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Attitudes of active older Internet users towards online social networking

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ABSTRACT

Although information and communication technology (ICT) has a radical impact on people's everyday lives, bringing new social experiences and new ways for people to interact, there is still a large difference in social behaviour in this area between people in different age groups. Online social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn etc. are becoming increasingly important social media, but people aged 50 years and over use these resources at lower rates than those in younger age groups. In this paper we aim to investigate the factors affecting the use of online social networks by active older Internet users in Slovenia. Additionally, we address how often, and to what extent, active older Internet users are engaged in using ICT. A research study is presented that was conducted among active older Internet users, on the basis of a non-standardised research questionnaire. Collected data were analysed with basic descriptive, univariate and multivariate statistical methods, followed by induction of a decision tree using the WEKA (Waikato Environment for Knowledge Analysis) 3.7 programming environment. Research findings revealed that female participants are more familiar with the term 'online social network' and are also more frequent users, compared to male participants. Additionally, the results showed that age, gender and education seem to be the most important factors having a direct or indirect impact on the use of online social networks by active older Internet users.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, information and communication technology (ICT) has a large impact on the society in which we live and on the development and interactions of individuals, communities, corporations et al. World Wide Web (Internet) and other advanced technologies enable new forms of social interaction and have been changing ways of communicating and increasing people's inclusion in society (Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, 2005). Wellman, Quan-Haase, Boase, and Chen (2002) discussed the global impact of the Internet on social capital, as it represents added value to the already established social interaction between individuals and additional support in maintaining it. On the other hand, the Internet is transferring social capital because the Internet offers cheap and convenient ways of communication and broadens the access to communities of people with common interests. The Internet indeed enables and represents a space where people with similar interests meet, interact and, in this way, overcome physical space limitations (Baym, 1997; Sproull & Kiesler, 1991; Wellman, 2001). While ICT provides a great potential for the world economy and society and the on-going development of new technologies and applications, it has a radical impact on people's everyday lives (e.g. providing new ways of conducting business, new markets, new opportunities, new social and cultural expressions and experiences, and new ways for people to interact) (Lindroos & Pinkasov, 2003; Mogley, 2011), but there is still a large gap in basic ICT knowledge between members of different age groups (Gatto & Tak, 2008; Pope-Davis & Twing, 1991). Various research projects have been undertaken to increase e-literacy among older people; in this way, some progress has been made. According to Zickuhr and Madden (2012), 70% of the elderly use the Internet on a daily basis; however, after age 75, Internet use drops off significantly. The reason could lie in the decrease in the older person's physical, mental and cognitive abilities and in

reduced body coordination; moreover, older people may also have decreased memory function (Chou, Lai, & Liu, 2013). In addition to these functional barriers, Lee, Chen, and Hewitt (2011) identified other causes: intrapersonal problems (older people claiming that they are too old to use ICT), structural barriers (the high cost of ICT equipment) and interpersonal barriers (the lack of technical assistance). Researchers also found that older people with higher levels of education and income rated such barriers as less constraining; however, with increasing age, the barriers were rated as imposing more and more constraints.

Social media may overcome these barriers, since online social networks can be used to connect with people regardless of time or place. Generally speaking, social media relies on computer-mediated communication and is defined as tools and platforms with the goal to consume, co-create, share, and modify user-generated content (Leist, 2013). Moreover, through social media, the elderly can provide and receive support and also increase their feeling of control (Leist, 2013). Social media applications can be used to interact with other people via blogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds or social worlds (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009). However, there are few social networks specifically targeted at older people. Griniute (2014) reported that recently Facebook (Facebook, Inc, USA), Twitter (Twitter, Inc, USA), LinkedIn (LinkedIn Corporation, USA), MySpace (MySpace LLC, USA) and other social networking sites have become popular social media for seniors, and places where individuals exchange opinions and share various types of information (Zhao, Yuan, Li, Chen, & Li, 2012). Nevertheless, although online social networks are becoming increasingly important venues for ICT adoption (Niehaves & Plattfaut, 2014), people over 50 still remain in the minority among users compared with people in younger age groups (Lyons, 2009). Wellman (1999) is convinced that online social networks fill the communication gap, since members of online social networks are more receptive to the needs of other people (Homans, 1961). Leist (2013) performed a mini review of social media use in older age groups from a gerontological perspective and defined three prerequisites in social media use: sufficient functional capacity to use a computer and social media (1), the adoption of ICT skills and especially knowledge about the use of social media (2) and attitudes towards social media use (3). Functional limitations (e.g., limited cognitive and perceptual abilities, blindness) can cause resistance among older people to using ICT and social networks (Freese, Rivas, & Hargittai, 2006), especially in cases when additional assistance is not available. Interestingly, even given objectively sufficient capacity, the elderly's attitudes towards and beliefs about insufficient functional capacity can still prevent them from using online social networks (Charness & Boot, 2009). According to Xie, Watkins, Golbeck, and Huang (2012), an important prerequisite for successful social network use is web proficiency, meaning that the elderly need to adopt certain concepts like server, search, browser, engine, in order to access websites and the various available applications. Additionally, specific knowledge for using social media is necessary; for example, elderly person have to understand the terms and conditions of specific online social networks and websites where their personal information is stored. It is also important to know how older people's sensitive personal data will be handled by the company responsible for a particular online social network. It is necessary for the elderly to be properly educated about the functionalities of social networks (how to create and share social media content), since the elderly are more often involved in online discussion forums, although they rarely create content (Xie et al., 2012). Older people often have negative attitudes toward online social networks, owing to privacy data protection issues, and means of communication. The fact is that online communication differs from offline communication. In general, older people's offline communication is quite formal, except with family and friends; in contrast, online communication is mostly informal. Another negative aspect in the elderly's reception of social media involves forms of self-disclosure and self-representation. In online social networks it is common and expected to present oneself by uploading pictures and publishing personal achievements; however, this type of activity can sometimes be perceived by older people as self-centered (Lehtine, Näsänen, & Sarvas, 2009). Xie et al. (2012) also mentioned as a barrier to using social networks a lack of personal relevance; it is therefore necessary to link online social network engagement with topics of personal relevance, such as hobbies, and interests. The last negative attitude found by researchers is the lack of control, especially when first using social networks and in managing the registration process (Charness & Boot, 2009; Xie et al., 2012). Along with this, there is also uncertainty about the intentions of other users (Pfeil, Zaphiris, & Wilson, 2009).

However, according to the user numbers of some online social networks, older people still display many positive attitudes (Zickuhr & Madden, 2012); for example, the SeniorNet website community at www.seniornet.org receives well over 1 million hits per month (SeniorNet Education and Empowerment, 2015). According to previous research studies, there are at least three main motivations for older people to use social media and online social networks. When diverted by online social applications, older people are motivated by feelings of enjoyment (Nimrod, 2010). Secondly, within online social networks the elderly can interact with other people and socialize and in this way reduce feelings of loneliness. The elderly often seek information about their family members and acquaintances (Griniute, 2014). And thirdly, Pfeil, Zaphiris et al. (2009) claim that social media can be successfully used to provide and receive social support, which can help older people overcome their general fear and anxiety (Cody, Dunn, Hoppin, & Wendt, 1999). However, the elderly interact mainly through text-based communication and with people who have similar backgrounds or experiences. On the other hand, when the elderly are facing adverse critical life situations, they mainly use face-to-face communication (Lewandowski, Rosenberg, Parks, & Siegel, 2011).

Social media may contribute to older people's empowerment, while increasing their sense of control and self-efficacy (Barak, Boniel-Nissim, & Suler, 2008). Additionally, it can be used to seek and distribute relevant health information in regard to various diseases and treatments, a feature which could have a positive affect on their quality of life (Leist, 2013; Tennant, Stellefson, Chaney, Chaney, & Dodd, 2015). According to Leist (2013), not much is known about the negative consequences of social media use by older people. However, after reviewing the literature, she was able to summarize some potentially negative consequences. Because older people may be interested in searching for relevant health information, there is a potential risk if shared information is incorrect, or even harmful. This is especially dangerous in life-threatening chronic conditions and illnesses, like cancer. Such users could also be involved in harmful behaviour or could have their personal information misused by criminals (Xie et al., 2012).

A large number of studies have been undertaken on computer and Internet use by older adults (Adler, 2006; Kim, 2008; Slegers, van Boxtel, & Jolles, 2008; Selwyn, 2004; Wagner, Hassanein, & Head, 2010; White & Weatherall, 2000); however, only a few studies so far have focused on social media or online social networks (Chakraborty, Vishik, & Raghav Rao, 2013; Choudrie & Vyas, 2014; Pfeil & Zaphiris, 2009). The studies have investigated the current state of knowledge about the prerequisites for social media use by older people (Leist, 2013), user requirements for social media for older people (Chou et al., 2013), privacy-preserving actions regarding information-sharing (Chakraborty et al., 2013),