



# Intergenerational contacts online: An exploratory study of cross-generational Facebook “friendships”



Bernadette Kneidinger\*

University of Bamberg, Feldkirchenstrasse 21, 96052 Bamberg, Germany

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 20 September 2013

Received in revised form 29 January 2014

Accepted 7 March 2014

### Keywords:

Intergenerational relationships  
Computer-mediated communication  
Social networking sites  
Online survey

## ABSTRACT

Since the older generations discover social networking sites (SNSs) as a useful communication and information tool, SNSs can become a new platform for interactions between members of different generations. This paper summarizes the contradictory status of research about the importance of computer-mediated communication for intergenerational relations and shows, with findings of an online survey ( $N=987$ ), how Facebook is used for intergenerational communication. This exploratory study reveals some quite different perceptions about the effects of SNS on intergenerational relationship quality that should be a starting point for further studies about intergenerational contacts in SNS.

© 2014 Swiss Association of Communication and Media Research. Published by Elsevier GmbH. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

The Internet has already lost its image as “youth media” and is seen more and more as an integral part of everyday life even from the older generations. The advertising industry summarizes the growing number of older Internet users under the catchphrase “silver surfers.” Not for nothing, it is an often cited fact that 50-year-olds or older constitute the largest group of “new” Internet users (cf. Van Eimeren & Frees, 2012, p. 362). In 2012, already 77% of the 50- to 59-year-old Germans are online (2011: 69%), 63% are 60- to 69-year-olds (2011: 54%), and every fifth are 70-year-olds or older (2011: 18%). These statistics indicate quite clearly that Internet usage is important independently from age and that the computer competency of older people is rising similarly as the computer equipment in the households is growing (cf. Egger & Van Eimeren, 2008). Internet is not only used as an information source but more and more as a communication channel and platform for building and maintaining social relationships. Especially, social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook highlight the social component of Internet usage. These networks are primarily designed to offer users a platform where they can stay in contact with friends, family members, and other acquaintances at least via Internet connection (Barker, 2009; Donath & Boyd, 2004; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2006; Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Ridings & Gefen, 2004). The users of Facebook

are rapidly growing. In the summer of 2013, Facebook has more than 1.1 billion users worldwide, indicative of a strong need for computer-mediated communication and maintaining contacts in the modern network society where sometimes big geographic distances can separate even strongly linked people. Facebook started as a social network site for university students, and therefore, it was not surprising that the early users of the network were young and well-educated people. But this user structure has changed rapidly over the last few years. Today Facebook is used by nearly all age groups, and the group of 50+ people represents the user group with the highest growing rates. User statistics indicate that approximately 15–16% of Facebook users in Germany and Austria are older than 45 years (Hutter, 2012). The question that appears in a generational social-scientific perspective is “In what way such virtual social networks that are already used will be used in the future for intergenerational interactions?”

According to the statistical user numbers, a potential for intergenerational contacts in SNSs can be assumed (Franz, 2010, p. 405; Van Eimeren & Frees, 2011). But so far, it is still uncertain if the technological opportunities for computer-mediated intergenerational contacts are already used from younger and older Facebook users. Until now, majority of studies about SNS still focus on the younger or middle-aged users. A huge number of these studies analyze very special user groups, such as university students (cf. Aquisti & Gross, 2006; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2006). During those times where the number of users older than 50 years is growing, the focus on younger user groups seems to be considered too narrowly. A particular research gap can be seen in a combined analysis of SNS usage

\* Tel.: +49 951 863 2085.

E-mail address: [bernadette.kneidinger@uni-bamberg.de](mailto:bernadette.kneidinger@uni-bamberg.de)

of younger and older people. Therefore, this paper should offer a first insight in the usage and experiences of different age groups with computer-mediated intergenerational contacts in an SNS. To answer this question, younger and older Facebook users are asked in an online survey about their communication habits and how they use the SNS to maintain interactions with family members of different generations. Before the findings are presented, some theoretical considerations about intergenerational contacts in a society that experiences some very profound changing processes should be done. In addition, a short overview of already done research on the significance of computer-mediated communication for intergenerational contacts should be given.

## 2. Changing society: changing intergenerational communication?

Intergenerational relationships are a quite traditional and intensely studied sociological research field. Nevertheless, in the research literature, a division into two main focuses can be observed. On the one hand, several studies that focus exclusively on generations in the family context exist. On the other hand, there are studies that address a much more abstract level of intergenerational contacts, namely, a general analysis of relationships between the young and the old in a society. This study aimed to combine these two main research directions by observing individual relations to people from various age groups but do not constrain these contacts on family members, but all various forms of intergenerational contacts inside and outside family relations should be observed. The contacts from parents and children and the other way around are asked as well as relationships of older and younger person in work, leisure, or educational context and in the neighborhood. Thereby, Höpflingers (1999, p. 15) criticizes the frequently separated analysis of familial generation contacts, and historical–social generation problems should be kept in mind by the conception of this study.

This extension of the focus over the pure inner familial relationships should not raise the question of the significance of family as the “root” of intergenerational relations (Trommsdorff, 1993, p. 266). An analysis of generations always has to consider social transformations that influence and change family models. In the last centuries, a continuous process of change in family structures (Lange, 1994) could be observed, which reaches from the demographic change on a general level and postponed times of the birth of the first child to changed types of relationships such as the “patchwork family” that do not have much in common with traditional parent–child constellations. Even increased needs of mobility in the professional context that can cause increased geographic distance between family members (cf. Davis, Vetere, Francis, Gibbs, & Howard, 2008, p. 193), which is called “multilocal multigenerational family” (Bertram, 1995; Lauterbach, 1998), have to be discussed. The latter is the case especially for families with high educational and socioeconomic status (Fors & Lennartsson, 2008; Lauterbach, 1995, p. 127), and it has to be expected that this factor will become even more important with increasing globalization tendencies. Indeed, studies show that the distances between parents and their grown-up children are quite low in Europe. Nearly 50% of all parents in middle European countries (Germany, France, Austria, and Switzerland) have at least one child that lives 25 km away (Hank, 2008, p. 5). Nevertheless, it has to be highlighted that even a comparatively low distance causes less everyday and random encounters between the generations than living together in one shared place. All these changes can cause decreasing direct contacts and exchange of experiences between the generations even in the family context. (cf. McCarthy & Thomas, 2004). But it appears important to bring to mind that geographic distance can never be equated with emotional distance between the generations. Rather,

a new “intimacy over distance” (Rosenmayer & Köckeis, 1965) can be observed. Nevertheless, frequent contacts between the generations are provably important for the social togetherness by removing negative age images with intergenerational contacts (cf. Kaplan, Wagner, & Larson, 2001) and increasing the mutual understanding between the generations (Hernandez & Gonzalez, 2008, p. 293) and the pro-social behavior of the younger generations in general (Lambert, Dellmann-Jenkins, & Fruit, 1990).

## 3. Internet and generations

At least since the millennium, the potentials of Internet and the interconnection of households via computer networks for the everyday lives of older people are discovered (cf. Kanayama, 2003). Under the term “smart homes,” new living concepts for elderly are developed that use computer and Internet technologies to create smart houses and apartments where even elderly with some health issues can live an autonomous life in their own homes because the network techniques connect them 24 h a day with important relatives and institutions that can take care of them if something happens (Bowes & McColgin, 2005; Stefanov, Bien, & Bang, 2004). Besides these advantages of interconnected homes in health and security issues, the Internet also offers the elderly a new multimedia communication channel. Especially for older people who are not so mobile anymore because of health issues, computer-mediated communication represents an important channel to interact with family and other relatives who live outside the own home (cf. Bonfadelli, 2009, p. 163f). These new interaction forms can help reducing loneliness in old age, which in consequence can reduce physical and psychological well-being (cf. Foley, Alfonso, Brown, & Fisher, 2003; Hernandez & Gonzalez, 2008; Thompson & Heller, 1990). The opportunity to maintain contacts with family members is one of the main motivators for elderly to start using new communication technologies such as computer, smartphones, and the Internet (cf. Harley, Kurniawan, Fitzpatrick, & Vetere, 2009; Hutchinson et al., 2003). Even younger generations report a high significance of computer-mediated communication for the contact maintenance with older family members (McMillan & Morrison, 2006). A study of Quadrello et al. (2005) about the significance of e-mails, telephone, and face-to-face communication reveals that the geographic distance between family members has a high influence in which communication channels are used. Those who have to overcome longer distances tend to use much more e-mails (Quadrello et al., 2005, p. 205) and other computer-mediated communication channels (Şenyürekli & Detzner, 2009) than those who live quite close to their children, grandchildren, and other relatives. Computer-mediated communication facilitates relationship maintenance over (even large) distances (Deterding, 2009, p. 129; Lange, 2009).

But even independently from the distance, many studies can prove the positive outcomes of computer-mediated communication as a supplement to more traditional communication forms (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; McMillan & Morrison, 2006; Stern & Messer, 2009). Other studies highlight more possible negative consequences of Internet usage in the family context. They see a threat for the cohesion of generations because of the Internet because the time for family activities would decline (Mesch, 2006; Turow & Nir, 2000) or that the changed usage competencies could blur the lines between traditional intergenerational role models of parents and children (Lenhart, Raine, & Lewis, 2001; Mesch, 2003; Turow & Nir, 2000). These contradictory findings can also be found in studies about SNS usage. Although it is shown that the usage of SNS can help college students or soldiers maintain contacts with their families (Madge, Meek, Wellens, & Hooley, 2009; Schachman, 2010),

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/141242>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/141242>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)