

Social Media use by the Elderly: Friend or foe

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Abstract: Worldwide, populations are aging, especially in the developed world. In parallel with this increase in the elderly population groups, there has been an increase in the use of social media. However, few studies have explored the use of social media for social engagement by the elderly and the motivations behind such use. The generally accepted age threshold of being elderly is 65 years. Often this coincides with retirement age as well as social pension age. Although this is not always the situation, often the elderly age state is accompanied by changes in economic and social situations. Often transitioning to being elderly presents challenges for those experiencing it, and the question arises as to the extent to which the use of social media can facilitate or hinder that transition. Using a social exchange theoretical lens, as well as that of self-determination theory and privacy calculus, this research was exploratory and qualitative. In-depth personal interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 20 Eurocentric English-speaking respondents who were over 65 years of age. Some were retired, some were partially employed, some had their own businesses, and some were employed full-time. The gender split was 50:50. The purpose was to explore the use of social media by the elderly and the motivation behind it. In addition, observation of the social media use of the respondents lent further insights into the interpretation of the results. The overwhelming use of social media by the elderly was for social engagement, and the general tenor of posts and responses was one of great positivity. That positive approach was largely driven by self-interest and the implicit understanding that if one posted positive messages or responded positively, there would be a resultant feeling of goodwill and wellbeing in the recipient, and that those well-meant messages would be reciprocated, leading to a feeling of wellbeing in oneself. Although elements of competition, providing purpose to one's life, and honouring privacy concerns of others were additional motivators, the main motivation was for happy social engagement and feelings of personal wellbeing.

Keywords: Elderly, Social media use by the elderly, Self-determination theory, Social exchange theory, Privacy calculus

1. Introduction

Worldwide, populations are aging, especially in the developed world (United Nations, 2023). In parallel with this increase in the elderly population groups, there has been an increase in the use of social media, in general, and amongst those older than 65, in particular (Statista, 2023). In the US, for instance, some 45% of the elderly use social media (Faverio, 2022). However, few studies have explored the use of social media by the elderly and the motivations behind such use.

The generally accepted age of being elderly is 65 years. The age of 65 has often been taken as the mark of 'later life' (Uhlenburg, 2009). Often this coincides with retirement age as well as social pension age (United Nations, 2023). Often the elderly state is accompanied by changes in economic, financial and social situations. Many of the "friends" that one had in the work environment seem to vanish. By then most children have left the home – or even the country; spouses may die; and physical mobility may become reduced. Thus, transitioning to being elderly can present challenges, and the question arises as to how the use of social media can facilitate or hinder that transition.

2. Literature Review

The world's population is ageing. The generally accepted age of being elderly is 65 (United Nations, 2023). Often this coincides with retirement age as well as social pension age. Income is often reduced and unless there is a substantial state support for pensioners and/or the latter have saved judiciously for their retirement, financial burdens can weigh strongly on the individuals (United Nations, 2023). The social environment of the retired person is often severely disrupted, with a reduction from the status accorded the individual. Plus, the readymade social environment of the workplace disappears. Renegotiation of relationships with spouses is often required. Furthermore, becoming elderly often signals reduction in physical ability and mobility. The upshot is that many feel that while retirement signals more time on one's hand to enjoy the things they love doing, the economic and physical constraints frequently limit such opportunities. Added to that, many families are distributed across the world so chances of spending more time with children and grandchildren are limited. Given all that, feelings of loneliness and social isolation can result and together with reduced physical ability, this can lead to depression and a reduction in mental and physical wellbeing. In fact, loneliness has been earmarked as the "hidden killer of older adults" (Coughlan, 2011).

On a more positive note, social media and ICT have enabled many elderly to overcome the challenges of aging and they lead motivated, fulfilling and happy lives (Sohu, 2020; Wilson, 2018)). The feelings of social isolation

and loneliness are reduced (Colten et al, 2013); depression is reduced (Jean et al, 2020) and well-being is enhanced (Szabo et al, 2019). Common indicators of a healthier mental state are happiness, increased self-esteem and the loss of loneliness (Ryan and Deci, 2001). Older adults use social media for two main reasons: for socio-emotional use (Coelho and Duarte, 2016) and for informational use (Quinn, 2018).

Initially social media had been used for social reasons. Boyd and Ellison (2007) described social media as web-based services that enabled users to (1) develop a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) specify a list of other users with whom they are connected, and (3) view and communicate with their list of connections and those made by others within the system. Essentially, individuals manage their self-identity and their relationships on social media. The display of one's friends is what initially differentiated social media from other online media (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). Most people used social media to socialize generally, to keep in contact with existing friends, and to meet new friends (Brandtzaeg and Heim, 2009). However, other opportunities for the use of social media were soon spotted and exploited by all forms of organizations and businesses, social and political causes, governments, and news and entertainment agencies.

There has been considerable research on the use of technology by the elderly and also their informational use. However, there have been a limited number of studies on how the elderly specifically use their social media to enhance their emotional wellbeing, and facilitate the challenges of overcoming the transition of to the elderly state. This research aims to address this gap in knowledge by exploring the use of social media by the elderly.

3. Theoretical Background

This study used a social exchange theoretical lens, as well as that of the privacy calculus theory, and self-determination theory.

The social exchange theory (SET) was introduced by the sociologist, Homans (1958), as a way of explaining the subjective cost-benefit analysis of alternatives in the voluntary exchange for mutual benefit of activities and resources between two individuals. The parties expect to develop and maintain a rewarding relationship. Cropanzano et al (2017) defined the SET as "(i) an initiation by an actor toward the target, (ii) an attitudinal or behavioral response from the target in reciprocity, and (iii) the resulting relationship". The core assumptions are that individuals seek rewards and avoid punishment; and that they seek maximum profit with minimal effort. The SET is a very widely accepted and applied theory in workplace behaviour (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). It also has wide applications in any interpersonal relationships, particularly family and friends.

Aligned with the SET, the privacy calculus theory suggests that an individual's intention to disclose private information is based on a calculation of potentially conflicting factors in light of possible outcomes. It could be construed as a type of risk-benefit analysis (Stone and Stone, 1990). It has been used to examine people's online behaviours, particularly in terms of privacy and security risks.

Yet a further theoretical lens which was useful in this study was self-determination theory. Amongst others, self-determination theory emphasises three basic psychological needs – the need for competence, for relatedness and for autonomy (Ryan and Deci, 2002). Competence refers to the need to feel effective; relatedness refers to the need to feel connected to others and to belong; and autonomy refers to an individual's ability to act according to their own will.

4. Method

The purpose of the study was to explore the use of social media by the elderly and the motivation behind the different uses. This research was exploratory and qualitative, and followed an interpretivist paradigm. In-depth personal interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 20 Eurocentric English-speaking respondents who were over 65 years of age. They were based in different countries around the world, e.g. the UK, the US, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia. Some were retired, some were partially employed, some had their own businesses, and some were employed full-time. The gender split was 50:50. Ages ranged from 65-88.

In addition, observation of the social media use of the respondents lent further insights into the interpretation of the results. Frequency of postings, extent of friendship circles, number of social media subscribed to; frequency of responses was also noted.

It should be noted that only postings related to individual, private friendships and relationships were covered in this research. Formal communities of practice, and special interest groups, plus business-related groups such as brand communities were excluded.

5. Findings

Very definite categories of social media users emerged from the study. There were the regular posters, many of whom posted something at least once every day and/or at specific times each day such as the beginning of the day. There were the regular respondents who could be counted on to respond to most of the regular posters' posts. Then there were the sporadic posters, who seemed to be selective in what they posted, both in terms of topic and regularity. As with the posters, there were also the sporadic respondents, who did not necessarily respond to each post of a certain poster, or in fact, to the same posters. There were also the passers-on – those who did not actually write anything or create any part of the message but merely passed on something that might appeal to others, such as religious/inspirational messages, recipes, jokes, handy craft hints. Finally, there were the lurkers who observed others' posts avidly but did not care to respond via social media and did so via e-mail instead.

There was no apparent split in number of posts between people living on their own, such as widows, and those living with others, as in an intergenerational family or a care facility. However, those living alone tended to post more regularly, as opposed to spurts of postings.

A brief summary of the findings appears in Table 1 below.

5.1 Target Audience

The general response regarding the target audience of their postings was “anyone who knows/knew me and would be interested in being my friend”. This was more broadly expanded upon as catching up and/or communicating.

5.2 Content of Posts

A post consisted predominantly of photo's, videos and other images such as cartoons, media headlines. Invariably these were accompanied by short text comments. Depending on the social media used, so the type of posting content (text or illustration) was prescribed - also the length of the posting.

Although some topic areas received more or less equal attention from males and females in terms of numbers of posts, by and large there was a clear division of topics covered by males and by females.

Both males and females posted a considerable amount of content about their children and grandchildren. However, males tended to post more family group pictures and action shots/videos of their grandchildren performing well at some sport or leisure-time activity. Females tended to post more pictures/videos and information about significant events: birthday celebrations, engagement parties, weddings, births, graduations, prize-givings at schools, special performances/achievements in sport or the performing arts. Females also focused more on posts of their young grandchildren doing “cute” things such as learning to walk/skate, than males.

Table 1: Summary of main findings

Contents of postings		
What is posted		Photos, videos, images, short text
Topics of posts	Male & female	Children & grandchildren; birthday wishes; gardening
	Male	Family groups and action shots; jokes; “male” hobbies and products
	Female	Significant family events, “cute” grandchildren; pets; reunions; “female” hobbies
Posting behaviour – message initiation		
Medium		Facebook
Frequency		Daily
When		First thing in the morning
Why		Achievement; regular regime; would be missed if they broke the pattern of activity; forced productivity; earliness established more opportunities for engagement
Reasons for posting		
Reasons		Keep in touch; share enjoyable information /content; happy experience; inspirational and uplifting; relatively cheap; immediate contact; can see movement and context

Why		Expected of them by their friends; obligation to make others feel loved; convenience
Responses to postings		
What is responded		Brief - single words, short phrases and sentences, emoji's
Topics	Male & female	Always positive
	Male	Achievement oriented
	Female	Appearance oriented
Why		Matter of courtesy; short responses the norm; positive responses expected; positive reciprocity; immediate gratification and positive reinforcement

An interesting aspect of the “family” topic, was the awareness amongst a number of female respondents that they should be cautious about what they posted about their grandchildren, in particular. They were wary of online malpractices, such as stalking and sexploitation, and were conscious of maintaining the privacy of their offspring. Cheryl reported that her daughters and daughter-in-law “freaked” whenever she posted pictures of her grandchildren and she’d been severely reprimanded for doing so. Sandra recounted the many times she’d been lectured to by her children on the need for maintaining the privacy of her young and the consequences of not doing so. This resulted in an inner conflict among many posters because they loved to share the delights of, and pride in, their families but wanted to protect them from harm. On the other hand, some respondents seemed unaware of the potential dangers of posting family pictures and did so with abandon, joy and pride.

Along the lines of family censure, teenage granddaughters, in particular, were reported to be very sensitive about anything that was communicated about them online. Any possible post had to be “cleared” with the relevant grandchild – “it’s not even enough for my son or daughter to grant permission” (Felicity) because they get censored as well.

Linked to families, females tended to post many more pictures/videos, in particular, about their pets – and these tended to be smaller, more lapdog type dogs. A number of females, in particular but not exclusively, posted pictures of reunions of school or university friends – and these groups often developed into well-supported online friendship circles. Linked to past contexts, various elderly people had relocated to another country during their lives, and such people often tended to post text or photo’s of “the home country”, sometimes lamenting the current state of such a country.

Birthday wishes and congratulations of other celebrations featured strongly amongst both males and females. The fact that automatic reminders on some social media helped users to “remember” was an added advantage of social media use. Religious messages or inspirational messages were often posted by females; and although both males and females posted jokes, men tended to do so more than females.

Recent trips also featured strongly, with females tending to focus on this topic much more. Philippa gloried in being referred to as the “Gallopig Granny” and even adopted that name for herself. Often these “trip” postings included photo’s of social events enjoyed with fellow travellers.

Hobbies, and achievements in this regard, were a very popular topic of postings. Males tended to focus on photography; woodworking; home construction; car/motorbike restoration; fishing. These were usually pursuits where the “product” could be illustrated, rather than actions pursuits such as cycling, walking, etc. Females tended to focus on postings of their arts and crafts - quilting, knitting, crocheting, and general arts and crafts. Photo’s of gardens also featured strongly in females’ postings.

Interestingly, there were a number of topics that respondents acknowledged they did not post about – business activities/promotion (these were relegated to other business-oriented social media); political propaganda or commentary (although there might be some lampooning of characters like Donald Trump); personal illness and operations (apart from retrospective comments on “full” recovery); and cosmetic surgery they had had done or hair colouring.

5.3 Posting Behaviour (Message Initiation)

By far the preferred social medium was Facebook. This was because it was the “original” social medium, and the social medium that the elderly had become familiar with. It was also seen to serve their purposes and requirements. However, some respondents also used Instagram and WhatsApp and one or two used Tiktok.

Such uses were because grandchildren preferred them, and in the Tiktok instance, use was more as a lurker than a poster.

Many respondents preferred to post on a daily basis and posting on social media was one of the first things they did in the day. They did this for a number of reasons: it was a positive achievement, something they could tick off a list easily; it was relatively quick and easy to accomplish; it gave them a regular regime to follow – a purpose to getting up in the morning; it established a pattern of activity where they would be missed if they skipped a day or two; it forced productivity, especially amongst those inclined to procrastination or slothfulness; and starting early in the day provided more opportunity for responses from others and social engagement in that day.

5.4 Reasons for Posting

The main reason reported for posting was in order to keep in touch, and then to share activities with a wide group of friends and family, as well as introduce friends to one another. The overarching motivation was to share enjoyable content, either news of beloved and important individuals (whom the recipients might well know); happy experiences; or inspirational, encouraging and uplifting messages.

Furthermore, in comparison with the rising postage costs it was a relatively cheap way in which to keep in touch. Plus, the real-time connectivity of certain social media enables immediate contact and communication with friends and family, which can be very gratifying without any delayed gratification. One can also see movement and the respondent's surroundings/context.

Some respondents noted it was "expected" of them by their "friends". It was seen as an obligation to make others feel loved and included. It became almost addictive, something that had to be done. In fact, Sylvia's children and grandchildren complained that, when travelling in Europe, irrespective of how lovely the surroundings were, Sylvia's "main purpose in life" was to find a place with wi-fi so that she could follow her social media activities.

Lastly, birthday reminders/automatic greetings were also convenient ways to ensure that others felt loved and special on their significant days. They were also a convenient alternative to having to go to the shop, buy a card, write a message and post the card. Not only did the convenience benefit mobile respondents but particularly those whose mobility was impaired.

One negative aspect of social media use by the elderly was the overarching concern about privacy/security breaches – particularly of the grandchildren and children. This concern often led to decisions not to post anything to do with their offspring. However, in some cases the privacy concern stretched as far as not posting anything at all to do with personal aspects of one's life.

5.5 Responses and Reasons for Responding

Responses were usually brief, single words, phrases or sentences. There was little actual in-depth engagement/extended communication or opening up of new topics. Postings or responses might often be in the form of pictures, videos, or emojis. Often they were simply an indication of "liking".

Responses were practically always positive. These positive approbations were often just a smiley emoji, a "like" or simply accolades such as "beautiful couple"; "what a lovely family!". Frequently responses to photo's of the original poster referred to physical appearance – "how young you look"; "gosh, what good shape you're in"; "love the new hairstyle". Such personal comments were particularly the case amongst females, while males would comment upon achievements of others such as catching a big fish, building a sundeck, acquisition of a vintage car. Both genders commented on spectacular scenic or wildlife photo's. All respondents felt that a response was expected as a matter of courtesy, and that the typical short response was the expected norm. It made communication very easy. Similarly, positive responses were expected. They were also easy to give – even though sometimes the respondent did not always feel so positive. Once given, however, duty was done and the recipient felt good as did the respondent for sending a positive message. It was thus easy to get someone to feel well-disposed towards you if you "like" them. In fact, spreading positive goodwill was seen to be much easier on social media than the onerous exercise of specially dressing up, travelling to see a friend or family member, spending an obligatory amount of time visiting and then travelling back home again. The frequent, almost immediate response to postings meant immediate gratification and positive reinforcement.

6. Discussion

Although the Findings section reports on what the respondents said, that is the explicit, this section analyses the responses and posting behaviour thematically to gain greater insight into the implicit meanings of the responses.

The overriding tenor of social media use by the elderly was one of positivity. The groups of motivation were all driven by a positive approach and this attitude was also manifested in the norms which guided the postings and responses.

6.1 The Purpose of Social Media use

The purpose of social media use was overwhelmingly to build and nurture friendships (Coelho and Duarte, 2016). This involved catching up and communicating with existing friends/family and making new friends. This is very much in line with the original intentions of social media (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). The assumption was that if you are my “friend” then you would be equally interested in the things and people that are dear to me. Thus, sharing postings of family, grandchildren, beloved pets were assumed to be as precious to the recipient as the poster. Social media were used predominantly as a broadcast medium – disseminating information. Interestingly, when making friends, the original friend remained the fulcrum and was always included in friendship circles that resulted. This indicates a type of loyalty to that original friend.

6.2 Norms

There seemed to be a number of norms that implicitly guided the social media interactions. These norms referred to content of posts, and manner and tone of interaction – the type of behaviour that was expected from posters and what was expected from responders. Posts about business were avoided – so no blatant marketing and no shop talk despite the respondents comprising a number of business people. Posts about politics were avoided, except glancingly or jokingly, such as cartoons about characters like Donald Trump. It seemed that the elderly were aware of the possible differences in political leanings of their friends and did not want to offend them unintentionally. Information about physical operations and illness seemed to be avoided – possibly because of the negative overtone of the potential outcomes. Only happy recoveries were commented upon – again emphasizing the positive. Little was noted about cosmetic surgery or dying their hair. The implication was that the usually rejuvenated appearance was attributable to their natural youthfulness and thus a positive feature to be admired. Responses were usually brief rather than extended engagement.

6.3 Content of Posts

By and large the content of posts focussed on matters close to home and had a decidedly positive orientation. Birthday wishes abounded, together with complimentary comments on how young and lively the birthday person was. Family featured strongly - almost to the extent of boasting and seemingly outdoing their friends with regard to the number, attractiveness, prowess and expertise of their offspring. So, the element of competition and achievement was an underlying motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2001). However, caution and concern about privacy deterred many respondents from posting content about their offspring. The influence of privacy calculus decision making was very evident (Stone and Stone, 1990). Instead, sometimes as a substitute, pets featured commonly in posts. Hobbies and gardens were common content with an element of competition featuring in such posts as well. On the other hand, often common interests in such content led to the formation of common interest groups. Reunions of old school/university friends, as well as people who might have relocated from another country featured frequently, and while there were many laments about the current status of such countries, the overall implication was one of positivity and the good fortune of being in the current country. Trips were often a focus of posts. These created the impression of youthful curiosity; preparedness to explore and learn new things; gregariousness and always being on the go. Here, too, there were elements of competition in terms of places visited (Ryan and Deci, 2001). Linking back to concerns about privacy, the focus seemed very much on caution about postings regarding offspring but yet information was shared about planned trips, especially extended ones, thus compromising any security measures that might have been taken with regard to absences from homes, spending abroad, etc. So, to be positively engaged and admired was more important at that moment than potential security threats – illustrating privacy calculus (Stone and Stone, 1990).

6.4 Motivation for Using Social Media

The main motivations for using social media were the benefits to the self; and the advantages of social media.

The overriding benefit to the self was social engagement (Coelho and Duarte, 2016). Interactions on social media provided company, thereby minimising any feelings of loneliness (Colten et al, 2013). Interactions also provided

the opportunity to acknowledge and be acknowledged by others, to praise and be praised (Ryan and Deci, 2001), and to celebrate important dates with others. The positive feelings of involvement, and of being wanted were important. Plus, there was the implicit assurance that messages would be positive and that one would feel good after using social media. There was also the knowledge that responses were usually prompt, if not immediate, so any short-term memory issues would not be challenged. Linked to this implicit recognition of frailty, was the positive attitude of tolerance. Tolerance would be facilitated by the knowledge that the actual engagement could be brief, and offensive postings would be minimal because, deep down, everyone wanted to feel good and they realised that by making others feel good, there would be reciprocity and they would be made to feel good as well. This is an excellent example of the social exchange theory (Homans, 1958; Coprazano et al, 2017).

While experiencing these benefits oneself, there was the rewarding knowledge that one was bestowing all the benefits on others, and such altruistic pleasures were in themselves rewarding.

Yet another beneficial area was that social media engagement brought a purpose to many individuals' lives. It gave them a reason for living; plus it gave them something to do and helped them feel as though they were filling every moment of their lives productively (Deci and Ryan, 2002). It spiced up the competitive elements of some; and gave regularity to the lives of many – something to which they had become accustomed after years of work. Additionally, many saw their own participation as a duty to others, their friends, who needed their dose of positive acclaim or positive inspiration. Such postings were expected and would be missed if not forthcoming.

Regarding the advantages of using social media, the respondents all found mastering social media use relatively easy – which puts pay to the notion that the elderly are technically challenged. One should also remember that many of the younger ones in the sample would have had experience of some fairly advanced IT in business.

The perceived advantages of social media were that they overcame the physical constraints of many elderly people, such as lack of mobility and inability to concentrate for long periods. They enabled one to reach many people all at once, thereby obviating the need for many time-consuming individual communications and even travel (Brandtzaeg and Heim, 2009). Social media were thus seen as a quick and relatively cheap way to give and receive acclaim, approval, acknowledgement - in other words, love. Plus, the ability to see videos and picture/photo's enhanced the appeal of the media, as did features such as birthday reminders.

7. Limitations and Areas for Future Research

This study was exploratory and was conducted amongst a select sector of the elderly population. In future, the elderly of other countries/cultures should be studied. Further exploration is required into the competing uses of social media – other than for social engagement - and how these uses either contribute to the positive effects found in this study or not. In addition, more qualitative research in the form of focus groups should be undertaken as well as quantitative research for further validation of the findings.

8. Conclusion

This research contributes to the theoretical development of social media use motivation by the elderly. It also provides insights into how life of the elderly can be enhanced by social media.

The overwhelming use of social media by the elderly was for social engagement, and the general tenor of posts and responses was one of great positivity. That positive approach was largely driven by self-interest and the implicit understanding that if one posted positive messages or responded positively, there would be a resultant feeling of goodwill and wellbeing, not only in the recipient but also within oneself for making others happy. In addition, the implication was that those well-meant messages would be reciprocated, leading to a feeling of wellbeing in oneself. Topics of posts, behavioural norms, posting and responding behaviour were all driven by the desire for personal happiness. Although elements of competition, providing purpose to one's life, and honouring privacy concerns of others were additional motivators, the main motivation was for happy social engagement and feelings of personal wellbeing.

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