

Elderly's Uses and Gratifications of Social Media: Key to Improving Social Compensation and Social Pressure

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts to build a bridge between the existing factor and impact research on senior citizens' use of social media. A random sample of 392 senior citizens was surveyed, and 109 of them were social media users. This article aimed to understand the reasons for and the potential effects of using social media on one's perceived affectionate support, social compensation and social pressure. The result demonstrated that social media could help senior citizens gain more social compensation and social pressure, while affectionate support could be acquired only via face to face communication.

KEYWORDS

Affectionate Support, Senior Citizens, Social Compensation, Social Media, Social Pressure, Uses and Gratifications

INTRODUCTION

Compared to the digital native, senior citizens are relatively slow in their adoption of social media. The adoption rate of social networking sites among the group of age 65 or above stands at a mere 43%, which is only a half of the 89% obtained from the group of 18-29 according to the Pew Research Internet Project 2013 (Brenner & Smith, 2013). Yet, if we take into account the figure in the past few years, this figure carries more than its superficial meaning. The portion of age 65+ using social networking sites rises from a 20% in 2011 to the current level, representing one of the fastest developing age group (Smith, 2014).

Since the surge in senior citizens' usage of social media is quite a recent phenomenon, research work in this area is limited in scope and quantity. Previous studies on senior citizens' usage of ICT (Gatto & Tak, 2008; Richardson, Weaver, & Zorn, 2005) may serve as references for the current direction and design of this research. Still, I would like to make a sharp distinction between "internet" and "social media". Internet is a much more encompassing term whose umbrella covers not only social media, but also other functions like email, internet search, online shopping, etc.; social media is more limited in its definition, which focuses on some interaction functions enabled by the internet, for example, social networking and instant digital communication. Therefore, research focusing on senior adults' use of ICT should only serve as supplementary references for this study.

More relevant to this study are the limited works on senior adults' use of social networking sites (SNSs). SNSs are not equivalent to social media for they are confined to websites which manifest a network nature and take on a website mode while the latter also encompasses mobile-based network media like WhatsApp. However, for the sake of simplicity and the fact that both terms in essence

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correspond to Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007)'s conceptualization of SNSs as online media which "allow individuals to present themselves, articulate their social networks, and establish or maintain connections with others" (Ellison et al., 2007, p. 1143), they would be treated as an equivalent concept in this study. From a development perspective, many studies started out with an aim of understanding why senior citizens are reluctant to use social media. Lehtinen, Näsänen, and Sarvas (2009) found out that many senior citizens reject using SNSs since they understand the internet as a dangerous place. Nimrod (2013) made a descriptive account of the old-age social media users. He identified 3 categories of users, information swappers, aging-oriented and socializers and their corresponding motivation for participating in online communities. This line of research shares the same vision of designing or accommodating an elderly-friendly SNS. Toward the other edge lies the study assessing the effects and impact of social media on senior citizens. Nef, Ganea, Müri, and Mosimann (2013) analyzed 18 articles and concluded that SNSs allowed old people to have better intergenerational communication. Leist (2013) demonstrated that social media could help senior citizens relieve stress and increase perceived feelings of control and self-efficacy.

This study attempted to fill three gaps identified from the literature review of previous studies. First, though many studies examine the factors behind senior adults' use of social media, no one tries to examine it using a uses and gratifications approach (U&G). By incorporating current findings on the uses and gratifications of social media, this research aimed at providing a more comprehensive view on what drive senior citizens to use social media. Second, as we could see from above, research on the effects of use of social media on the elderly is very limited. Most of them adopt a qualitative approach and thus were very limited in terms of the size of the sample. Third, current works either worked on the factor side or the effect side, no work has been attempting to bridge the two sides. This research aimed to build a framework that explained the logic and relationships between the two sides. Based on the premise of U&G theory, this research used the method of survey to understand how gratifications relate to senior citizens' social media use; and the impact of social media use on their perceived affectionate support, social compensation and social pressure.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Uses and Gratifications

U&G theory aims to study why and how people actively seek out specific media to satisfy particular needs (Katz, Hass, & Gurevitch, 1973). The theory was built upon several underlying premises. It assumes that audience is active and their media use is purposive, they seek out the media to satisfy individual needs; and, audience are able to aware of interests and motives of social media use (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). U&G has been applied in different studies to investigate the demands and objectives in using a certain social medium or social media as a whole (Smock, Ellison, Lampe, & Wohn, 2011). Park, Kee, and Valenzuela (2009) studied Facebook student users and concluded that they mainly use it for socializing, entertainment, self-seeking and information. Facebook is also found to gratify the needs for partaking social interaction, meeting new people, entertainment, expressive information sharing, escapism and so forth (Smock et al., 2011). For social media as a whole, Leung (2013) concluded that social media are used for social and affect, need to vent negative feelings, recognition, entertainment and cognitive needs. The above studies drew samples mainly from the younger generation who are considered digital natives, who may have very different purposes and ways of social media use compared to the elderly. As mentioned before, no previous work has been done on social media use among senior citizens using U&G theory.

- **RQ1:** What gratifications can be identified among senior citizens' social media use?
- **RQ2:** What factors can predict the gratifications of social media users?

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