

SOCIAL NETWORKING

November 2009

Are You Tweeting Yet?



INTRODUCTION

You know them as YouTube, Twitter, My Space, Flickr, Blogs, Widgets and Facebook, but the world is coming to know them as a burgeoning phenomenon called social networking. Social networking is taking America by storm. Today, online strategies to network and share new information are growing exponentially. Highly accessible technologies that help us communicate one on one, one to the many, and in affinity groups are capturing consumer interest. Many are observing the growth of social networking and ponder the question, “is this a fad or a lasting trend?”

Understanding the potential value and benefit of social networking for the aging network as a professional tool to enhance communication internally and with consumers is a topic that has been virtually unexplored to this point. A recent survey of aging network state information and referral (I&R) liaisons was conducted by the National Association of State Units on Aging (NASUA). The survey was designed to gauge level of knowledge, interest, and possible future use of social networking as a tool for professional internal use and as a way to communicate with the public.

This issue brief will provide a brief background on the growth and development of social networking and introduce potential applications in the aging network. The brief will also examine the results of the NASUA survey, including what state I&R liaisons currently know about social networking, how important the trend is to them, and some of the challenges they face with use of the applications. Possible future use of social networking applications will also be explored, as well as implications for additional research and the examination of this topic’s relevance to the aging network.

Brief History

Soon after computers and the internet became available to the mainstream public social networking sites began popping up across cyberspace. Blogging evolved out of online diaries as early as 1994. This service allows users to post thoughts and information about a topic for others to read and then allows readers to comment and post more information if they choose. Often blogs are dedicated to specific topics or set within a specific audience. Countless blogs exist today and are a popular venue for social discourse online. In the early 2000s wiki sites gained popularity in their use for project communication and collaboration.¹

The first social networking site was called sixdegrees.com and was launched in 1997. This site allowed users to put up a profile and list their friends. Others could then connect with friends of friends but there were few other features to allow communication or interaction with the site. A host of other social networking and dating sites came and went between 1997 and 2002 when the U.S. saw the rise of Friendster.com. Friendster allowed users to connect with friends of friends who were no more than four degrees away, but technical difficulties led to a wane in US popularity by 2003.

Myspace.com was launched in 2003 to compete with Friendster. By 2004 MySpace had become a hit with teenagers, indie rock bands, and former users of Friendster. The site allowed users to customize their

¹ “Wiki sites” and other social networking terms are defined in Appendix A.

profiles, had less restrictive rules and fewer technical difficulties than Friendster. Currently, MySpace is the second most popular social networking site in the US. Facebook was launched in 2004, originally as a Harvard-only social networking site. It soon expanded to include anyone with an active college email address and by 2005 broadened its audience to anyone over the age of 13. Facebook is slightly more restrictive than MySpace because it only allows users to post their profiles in a template rather than customizing their homepage.

In 2003, LinkedIn was launched as a professional networking site made to compliment MySpace and Facebook, whose users often know each other through social rather than professional contact. This site now has over 50 million registered users worldwide.

A new blog and photograph repository called Flickr was launched in 2004. Now users share photos in real time and use the site to exchange comments and tags. In 2006 Twitter (whose inventors were inspired by Flickr) was created as an alternative to blogging. Twitter only allows users to post brief messages of 140 characters or less in the form of “tweets” or short blog posts, making it user friendly for those who access the internet from their mobile phones.

Podcasts evolved as early as 1998 with major businesses and companies but regained popularity around 2004 as a wider group of internet users began posting less formal podcasts. In 2005, YouTube was created as a place for internet users to post user-generated video content, either of themselves, or of movie and TV clips or music videos. The site gave internet users the first venue for posting videos and clips online and made it simple enough that almost anyone could access videos and/or post videos themselves.

The impact of social networking can be documented globally, impacting military conflict, business development, and political campaigns and shaping the older adult and youth cultures. During the recent election in Iran, Twitter posts from tech-savvy Iranian citizens generated the only news coverage from within Iran about the protests. Many non-profits and charities are using social networks to promote their causes online and even to raise money. Similarly, recent political candidates have used social networking sites to build their base of support, rally votes, and ask for campaign contributions. Agency generated YouTube videos have also been used to inform consumers about available services.

According to a recent study by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, young people are much more likely to use online social networks than adults. While well over 50% of younger adults ages 18-34 have at least one profile on a social networking site, well under 50% of those ages 35-65+ have such a profile. Specifically, Pew found that only 30% of adults ages 35-44, 19% of adults ages 45-54, 10% of adults ages 55-64, and 7% of adults ages 65+ had a profile on a social networking site.² However, additional data suggest that older adults are quickly catching up with the social networking phenomenon. According to Facebook, their fastest growing demographic of users is women aged 55 and older.

Social networking stakeholders in the aging network include a range of federal agencies, state governments, area agencies on aging (AAAs), local providers and consumers. A recent search of federal

² “Adults and Social Network Websites: Pew Internet Project Data Memo”, Pew Internet & American Life Project, January 2009. View report online: <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2009/Adults-and-Social-Network-Websites.aspx?r=1>

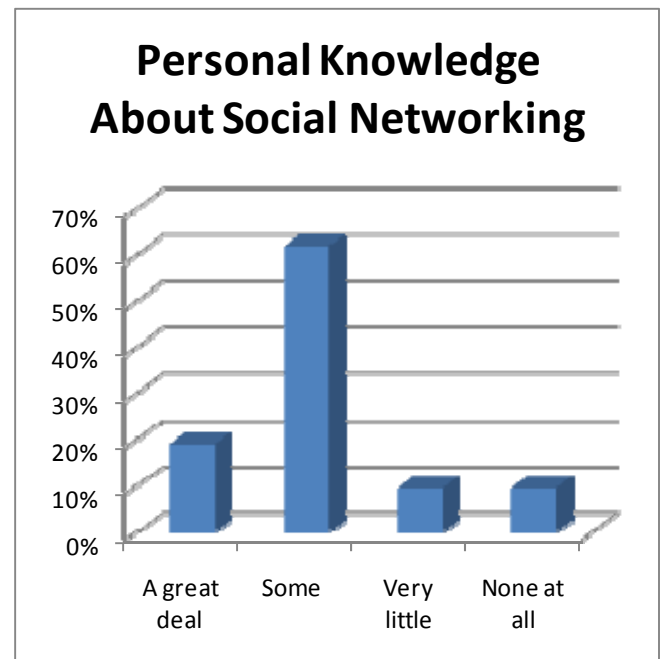
websites, including Administration on Aging, Environmental Protection Agency, the Centers for Disease Control and others, show some use of social networking applications. States report a high level of knowledge of social networking in a recent NASUA survey. During the current economic downturn, state and local planners of aging services now consider whether social networking is a viable option to reach out to a larger audience accomplishing more work with less staff. Area agencies on aging attending a major regional training conference of southeastern states held this fall attended a training session in large number and demonstrated high recognition, interest and some use of the applications.³

Social networks give individuals and agencies a new forum to tell others about themselves and to communicate in professional issue groups. Expansion of social networking use in the aging network will include further examination of the potential impact and the key challenges that impede its use. Policies, value, cost, purpose (social versus professional use); professional staff time management (personal versus professional use); inclusiveness (isolation versus enhancement of social engagement) and safety (privacy and security of identity as well as confidentiality of information), access (inclusiveness of diverse populations) are all compelling topics that warrant further exploration.

Opportunities for aging network growth, expansion and impact will also require additional examination to determine the role that social networking will play in the future. Marketing, professional staff development, strategic planning, populating databases, sharing promising practices and advocacy are just a few of the suggested areas that social networking can have its greatest impact in the aging network.

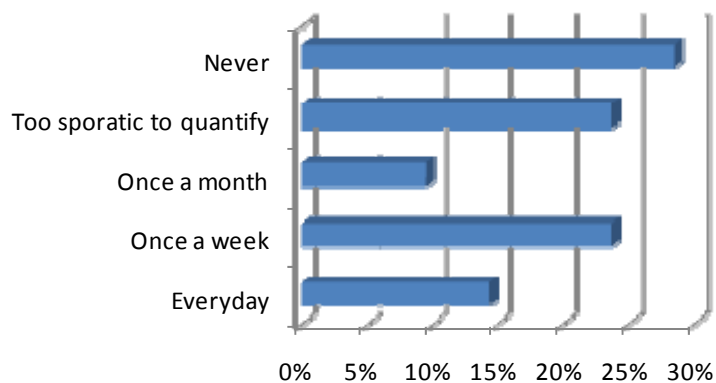
Key Findings of the NASUA Survey

In August 2009, NASUA surveyed state information and referral liaisons about their level of knowledge, interest and possible future use of social networking as a tool for professional internal use and as a way to communicate with the public. Forty-two responses representing 30 states were received.



³ "Facebook, Twitter and Blog: The Role of the I&R and ADRC in Social Networking," presentation at the 19th National Aging and Disability I&R Symposium, May 31, 2009.

Professional Use/Contact with Social Networking Applications

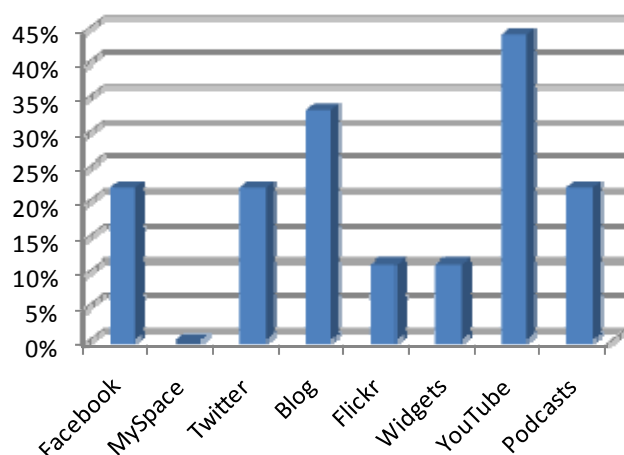


Knowledge about social networking is more prevalent than not among I&R liaisons. Over 60% of respondents felt they had at least “some knowledge” about social networking while less than 10% believed they had no knowledge at all on the topic. There is a clear divide in the frequency of professional use of social networking applications. When asked to describe their professional use or contact with social networking applications such as YouTube, blogs, widgets, etc. it became clear that the majority of respondents (52.4%) rarely, if ever, used social networking in a

professional capacity. Of those who did use social networking in a professional capacity, fewer than 15% had daily contact with such applications, while the majority (33.3%) sighted having less frequent contact (once a week or once a month).

Social networking is a phenomenon that has exploded in the past decade among younger internet users, but interest among those 35 years of age and older has been slower to develop. This may be due to an interest in more knowledge about the new technology, its applications and potential uses among the older population. Not surprisingly, social networking training is an interest among most of the survey respondents. Almost three-quarters (73.8%) of I&R liaisons said they would be interested in such training. Just over 7% said they would not be interested in such a training and almost 20% felt undecided about the value of such training as it pertains to their state unit on aging. Training could be designed to define applications, explore potential uses and share best practices of existing aging network engagement.

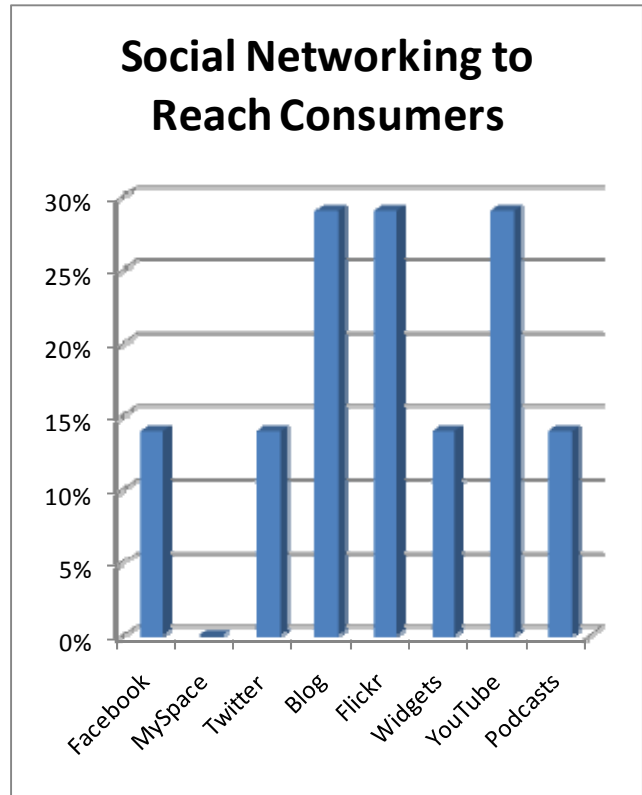
Social Networking within the Aging Network



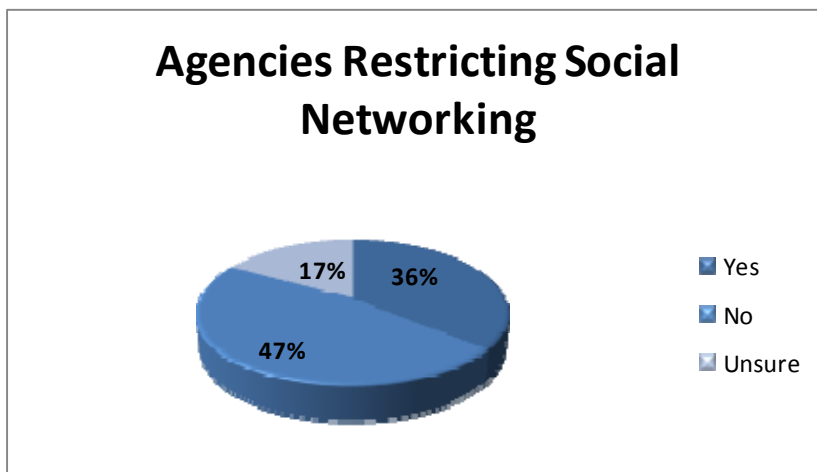
A range of information sharing benefits can be attributed to the use of social networking for aging network professionals and the consumers they serve. Most respondents agreed (76.2%) that social networking could benefit the aging network in several ways; sharing information with consumers and professionals, marketing to new consumer audiences, and promoting visibility of services and supports. One respondent felt that social networking would be a good way to promote advocacy efforts. Another felt that consumers, families, and provider networks would benefit from a more active aging social networking effort.

Few of the state I&R liaisons report using social networking applications to communicate with other professionals in the aging network. However, those using social networks reported using a wide variety of applications, suggesting they are still in the early stages of use with the applications. A number of respondents also mentioned using wiki sites for group projects across the aging network and LinkedIn to connect with local members of the aging network. One state specified that their agency used internal blogs to post information of concern to employees, while another state said it used a blog in their partnership work with another agency.

Even fewer of the state I&R liaisons reported using social networking applications to communicate with consumers directly about aging issues. With the current economic downturn, a real concern is whether additional promotion can be effectively balanced with potential service cuts. One state reported, however, that they plan to place an agency video on YouTube and offer caregiver support podcasts on their website.

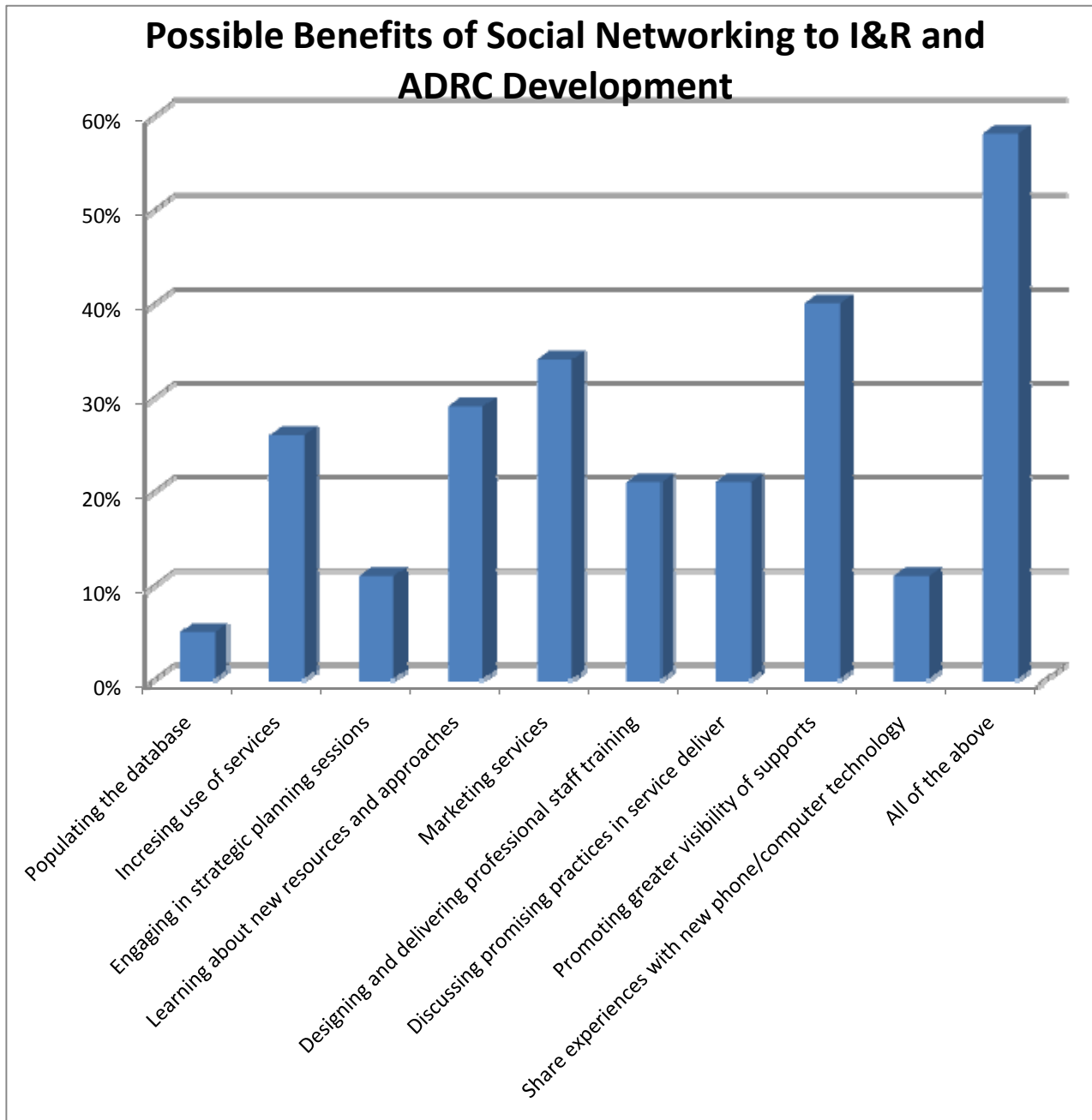


One clear reason for the lack of use of social networking applications in a professional capacity at state units on aging is agency policies governing/hindering the use of such technology. Thirty-six percent of respondents reported restricting access to online social networking sites by limiting access time or blocking access all together. Some states had specific concerns related to the use of social networking including that consumers might share personal or confidential information, not realizing that they had no expectation of privacy on the site. Other respondents mentioned a concern that the use of these sites may leave agency servers vulnerable to system attacks by hackers.



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While concerns about the use of social networking sites do exist among I&R liaisons, social networking has the potential to benefit I&R as well as Aging and Disability Resource Center (ADRC) functions of state units on aging (SUAs). Specifically, respondents felt social networking could be used to promote greater visibility of services and as a tool to teach about new resources and approaches. When asked about other programs that could benefit from social networking applications members cited the following: State Health Insurance Assistance Program (SHIP), caregiver support, Senior Medicare Patrols for fraud alerts and scam information, advocacy, exchanging information and receiving technical assistance among SUAs and AAAs, evidence-based health promotion, legal services programs, and the Ombudsman.



Conclusion

The extent to which the aging network is engaged in this new and dynamic phenomenon has yet to be studied. This brief is a snapshot of state unit on aging knowledge and interest in the social networking phenomenon. Further research and exploration should engage other stakeholders in the aging network – federal agencies, area agencies on aging, local providers and the full complement of consumer groups, including older adults, caregivers, persons with disabilities, veterans, minorities and ethnic groups. Particular applications have captured the interest of consumers over others.

There is more to learn about the challenges and opportunities of social networking use. Policy and professional staff development, advocacy and increasing visibility are topics compelling states to take a closer look at a range of social networking applications. In addition, the implications of increased use by federal agencies should be explored, including whether there will be a systemic impact on state policies and local technology use policies.

While the current economic downturn has posed considerable challenges to aging network maintenance of administration functions and community services, the question whether social networking adds value to the economic balancing equation is a topic many want to discuss. Gaining the interest of potential funders through social networking is one possible way to expand solutions to the economic downturn.

States express high interest in training and advancing their knowledge of social networking. Additional surveys and studies may uncover specific training needs and opportunities for education. As the use of social networking expands, there will be increasing opportunities to understand the potential for engaging consumers and meeting the growing need for world class conversations with people of all ages, abilities and incomes about the services provided by the aging network.

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Appendices

Appendix A- Explanations of Social Networking Tools

simple download or streamed webcasts: special client software applications known as *podcatchers* (like Zune, iTunes, and Winamp) are used to automatically identify and download new files in the series when they are released by accessing a centrally-maintained web feed that lists all files associated with the series. New files can thus be downloaded automatically by the podcatcher and stored locally on the user's computer or other device for offline use, giving simpler access to episodic content. An RSS feed icon (as seen above), commonly used to indicate the Web feed for a podcast.



Twitter is a free social networking and micro-blogging (short blog posts) service that enables its users to send and read messages known as *tweets*. Tweets are text-based posts of up to 140 characters displayed on the author's profile page and delivered to the author's subscribers who are known as *followers*. Senders can restrict delivery to those in their circle of friends or, by default, allow open access. Users can send and receive tweets via the Twitter website, Short Message Service (SMS) or external applications. While the service itself costs nothing to use, accessing it through SMS may incur phone service provider fees.

A web **widget** is a mini-web application one can put in a web page, blog or social profile that can quickly and easily provide visitors with user specific information, extra functionality, or games. Widgets are available in a ready-to-use formats and are visually attractive and customizable by the user. It takes the form of pictures, graphs, statistics, summary, or just numbers. One can copy the snippet of HTML code available from the website hosting the widget and embed that code into a webpage as a link to the information held via the widget.



A **wiki** is a website that allows the creation and editing of any number of interlinked Web pages, using a simplified markup language or a WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) text editor, within the browser. Wikis are typically powered by wiki software and are often used to create collaborative websites, to power community websites, for personal note taking, in corporate intranets, and in knowledge management systems. Most wikis serve a specific purpose, and off topic material is promptly removed by the user community.



YouTube is a video sharing website on which users can upload and share videos. It uses Adobe Flash Video technology to display a wide variety of user-generated video content, including movie clips, TV clips, and music videos, as well as amateur content such as video blogging and short original videos. Most of the content on YouTube has been uploaded by individuals, although media corporations including CBS, the BBC, UMG and other organizations offer some of their material via the site, as part of the YouTube partnership program. Unregistered users can watch the videos, while registered users are permitted to upload an unlimited number of videos. Videos that are considered to contain potentially offensive content are available only to registered users over the age of 18.