



Full length article

Senior citizens on Facebook: How do they interact and why?



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 20 August 2015

Received in revised form

18 February 2016

Accepted 19 February 2016

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Senior citizens

Facebook

Uses and gratifications

Facebook activities

Technological affordances

National survey

ABSTRACT

This study investigated why senior citizens use Facebook and how they participate in specific activities on Facebook in order to gratify their needs. An online survey of 352 senior citizens over 60 years old revealed four primary motivations for using Facebook: social bonding, social bridging, curiosity, and responding to family member requests. The analysis of the relationship between senior citizens' motivations and their participation in activities on Facebook indicates that social bonding is a major motivation for participating in most activities on Facebook. In addition, data reveal that using message-based interactivity features on Facebook (i.e., posting on other people's wall and Facebook chatting with others) leads to greater Facebook use. The findings of this study contribute to our understanding of senior citizens' Facebook use as an emerging communication tool.

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1. Introduction

Social networking sites (SNSs) have become a daily communication tool for many people. The affordances of SNS technology allow individuals to connect with each other more effectively than traditional communication tools. They provide a place where users can share their opinions through a variety of actions (e.g., posting, commenting and chatting). Communication via SNS plays an essential role in an individual gaining a more comprehensive social experience: bridging gaps and bonding with friends both on- and offline. The fact remains, however, that the dominant demographic of SNS users are young people. As a consequence, most research conducted with regards to SNS has focused on younger generations. Nevertheless, social networking sites are increasingly attracting middle-aged and elderly users. As of 2013, 27% of adults ages 65 and older used SNSs such as Facebook and LinkedIn (Smith, 2014). Despite these growing numbers, SNS research continues to neglect these users.

As global life expectancy increases, and populations grow older than ever before, the elderly—who are generally not familiar with new media—face increasing isolation from societies in which technology changes rapidly (Melenhorst, Rogers, & Caylor, 2001).

These members of society are largely retired, and as a result the breadth of their social networks would have decreased, which in turn has detrimental effects on their individual mental health, most noticeably in the form of loneliness and depression. In order to stem this trend of social isolation, Sundar, Oeldorf-Hirsch, Nussbaum, and Behr (2011) proposed utilizing SNS technology to help senior citizens maintain their collective sense of social wellbeing and thereby improve their quality of life.

However, we do not know how SNSs fulfill senior citizens' social needs. To fill this gap in the literature, this study aims to explore why and how senior citizens are using Facebook. Facebook is the most popular social networking site. Over 70% of online adults who use social media visit Facebook (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015). By using a national sample of respondents over 60 years of age, we attempt to understand the relationships between motivations for using Facebook, participation in specific activities afforded by Facebook features, and frequency of Facebook use.

2. Literature review

At present, online social networking sites have substituted or supplemented most forms of offline social networking. Given that building and maintaining social ties is beneficial to the elderly, providing them with social and informational support (Wellman & Gulia, 1999), it is crucial to explore how they perceive and use SNS as a tool of online communication from a theoretical perspective.

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2.1. Why are people on Facebook?

Since social media are a highly participatory form of new media, it is important to understand why and how people use particular types of social media. Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory has been frequently applied to the use of social media to explain why individuals use certain social media and what gratifications they receive from such use. Specifically, U&G theory assumes that users have free will to select the media of their choice, and the gratification they seek impacts their actual media use (Rubin & Perse, 1987).

Joinson (2008) employed U&G when investigating motivations for Facebook use among college students. He identified seven motivations: social connection, shared identities, photographs, content, social investigation, social network surfing, and status updates. Of these motivations, he found that content gratification (e.g., application within Facebook, playing games, discovering apps, and quizzes) significantly predicts time spent on Facebook. In other words, entertainment related content motivated younger users to stay on the site for longer durations. Papacharissi and Mendelson (2011) also discovered a set of Facebook use motivations: companionship, professional advancement, social interaction, meeting new people, habitual passing of time, relaxing entertainment, expressive information sharing, escapism, cool and new trend. In addition, they found a significant relationship between these motivations, psychological antecedents, and social capital. Their ultimate conclusion was that people who are socially active in the offline world frequently use Facebook to gain social capital—either bonding or bridging, depending on their motivations. Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2011) conducted a similar examination of the relationship between social behaviors on Facebook (i.e., connection strategies) and social capital. Their survey findings suggested that social information seeking significantly increases social capital. Indeed, motivations related to the formation of social connections are a key component of SNS usage.

Previous literature suggests different SNS usage depending on age demographics, and provides important implications as to how to increase theoretical knowledge about SNS designs targeted to specific populations (e.g., Pfeil, Arjan, & Zaphiris, 2009). For example, Madden (2010) found that senior citizens use SNS because they want to reconnect with others in their age group, gain social support from online friends, and bridge generational gaps. Another study suggested that their favorite reason to use Facebook is photo sharing (Righi, Sayago, & Blat, 2012). And recently, in-depth interviews with 46 senior citizens revealed six motivations for Facebook use: keeping in touch, sharing photos, social surveillance, responding to family member requests, convenient communication and curiosity (Jung, Walden, Johnson, & Sundar, 2013). While these initial efforts serve to identify specific motivations, they have not fully investigated senior citizens' perception and usage patterns on SNSs like Facebook. To fill this gap in the existing literature, the current study seeks to identify senior citizens' motivations for using Facebook.

Research Question 1. What are the primary motivations behind senior citizens' use of Facebook?

2.2. Technological affordances of social networking sites

Social networking sites enable people to form new, and maintain existing, relationships as well as generally take part in a wide network of social connections. As technological tools, SNSs provide their users with various features, or affordances, for effective communication. Each SNS has its own technological affordances that support users' abilities to connect with each other. For

example, Junco (2012) lists Facebook's primary user-interaction features as status updating, sharing links, private messaging, commenting, chatting, and media sharing. And, Pempek, Yermolayeva, and Calvert (2009) describe the activities made possible by these SNS features: communicating with friends, looking at or posting photos, finding out about or planning events, sending and receiving messages, posting to or reading on walls, getting to know people better, finding contact and profile information.

Burke, Kraut, and Marlow (2011) classify these functions into three types of social activities: directed communication with individual friends, passive consumption of social news, and broadcasting. They then demonstrate that these different social affordances are all influenced by the individual differences of their users, though they all ultimately link to positive psychological (e.g., social connectedness) and health outcomes (e.g., wellbeing). In addition, as the most recent study by Yang and Brown (2013) has indicated, there are four categories of activities available on Facebook: electronic interactions with friends, voyeuristic actions (i.e., lurking or stalking), self-presentation and gaming. A survey of college students revealed that these patterns of Facebook activity directly influence social connectivity. Among all Facebook activities, electronic interactions (e.g., posting on other people's walls, chatting with someone, etc.) were directly linked to increased social adjustment. Thus, SNSs appear to provide users with several specific technological features for effective social interaction.

Multimedia elements (i.e., graphic, audio, video, flash) have long been used as informational and emotional content on websites to capture users' attention (Street & Manning, 1997). Facebook also offers a variety of modalities for interactions. Users can post information or stories on their walls and also post comments on friends' walls. The text posted on walls is usually short. In addition, other modalities such as photo and video can be used. Facebook allows users to create albums to upload their photos as well. They can also post videos from external links or their own uploads. Audiovisual modalities could lead to higher credibility of posts because they tend to trigger the "realism heuristic", i.e., seeing is believing (Sundar, 2008). Furthermore, the use of multimodality makes the medium appear richer, enhancing users' engagement with its content (Ramirez & Burgoon, 2004).

SNSs further allow users to be both content receivers and providers. People not only have access to other users' opinions or thoughts through posts on SNSs, they can also simultaneously generate their own online content and replies, thereby boosting their engagement with the site. The interactivity features in SNS allow users to supplement or alter their perceptions and attitudes toward online content by sharing feedback with other users. Prior studies have explored how individuals process information about others' comments in combination with other online content. Following Chaiken and Eagly's (1976) argument that the persuasion process differs depending on the nature of the communication message, information processing about others' comments can be assumed to be different from other online message content. In a similar vein, Lee and Jang (2010) found that others' comments affected almost all readers' opinions, but those who undergo less cognitive information processing (and thus less analytical thinking) are most strongly affected. That is, comments are more likely to trigger heuristic processing than online message content, and therefore the number of comments can serve as a heuristic about the perceived amount of interaction with others (Koroleva, Stimac, Krasnova, & Kunze, 2011). More specifically, in the context of SNS, Greene, Choudhry, Kilabuk, & Shrank (2010) found that communication via Facebook's commenting function increases perceptions of interpersonal support. Users who received more comments from Facebook friends perceive more emotional and informational

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