Are We Ever too Old for Technology?

A Study of Senior Citizens and Their Use of Facebook.

By:
Jeremy Mueller

A paper submitted
In partial fulfillment of the
Bachelor of Science degree
In Communication
Advertising and Public Relations
Table of Contents

Table of Contents…………………………………………………………………………2

Introduction………………………………………………………………………………..3

Abstract………………………………………………………………………………...3-4

Rationale…………………………………………………………………………………4

Literature Review Overview……………………………………………………………..4

Literature Review……………………………………………………………………...5-10

Research Questions…………………………………………………………………...10-11

Methods………………………………………………………………………………11-12

Results………………………………………………………………………………12-14

Limitations……………………………………………………………………………..14

Discussion/Conclusion……………………………………………………………….14-15

References…………………………………………………………………………….15-16

Appendix A……………………………………………………………………………17

Interview Questions…………………………………………………………………18-19
Introduction

The social media website Facebook has become an enormous hit with teenagers and college students. The popularity of the site has also attracted people 30-50 years of age, but what about people 65 years and older? The number of senior citizens joining Facebook is the fastest growing group on the site, according to recent industry studies. Senior citizens can’t escape the influence of this new technology.

Uncovering this issue by testing uses and gratifications and diffusion of innovation theories can help explain this recent phenomenon. Also, finding the reasons why some seniors choose to use Facebook and why some choose not to is going to be the main discovery of this research. Regardless, of the reasons why, the growing number of senior citizens that are joining Facebook is an interesting topic to look into.

Abstract

This study investigates the reasons why senior citizens choose to adopt or not-adopt Facebook. Users and non-users of Facebook, ages 65 years and older were interviewed
during this study to be able to determine their motivations for their decision regarding this fairly new technology. Results of this study show that seniors that are Facebook users, do so to fulfill a social need and family obligation, where seniors that do not use Facebook are fearful of change and find it too complicated to use. This in-depth investigation into the topic of senior citizens using Facebook will enrich the communication research field and add insight on interpersonal and intrapersonal communication backgrounds.

**Rationale**

This qualitative research paper is needed for many reasons. Discovering the reasons why this age cohort (senior citizens) choose to use only certain new technologies can help marketers to better understand how to target this demographic and better help researchers in similar experiments. Testing uses and gratifications theory and diffusions of innovations theory can contribute to this research and future research by comparing and contrasting this study to other previous adoption of technology studies.

**Literature Review Overview**

Research is conducted on this topic to draw out reasons why senior citizens are joining or not joining Facebook. The main themes discussed in the research of my topic regarding senior citizens joining Facebook include external factors, such as pressure from
family members, not missing out on friends and family lives, and keeping up with technology.

The increase in popularity of Facebook amongst senior citizens has led to new and interesting research in the field of communication. Whether it’s because of family pressure or just to catch up with friends, the phenomena of seniors and Facebook is something that still has researchers exploring the answers.

---

**Literature Review**

Both research in psychology and marketing has documented that consumers’ knowledge has a significant effect on their decision making (e.g., Gatignon and Robertson, 1991; Alba and Hutchinson, 1987). While this may stand to be true, it has no affect on consumers’ adopting a new technology. The consumer must also have something in common with the new technology in order to adopt it. A new technological creation that does not fit a person’s interests or ideals is less likely to get adopted. When discussing innovation there are two types that need to be mentioned. They are continuous and
discontinuous innovations. Continuous is when changes are made to an already existing product and discontinuous is the creation of a new innovation that has never been seen before and requires a lot of learning to understand and use the product. Technological innovations are most likely to fall into the discontinuous innovation category (Moore, 1999) and thus can be regarded as knowledge intensive innovations. Consumers take what they already know from a similar product using it to help understand the new technology. This occurs through a process called access, mapping, and transfer. Novice consumers are more likely to understand a new innovation better than an expert, as they are able to compare it to a similar product. According to Rogers’ 1962 study, there are five stages of adopters: namely innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards. These categories help marketers to understand consumers’ personal characteristics. This helps the marketer target a category more specifically.

Innovativeness is closely related to consumers’ willingness to educate themselves about new products, having positive attitudes towards new products, and, on the basis of these positive attitudes, adopting them (Saaksjarvi, 2003). Consumers’ will be less likely to avoid new innovations in the future, due to the education that will be available on new technology.

Organic farming is on the rise, because of its list of solutions to numerous farming problems, including nitrate pollution and food safety. However, regardless of substantial policy support, the organic sector still represents only a small portion of the total utilisable agricultural area (UAA) in most European countries, averaging 4% at the end of 2007 (Willer et al., 2009) The adoption of organic farming is slow due to the farmers’
inherent risks that could come with the change. Although, there is a reduction in the fear of organic farming when more farmers adopt, thus increasing the adoption rate.

Obviously, not all individuals in a social system adopt a technology at the same time and based on that, (Rogers, 1962) divided adopters into five adopter groups: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority and laggards (Lapple, Van Rensburg, 2011). In Ireland farmers practice a technique called Rural Environmental Protection Scheme (REPS). Farmers can only receive subsidies from the Republic of Ireland by practicing organic farming. REPS helped contribute to the growth of organic farming from the 1980’s until present day. Organic farm numbers increased from 1102 in 2007 to 1315 organic farms in 2009 (Daff, 2009). However, despite the increase in organic farming in Ireland, most of the farming population has not been reached. Overall, this study showed the increase in the adoption of organic farming is on the rise due to the support of organic farming, but has still not been adopted by all farmers.

People who use the web use it for informational purposes are interested in information that adds value and substance to their lives. They find value in websites that are entertaining and speak to them in a personal voice. Websites that do this attract interest to their sites and add a personal distinction. Users that visit these types of websites are interested in exchanging information with others. They seek the information for self-gratification, yet find it just as gratifying passing the information on to others. “In this concept, the potential for human qualities and continuing relationships can lead to the advancement of our understanding of the theoretical concept known as Para social interaction” (Eighmey & McCord). This study used five websites for visitors to use and
demonstrated the same results as previous studies. It explored continuing relationships and personal involvement. Finally, it showed that users want continuous information by a website that is updated on a daily basis. A more frequently updated website can lead to more views and repeat visitors. Last, the site must be entertaining. While the site should be informative and up to date, it should also be entertaining. Failure to entertain the audience will not bring users back to the site and could eventually be the demise of the website.

The Internet is the center of new media and has changed people’s relationships with different mediums, such as, television, radio, and print. The addition of new media has made the other media sources seem and become less relevant. Text users are attracted to the Internet because of pictures, animation, virtual reality, and 3-dimensional video (3D). The Internet is also a much faster way to acquire information at any one time on any one day. It also provides a trail showing when, where, and what cites people have gone to, making it much easier and quicker for researchers in gathering information. Internet users have doubled in each of the last six years. If this continues, the Internet will be as common a medium as television and other classic mediums. When this happens it will change the scope of this theory from studying a single person to studying groups of people. Some worry that the Internet is becoming more commercial and not the same escape destination that it once was. Meaning people are being bombarded with advertisements, spam, and other things that they want to avoid by going on the web. To
sum up, this theory will now have to cover more ground, to accurately incorporate the new media that exists today. As this media begins to grow and evolve, so must this theory, or else it may become something different altogether.

Every year a new technology is added to cell phones, cameras, and computers. For some new technology products, consumer acceptance has not been as warm or quick as expected. They may delay the adoption, leapfrog the new product, or dis-adopt it after a trial (Geng, Wenjing, and Chan). According to the technology acceptance model (TAM) how easy a product is to use can determine its acceptance or rejection. Innovators tend to accept new technology, while laggards never adopt it because of their fear of the unknown. The emergence of new technology on a regular basis has leaded some people to adopt coping strategies to help deal with their reaction to these technologies.

Psychologists have developed a number of typologies of coping strategies including several broad categories: problem solving, seeking social support, and avoidance ([2] Amirkhan, 1990). These coping strategies have helped marketers in learning to understand why people choose to adopt or not adopt a new technology, based on their behavior towards the stresses of deciding to purchase new products.

According to several studies done in the 1980’s regarding senior citizens and media adoption; people ages 65 years and older differ from other age groups when it comes to the usage of media. Schewe (1984) and Lazer (1985) argue that behavior and attitudes of the seniors are moderated by three factors: (1) physical and mental health, (2) financial well-being, and (3) independence, i.e. marital status and mobility. Data dating back over a decade on this topic concludes that the best way to target senior is by income. While in
most cases the elderly have a higher rate of media consumption than those who are younger. They tend to seek information from media instead of entertainment. However, seniors are more likely to pick up a newspaper than turn on a TV. They are also less likely to accept advertising due to the complexity and inability to remember the information. This study has a direct correlation between income and media adoption. In most situations, seniors with higher incomes are more likely to adopt media than seniors who have less income.

For grandparents living in the 21st century, the only way to keep in touch and stay on top of what their children and grandchildren is to adopt a social media outlet. Whatever social media outlet their family is on is most likely going to increase the odds of them adopting the social network as well. Seniors also use Facebook to look up old friends to see if they too are on social media. “Older adults are more likely to reach out for support online, (Platenburg, 2010)”. Unlike younger generations, seniors are more careful about what they post on a site, (i.e. personal information and inappropriate photos). Seniors, just like the rest of u, find it fun and entertaining to be able to look in on the lives of others.

Facebook.com is the second most used website in the world considering three month website traffic, behind only google.com (Alexa, 2011). Creating a profile on Facebook allows people relate to one another and discover independence. This in turn helps to increase a person’s psychological well-being. The need for competence, autonomy, and
relatedness are key factors of why people join Facebook. In this study psychological and social need contributed to predict behaviors on Facebook, helping to show peoples’ need to look upon and feel connected with others. Most importantly, understanding of Facebook is important because one function of Facebook is to maintain balance in life between psychological needs, social needs, and social interactions (Ferrell, 2011).

Research Questions

Senior citizens who choose to use or not use Facebook have lead me to develop three research questions to better help understand the reasons for their interest or disinterest.

RQ 1: Why did this person say he/she decided to join or not join Facebook?

RQ 2: What do they say were some key factors for them joining or not joining Facebook?

RQ 3: What is the difference between senior citizen’s who use Facebook and those who do not?

Methods

In order to study the reasons why senior citizens are on Facebook, I used a semi-structured interview, where participants answered questions about this topic. The interview was in a natural situation, where the interviewee had prior awareness of what the questions consisted of. Interviewee participants consisted of six participants from
ages 65 and older. Half the population needed to be using or have used the site and the other half must have never used the site. I used a snowball sample by using the resources that I have at the Rochester Institute of Technology and Facebook. The interviews were conducted in a location where they feel comfortable and were 15 minutes in length. I recorded the data by writing the questions and answers down in a notebook. These interviews helped to find out why senior citizens use or do not use Facebook.

Participants were in their 60’s or older. Preferably 65 years old or older. Interviews were performed on a one to one basis and not involving groups. That eliminated any groupthink or pressure to perform from others. I analyzed the data by comparing it with past research and use organizational culture as it uses interpretive methods, and uses academic research. This study aims to understand the data and examines sense making.

Results

In my study I interviewed six participants. Three of the participants joined Facebook and the other three have not. Participants who joined Facebook reported they did so because of family. One female participant said, “Facebook allows me to connect with my daughter when she is away at college.” Facebook serves as a way for seniors to be able to see what their family is up to, because they are not able to visit them as often as they would like to. All of the participants that use Facebook enjoy viewing pictures that their family members post on the site. Another participant said that, “it’s a way for me to see
how big her grandchildren have gotten, because they live too far away for me to visit them on a regular basis.” Another participant said he liked Facebook because, “it’s a way for me to find old friends, (the ones that are still alive, that is).” All the participants that chose to join the site report they did so because of family and friends. This ties into uses and gratifications theory, because these seniors use looking at family pictures and connecting with old friends as a way of fulfilling a need. Participants showed that there were three factors for them joining Facebook. They were, to feel connected to others, interact with others, and stay up to date on family situations and the newest trends. One of the interviews was by a woman who works at Rochester Institute of Technology (R.I.T.) who is also a senior citizen and she admitted, “I use Facebook to occasionally look in on others to see what they are up to.” On the other side were seniors who have chosen not to join Facebook. There were many reasons why these seniors chose not to join Facebook, to include, not wanting any of their information to get out to the public (privacy issues), not wanting to spend time on the computer, and most seniors found the site to be too confusing and difficult to understand how it works. One woman mentioned that, “Facebook is more for younger people, I enjoy talking to friends on the phone or seeing them face to face.” She also said, “I have enough friends, I really don’t need anymore.” There was also the factor of privacy issues. One senior said, “I don’t want anyone having access to my information.” She went on to say, I pay my bills by mail and prefer to keep what I do in my spare time private.” Another participant admitted, “I don’t understanding how Facebook works. It’s too confusing to even bother with.” Although, these three participants were not on Facebook, they did admit to using the internet for other things. They used it to check email, read about sports, look-up health information
and check the news. Key factors for the seniors that chose not to use Facebook were privacy, time, and inexperience. The difference between a senior citizen that uses Facebook and a senior citizen that does not use Facebook is the person’s willingness to try the new technology. The seniors, who are willing to get on Facebook, eventually figure out how the site works and are able to navigate through it with ease. One participant said, “At first I was skeptical of the site, but after learning how it works, I now use it two-three times a day.” The seniors that are not willing to use Facebook feel intimidated by the new technology and would rather continue doing their normal routine when it comes to connecting with others. According to the diffusion of innovations theory, the seniors that chose to use Facebook are known as early or late adopters. Meaning that they are not the early adopters of new technology and in most cases they might be skeptical towards it. The seniors that did not choose to use Facebook are known as laggards. Laggards are the last to adopt technology, if they adopt it at all. They have an aversion to change and tend to focus on more traditional things.

**Study Limitations**

This study is limited in that the results based on self-report gathered data from a small convenience sample of homogeneous senior citizens in the Rochester, N.Y. area.

**Discussion/Conclusion**
This study set out to understand the reasoning behind senior citizens choices of adopting and not adopting Facebook. Six interviews were conducted from three adopters of Facebook and three non-adopters of Facebook that ranged in ages of 65 years of age and older. The data gathered from the interviews were used to answer three research questions. The participants were asked a number of questions pertaining to their use or non use of Facebook. The results of the study showed that senior citizens who use Facebook do it to feel connected by interacting with others and it also helped them keep up on current family events. The seniors who chose not to use Facebook found it to be intimidating and hard to understand. They were too busy in their day to day lives to spend hours a day on the social media site. For future research, this study would provide more accurate results by much larger heterogeneous sample size. The use of focus groups along with the interviews would help in getting more accurate results. Finally, this study would benefit from comparing this study to the adoption of past technologies (television, radio, etc.) to see how they are similar and different.

References


- Alexa, 2011 “The Web Information Company”


- Department of Agriculture Fish and Forestry (DAFF) (2009-2010)


Appendix A: Consent Form and Instrument

Senior Citizens and Facebook
Information and Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research studying people 60 and older who use and don’t use Facebook. This study is being conducted by an undergraduate student at the College of the Rochester Institute of Technology, under the supervision of Dr. Bruce Austin from the Department of Communication. You were selected as a participant in this study based on age and usage of the Facebook website.

This is a voluntary study that involves no risks to the subjects. The study will take approximately 20 minutes and involve a series of non-threatening questions.

This researcher intends to try and understand the reasons why people 60 years and older are either choosing to use or not use Facebook. Any information obtained in the interviews will be confidential.

You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Note: You have the option to stop participating in this study at anytime.

For more information on subjects rights and welfare please contact:

Heather M Foti, MPH
Associate Director
Human Subjects Research Office (HSRO)
Rochester Institute of Technology

Office Location
Bldg 87 ~ University Services Center
Suite 2400

Mailing Address:
141 Lomb Memorial Drive
Rochester, NY 14623-5604
Interview questions for Senior Citizens that use Facebook:

1. Why did you join Facebook?
2. What aspects of the site attract you?
3. Do you use other social media sites? (Twitter, Foursquare)
4. What is your favorite feature about the site?
5. How many times a week do you spend on Facebook?
6. Do you play games on Facebook?
7. Is Facebook the only way that you keep in touch with family & friends?
8. What types of things do you “like” on the site?
9. Do you search for health information on the site?
10. Do you use the site for a religious platform?
11. Do you use the site to express your political opinions?
12. Do you think Facebook helps people stay in touch?
13. Do you Facebook stalk?
14. Do you find the site user friendly?
Interview Questions for Senior Citizens that do not use Facebook:

1. Why haven’t you joined Facebook?
2. Do family and friends pressure you to get on the site?
3. Do you ever think you will use this site?
4. Do you use other social networking sites?
5. Do you use the Internet?
6. Do you find Facebook intimidating?
7. Do you know anybody that uses the site?
8. What do you do in your spare time?
9. What are your hobbies?
10. Do you ever talk politics with people?
11. Do you ever discuss religion with people?
12. Are you aware of new technologies?