to share events with far-flung family and friends:

Let's say my group of friends celebrate Lunar New Year in Washington, DC. They take pictures and send an email with all the pictures to us.

Similarly, Elena (P96, F, 75), who was socially connected, was a heavy user of Facebook. Rather than posting things publicly on Facebook, she often used Facebook Messenger (a variant of texting) to privately chat with friends. This was echoed by a networked individual, Thomas (P68, M, 67), who also used Facebook Messenger to keep in touch with friends in Asia and Peru:

I just happen to see that they're on Facebook at the same time as I am, or they see that I'm on it. Because my name pops up when I go on just like their names pop up when they come on, and if they're on there then we'll chat.

Skype video chatting has also become an integral part of communication channels for older adults. A third of the participants used Skype to contact family members and friends living faraway. Although most of these older adults were novice Skype users, they loved the increased companionship enabled by its nonverbal cues seeing their grandchildren or connecting with those 'in the old country' who did not speak English well. For instance, Tom (P55, M, 68), a networked individual, frequently used Skype and FaceTime to chat with family members living abroad:

One of the uses we have for the kitchen computer is to Skype with our family. I have a brother and sister in BC [British Columbia]. I have a daughter in France so we Skype with her at least weekly. We also have a daughter in Guelph [Ontario] and we Skype with them. We use Face Time too but when it is Apple-to-Apple device. Otherwise we use Skype.

(3) *Digital media facilitates intergenerational communication*

Facebook provided older adults with opportunities for intergenerational communication. Notably, half of the Facebook users in our study used it for keeping up with the younger adults in their social networks. Most did not post pictures themselves but valued viewing updates and pictures from their children and grandchildren. Just being able to watch the younger generations grow up allowed the older adults to appreciate the simple pleasures in life. Some actively used digital media to chat and post photos for keeping up with others. For example, Rose (P40, F, 67), who is socially connected but not networked, had 80 Facebook friends and relatives. She often used Facebook to look at pictures of her cousins and their kids, finding old friends, and organizing reunion and get-togethers:

I like Facebook because I have a lot of young cousins, who I can see what they're up to ... I just like that kind of family connection that I can get on the internet. Because they live in Alberta and I live in Ontario ... I like looking at pictures of them and their kids and their kids' kids.

In addition to connecting with young family members, socially connected individuals also used digital media to communicate with younger friends. For example, Sutapa (P77, F, 76) made many friends through her active choir membership:

Everyone else was younger than me and they said you've got to get on Facebook because we've got thousands of photos ... So I check it out every day. I have lots of interesting friends there ... I pretty well use it just to see what my friends are doing. And occasionally I might even comment on it but basically I just see what they're doing.

(4) *Digital media facilitates social support*

Although the older adult participants who were living alone tended to have smaller networks compared to those who were living with their partner or adult children, living alone did not deprive older adults of social interactions. Using digital media enabled them to connect with family and friends, who provided social support and a sense of affiliation that helped to deal with social isolation (c.f., Valtorta & Hanratty, 2012). This has been especially important for those who are socially connected but are not networked individuals. For example, although Luisa (P69, F, 68) lived alone in her apartment after getting

divorced from her husband, she was in frequent contact with her mother in Hong Kong and her older brother studying in Germany:

My cellphone is always available to my mother who is now 93 years old ... Even my mom's friend knows my cellphone number ... in case of any accident.

The exchange of information was also an important form of support promoted by digital media. Some older adults emailed their children when they needed advice regarding online banking or recipe; others shared articles and resources with their friends via social media. For instance, Thomas (P68, M, 67), a networked individual, was a big fan of politics, and he frequently read and shared Facebook posts about current affairs:

I have one friend who's very political ... He spends half the morning searching articles ... He's retired. It's his hobby ... If I like something or if it's a good article, I'll put it on my wall. If it's anything against [former Prime Minister] Harper, I'll put it up.

Selected profiles

We came to understand these older adults' experiences with their social networks and digital media use through a profiling process, which helped us to connect the dots between the communication channels they chose to use, how they were using them, and what they were using them for. Their stories overlap somewhat, yet each profile presents a unique case. While the descriptive statistics showed participants' general trends of network structure and media use and the thematic findings highlighted a wide range of individual quotes, examining profiles gave us a holistic sense of how these older adults navigated their social networks and how their digital media use fit in the bigger picture. Below, we present two networked individuals Tom (P55, M, 68) and Ramona (P 82, F, 65) to illustrate our point:

Tom was a 68-year-old networked individual. He continued to work as a lawyer, different from most of the participants who were retired. He lived with his wife and their youngest daughter. His other two daughters were in Guelph and France. They visited the daughter in Guelph every weekend and the daughter in France every six months. When not seeing each other, they used Skype to check on the grandchildren at least weekly. Tom had four siblings, who spread across Canada. He used phone and email to contact his family members, especially for arranging social events. Tom was proud to have a wide range of digital devices at home and intentionally learned to use them for different purposes. As a lawyer who worked 30–40 hours a week, he frequently used the internet for e-invites and business meetings that could be easily incorporated into people's online calendars. In addition, Tom was active in an educational organization, a golf club, a health club, a sports group, a church group, and four professional organizations. For the educational organization, he often used email to send agendas and minutes between face-to-face meetings and Skype for conference calls. Tom also was in frequent contact with 11 neighbors, with whom they had parties, cooking barbeques, playing cards, dining out, and visiting each other at cottages.

Ramona, too, was a networked individual, but unlike Tom was retired. She was 65 years old, born in Jamaica and raised in the United Kingdom. She moved to Toronto when she was 25 years old. She lived alone, without a partner or a child, and had worked as a teacher.

She had six siblings who lived faraway: five in Europe and one in the United States. Contacts with her siblings were mostly made by landline and email, aided occasionally by Skype. Ramona emailed multiple people to share jokes and her updates. She chatted with her neighbors and they were mutually supportive. An art lover, she often went with her former colleagues to art shows at a district school. She loved dancing and was a member of a ballroom dancing group that often hung out after the club. Most of them were a lot younger than her, so she frequently used email to contact them. She also had a group of friends whom she has known for over 30 years who often got together for dinner, watching TV, playing games, and camping. She also participated in a group for people with her type of illness and they sometimes got together.

Discussion

Principal findings and implications

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) has cautioned: ‘The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.’ The picture that has emerged from our analysis is complex and nuanced; it challenges the presumption that networked individualism is only for younger people. In fact, our findings do not neatly fit into the stereotype of older adults as having declining social circles and being technology avoiders. Only a few participants were social isolates and non-users of digital media.

Older adult East Yorkers have reported a wide range of behavior in terms of their social network structure, relational autonomy, and digital media use. Those participants who we identified as networked individuals engaged in multiple, partial, diverse, large and often far-flung social networks. They often were active in clubs; they proposed ideas and planned events to bring people together; and they served as network brokers and weavers. By contrast, many of the older adults were socially connected - but not networked - individuals. They were involved, in only a few social networks, usually with local groups and family. Their networks tended to be less diverse.

To our surprise, digital media use was *not* a uniquely defining characteristic of networked individualism. For example, one networked individual abhorred using digital media even as he navigated among his multiple networks. More commonly, the majority of our sample - the socially connected as well as the networked individuals - integrated digital media with face-to-face and phone contact into their everyday lives to plan, arrange, and participate in a range of social activities, as well as to exchange social support. Older adults were adept at using email and mobile phones to arrange get-togethers and organize events. Many used Skype or Facebook to visit with and see pictures of younger generations.

Digital media expanded the geographical reach of the older adults’ social networks, facilitated communication with peers and younger generations, helped organize social and group events, promoted diversity of their social networks, and augmented the exchange of social support. While these functions of digital media have also been found among young adults, we have shown that they apply to older adults in different ways.

Limitations and future research

While the in-depth interviews are insightful and revealing, they have the limitations of a small sample. It would be fruitful for generalizability for future research to include a larger group of participants. As we do not have longitudinal data, it is possible that an even larger percentage functioned as networked individuals before they retired from paid work and they - and some of their network members - had to become more passive due to health concerns. Since the age criterion of 65+ defines this research, a detailed representation of participants in the sub-groups (e.g., 65–74, 75–84, 85+) would capture subtle differences within the older adult population. Moreover, a direct comparison between older adult networked individuals with their younger counterparts could shed light on the interplay of digital media use and social networking activities. For example, younger generations are more apt than older adults to use social media in which they communicate simultaneously with larger numbers of people while older adults tend to use email to communicate with only a few selected people. As the interviews were completed in 2013–2014, it is likely that smartphone ownership has become more widespread since then, affording older adults opportunities to become even more networked individuals. To improve future analytical efficiency, we suggest including questions that directly ask about the redundancy of social networks as well as more precise network measures and media use patterns. As we relied on the participants' reports of their activity and did not directly observe their digital skills or network activity, this may have resulted in some inaccurate self-assessment. We also note that because our interviewees were students aged 23–30, this could have unfavorably biased the older adults' self-assessments.

Concluding remarks

This study is the first to examine the extent to which older adults are networked individuals. We have shown that older adults who are networked individuals exhibit certain network attributes, such as network diversity and relational autonomy. They actively leverage digital media to maintain and manage their social networks. However, digital media use is neither necessary nor sufficient in qualifying a person as a networked individual. Rather, the digital media they adopt is highly dependent on who are in their social networks and whom they are communicating with. Therefore, we corroborate and extend prior work on networked individualism.

Sixty-five is more a number on a birthday card than a firm age boundary. As those older than 65 continue to do paid work and to be physically active in 'the new old age' (Jacoby, 2011), we expect that more will actively navigate their diverse multiple networks. When younger generations grow up to be older adults in the coming years, we expect that almost all will be active digital media users and an appreciably higher percentage will be networked individuals.

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Notes on contributors

Hua Wang is an Associate Professor of Communication at the University at Buffalo, The State University of New York. She studies communication technologies, social networks, health promotion, and social change. Her award-winning work has been published in journals such as *American Journal of Public Health*, *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, *Communication Research*, and *Computers in Human Behavior*. She was the 2014 International Communication Association conference theme chair and theme book editor on technologies and well-being [email: hwang23@buffalo.edu].

Renwen Zhang is a PhD student in the Media, Technology, and Society program at Northwestern University. Her research focuses on peer support among people with mental illness, with an emphasis on the role of social media in fostering empowerment. She is particularly interested in how individuals use online health communities to obtain health information and social support. Her publications have appeared in *Computers in Human Behavior* and *Telematics and Informatics* [email: alicenzhang@u.northwestern.edu].

Barry Wellman is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, co-director of the NetLab Network, and the Distinguished Visiting Scholar of Ryerson University's Social Media Lab. Formerly the S.D. Clark Professor of Sociology at the University of Toronto, he studies the intersection of community, digital media, and social networks. Wellman founded the International Network for Social Network Analysis in 1976. He has more than 300 publications, including *Networked: The New Social Operating System* (Rainie & Wellman, 2012) [email: wellman@chass.utoronto.ca].

ORCID

Hua Wang  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8428-8360>

Renwen Zhang  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7636-9598>

Barry Wellman  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6340-8837>

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