A Qualitative Interview Study on Older Adults' Attitudes Towards Social Networking Sites

Colin Sippl, Benedikt Imminger, Ricardo Geissel, Patricia Böhm, Daniel Isemann

Chair of Media Informatics, University of Regensburg

Abstract

We present a qualitative interview study on older adults' attitudes towards social networking sites (SNSs), in particular on reasons that keep them from using SNSs or entice them to do so. In cooperation with a multigenerational house in Regensburg, Bavaria (Ger.: *Mehrgenerationenhaus,* abbr. MGH), we conducted eight semi-structured interviews with older adults (50+) who were involved in computer tuition at the MGH. We recruited two different participant groups: 1. *tutors*, older adults with advanced computer skills who give free computer lessons and 2. *tutees*, participants of said lessons with relatively fewer computer skills. Although our sample included dedicated Facebook users, we found prejudices towards SNSs to be prevalent among our interviewees. Our findings indicate that security concerns and a lack of knowledge play a big part in keeping participants from using SNSs. Furthermore, reservations towards SNSs among tutors may reinforce tutees' scepticism regarding SNSs. Among the reasons fielded for SNS use were particular forms of participation and social interaction, but also pastimes and hobbies. Though more of the *tutors* are using SNSs, we could not find stark differences in attitudes towards SNS usage between *tutors* and *tutees*.

1 Introduction

An increasing number of older people nowadays has access to information technology and uses it on a daily basis. Similarly, internet based services are increasingly being incorporated into the everyday routines of senior citizens (cf. Initative D21, 2016, p. 8) for the situation in Germany). Yet, younger and older adults use the internet differently (ibid., p. 15).

While the overall usability of internet services has improved dramatically, including the emergence of more age-appropriately designed user interfaces (Williger & Lang, 2013), SNS and internet usage still have a strong potential for growth among older people (Initative D21, 2016, p. 8).

In 2016, 30% of Germans between the age of 50 and 59, 20% of Germans between the age of 60 and 69 and a mere 11% of Germans aged 70 or older used social media at least once a week. By contrast, 82% of Germans between the age of 14 and 19 actively used SNSs, while the national average was 43% (ibid., p.15). Polls among U.S. Americans indicate that social media use in the U.S. is likely more widespread than in Germany, especially among the older population. For instance, 64% of U.S. adults between 50 and 64 used at least one social media site in late 2016 and for U.S. adults aged 65 or older this rate was still at 34% (for more survey data, cf. Pew Research Center, 2017, p. 9).

A theoretical approach to explain the mentioned difference in usage between age groups is the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1986). Though sometimes criticised, the TAM has been extended several times and is a popular model in the field of technology acceptance (Marangunić & Granić, 2014), hence many of the publications cited in this paper rely on it (see section below).

Many studies, which investigate SNS usage among older people (e.g. Fittkau, 2011; Karimi & Neustaedter, 2012), cover a diverse group of participants, without considering different levels of computer know-how. As computer literacy may be a relevant factor in determining SNS usage and attitudes we included two user groups at the MGH with different computer skills in our interview study: *tutors* (with advanced ICT skills), who give free of charge computer lessons and *tutees* participating in these lessons with relatively fewer skills. Our paper contributes to research on senior citizens' attitudes towards social networking sites in Germany after an extensive review of research literature revealed that most studies on this subject were conducted in English speaking countries.

2 Related Work

As of 2016, there is still a huge generational gap in the use of SNSs (Initative D21, 2016, p. 15; Pew Research Center, 2017, p. 9). In recent years, several articles and studies on the topic of older people and SNS usage have been published.

Xie et al. (2012) showed that, in comparison to the general population, seniors have stronger privacy and security concerns. Moreover, older people tend to have a negative view of social networks, mainly fuelled by negative press coverage, with topics such as data leaks and cyber-mobbing.

Chung et al. (2010) used the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1986) to study the factors that influence future intentions to take part in social communities. The authors found that if an individual finds a website to be useful, it positively influences their user behaviour.

Bell et al. (2013) found indications that among older people there is no significant difference in loneliness between Facebook users and non-users. Additionally, the authors' findings indicate that Facebook users score higher on assessments of social satisfaction and confidence with technology than Facebook non-users.

Davalos et al. (2015) investigate the expression of nostalgia within Facebook conversations. Based on Facebook posts, the authors describe differences between nostalgic and general

posts. The authors find that nostalgic posts tend to be reflective, more emotional, and frequently include both positive and negative emotions.

Hope et al. (2014) conduct an interview study with 22 older adults between the age of 71 and 92 to investigate communication preferences and values related to social media usage. According to the authors the time investment required for participation, the loss of deeper communication, irrelevant content, and privacy concerns are major issues that keep older people from using SNSs. Based on these perceptions the authors derive design considerations for social media.

Karimi & Neustaedter (2012) investigate how older people cope with communication in the digital age. For that, the authors conducted semi-structured interviews with older adults and home tours. Among their findings, the authors detected a preference to keep away from new technologies among older people.

Some authors have employed non-qualitative methods to similar questions. Jung & Sundar (2016), for instance, use exploratory factor analysis and hierarchical regression to investigate patterns of and reasons for senior citizens' interaction on Facebook. Apart from social bonding and other social activities they identify curiosity and responding to a family member request as factors in the motivation to use Facebook. Further studies investigate motivations for Facebook use among adults older than 35 (Valentine, 2013), adequate design considerations for social media for older adults (Hope et al., 2014) and how the baby boomer generation understand social networking sites and how these fit certain aspects of their life (Lehtinen et al., 2009).

Role	ID	Age	Sex	SNS usage	SNSs frequency of use
Tutors	TR1	77	M	Facebook (7 years), Twitter (7 years)	daily
	TR2	70	F	Facebook (false name account for computer lessons, 6 years)	rarely
	TR3	70	F	Facebook (false name account for computer lessons and social searching, 6 years)	occasionally
	TR4	74	M	-	-
Tutees	TE1	68	F	Facebook (8 years)	daily
	TE2	50	F	-	-
	TE3	50+	F	-	-
	TE4	65	F	-	-

Table 1 – Overview of the interviewees

3   Study Methodology

3.1   Participants

In cooperation with the MGH, we conducted interviews with a heterogeneous group of eight people in the range between the age of 50 and 77. Four of these were *tutees* and four *tutors*,

who give computer lessons at the MGH. Two of the participants use SNSs regularly, while two others have false name accounts on Facebook (i.e. accounts that are not under their real name) and four do not use SNSs at all (see Table 1).

3.2   Interviews

We conducted extensive semi-structured interviews with *tutors* and *tutees*. Three of the *tutees* [TE2-4] were interviewed together. The interviews lasted thirty to ninety minutes. All interviews were audio recorded, partially transcribed and anonymized. We used separate interview guidelines for SNS users and non-SNS users (see Table 2). In addition, to provide more context for our study we asked the *tutor* group to describe the computer skills of those participating in their computer lessons as well as the general interest in and coverage of SNS topics at the MGH classes.

General questions
Computer equipment
Computer skills

↙   ↘

SNSs usage	SNSs non-usage
Platforms used	Known platforms
Frequency of usage	Reasons for non-usage
Reasons for joining	Conditions for joining
Device(s) used for SNSs	Presumed advantages of SNSs-usage
Assessing usability of SNSs used	
Hurdles in usage (if any)	
Features used	
Observed negative side effects of SNSs-usage (if any)	
Need for assistance (if necessary)	

Table 2: Topics covered in our interview guideline: After a general section in which participants were asked about the computer equipment used (including smartphones and tablets) and their computing skills, different interview guidelines were used for SNS users and SNS non-users.

4   Results

We used an iterative content analysis process (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). We first derived the categories directly from the interview data in an open coding. In a second step the resulting codes were revised, consolidated and compared with existing findings in related work.

4.1   Computer equipment

Today, the majority of computer lesson participants at the MGH own a laptop or a desktop PC which runs on either Microsoft Windows 7, 8 or 10 [TR1-3, TE1-4]. All of our interviewees have Internet access.

According to *tutors* TR1, TR2 and TR3, there has been a dramatic change in private computer ownership. A few years ago, participants of computer lessons at the MGH either did not own computers or they got their devices from their children and grandchildren [TR2, TR4]. Nowadays, most of those who visit the computer lessons usually buy computers or laptops on their own [TR1, TR2]. According to *tutors* TR1 and TR2, some of them own mobile phones and tablets (this is in accordance with (Initative D21, 2016, p. 13)).

The computer lessons at the MGH do not cover mobile devices [TR1, TR2, TR3]. Thus, an estimate of their usage among lesson participants is not possible. Nevertheless, occasional use was observed. Currently, the lessons and talks focus primarily on Microsoft Windows 7, 8 and 10, but one *tutor* reported a growing interest in smartphones and tablets: "[Tuition for mobile devices] is probably going to come because that is simply the future" [TR3].

4.2   Computer skills

The *tutors* observed that computer skills among the participants of computer classes at the MGH have been improving continuously in recent years [TR2, TR3, TR4]. Almost 20 years ago, when the first computer lessons at the MGH were held, those lessons mainly focused on basic HCI skills, like mouse movement, basic word processing or general Internet usage.

Nowadays, these topics occur very rarely, as most *tutees* are already capable of completing basic HCI tasks [TR3]. Visitors of computer lessons frequently ask for quick support for certain computer programmes or problems [TR2]. Currently, the most frequent topics in the one-on-one lessons concern office programmes, e-mail, photo editing and file management [TR4]. According to *tutor* TR4, this drastic change is also due to the improved usability of modern operating systems, programmes and websites: "Today, applications are programmed so well and intuitive and thus can be explained easily" [TR4]. However, as of 2017, the lack of computer skills among older adults at the MGH is, reportedly, still significant [TR1].

4.3   Interest in SNSs

As far as the topics covered by the computer lessons at the MGH are concerned, social media platforms are "actually irrelevant" [TR2]. On the one hand, the overall interest in SNSs is low, as SNSs have a bad reputation among *tutors* and *tutees* [TR1, TR3, TR4, TE2–4]. On the other hand, SNS users among our interviewees prefer and use Facebook. Five out of the 32 MGH *tutors* use Facebook. For most of these users, privacy settings are of key importance both for themselves and in their role in advising tutees. Furthermore, some of the *tutors* use a false name Facebook account [TR2, TR3].

4.4   Reasons for using SNSs

Four users had already gained practical experience with social networks. Among those were two active users [TR1, TE1] and two users with false name accounts [TR2, TR3]. Four were registered on Facebook and one of these users had also signed up for Twitter [TR1].

Social participation: Two *tutors* stated that their interest in SNSs had initially been sparked by media coverage [TR1, TR3]. (Local) Newspapers, websites and radio or TV broadcasts do not only regularly report about SNSs, they also often feature tweets and Facebook comments from their readers and watchers or even politicians (for social media and news coverage, compare Paulussen & Harder (2014)). The interviewees stated that apart from their children and grandchildren [TE1], traditional media channels are a common first contact point with SNSs. They get the impression that social media are used commonly, especially by the younger generation. This implies that those who do not use SNSs might be missing out on important information [TR2, TE2, TE4]. *Tutor* TR1 said: "To get the latest news I must visit Twitter. If I want to know what Trump really said, I have to read it there" [TR1].

Relationship maintenance: One of the *tutees* used Facebook in order to stay in touch with her family, friends and acquaintances: "What are they doing? Where is everybody?" [TE1] The newsfeed and messenger function enabled this user to stay up to date. The same *tutee* mentioned that Facebook Messenger facilitates the connection with other people, especially with people living far away [TE1] (compare also Bell (2013)).

Social searching: Moreover, participants were using Facebook for "social searching" [TR2, TR3]. This term was coined by Lampe et al. (2006) and refers to SNS use to "investigate specific people with whom they share an offline connection to learn more about them" (2006, p. 167). In contrast to relationship maintenance, there is no direct interaction with other users, as the enquirer wants to stay incognito. This study found one salient case of "social searching": a *tutor*, who described himself as a *non-user* of Facebook, used a false name account to secretly browse through timelines of offline acquaintances, e.g. to see "what the niece allows herself [to do]" or to view timelines of users that are "silly and share everything publicly" [TR3].

Passing time: One *tutee* visits Facebook regularly to play games or to participate in raffles. Furthermore, Facebook can be a source for local content [TE1]. Two interviewees said they not only looked for current topics, but also for content which is about the past, like old pictures of the city they are living in [TR1, TE1]. Compare Davalos et al. (2015) for nostalgia on Facebook.

Self-Expression: In addition to consuming content produced by others, two interviewees (one *tutor* [TR1] and one *tutee* [TE1]) use Facebook as a publishing platform to represent themselves. Both are very active, sharing updates at least once a week. This is interesting as Valentine (2013) found that Facebook users over 35 years tend to be passive members of social networks who rather observe than post personal content on their own. The *tutee* shared texts, pictures and events: "On Shrove Tuesday, for example, I uploaded a picture showing me sitting in the Hofbräuhaus holding a pint of beer" [TE1]. However, the contents TE1 and TR1 post differ markedly: while TE1 posts private content, TR1 mainly posts his own political, satirical caricatures to express a personal opinion and "to make people think".

Hobbies: One of the *tutors* [TR1] set up a page to publish his own paintings. Moreover, TR1 runs a special interest group with over 400 members on Facebook. This shows that SNSs are also used as a platform for personal hobbies by older users. Facebook allowed our

interviewee to build a community with like-minded people who are connected by a shared passion.

4.5   Reasons for not using SNSs

Apart from reasons for usage, we also examined reasons for non-use of SNSs. For this we asked non-active *tutees* and *tutors*, but also active social network users, why they or their acquaintances were hesitant to sign up.

Data privacy: One of the most frequently cited reasons for not joining any SNSs are data privacy concerns: "You don't know what happens to the information you share" [TE3]. The *tutees* and *tutors* had strong reservations against sharing private information through Facebook's services. They feared losing control over their private data, which would be analyzed by machines to provide targeted advertising [TR1] or could be used for identity theft [TE3]. This finding is in line with with Xie et al. (2012) and Lehtinen et al. (2009), who found that older people had stronger privacy concerns than younger people. For instance, two interviewees stopped using Facebook under their real names, as soon as the service repeatedly asked for their phone numbers. In response, they created false name accounts in order to protect their privacy [TR2, TR3].

Social surveillance: Besides automatic data evaluation by computers, *tutees* and *tutors* also feared that other people might judge them based on publicly available content like texts or pictures. Moreover, they expressed concerns that private data could be misused to harm one's public image. They mentioned cases of cyber mobbing [TE2, TE3] or usage of SNSs by the German youth welfare office to find incriminating evidence [TE3]. If *tutees* were to request assistance for setting up a Facebook account, the *tutors* would first customise the privacy settings page in order to prevent such web snooping [TR3].

Low quality and irrelevant content: Another reason for not joining Facebook was the lack of interest or distrust in the content found on SNSs. Several non-users expected to see a never-ending stream of subjective opinions without any significance or relevance to their personal life [TR3, TR4, TE3]. Moreover, information on Facebook was regarded as less reliable in comparison to sources like Wikipedia [TE3, TR4] or the local newspaper. Although *fake news* is only a recent phenomenon, it was mentioned in every single interview session with non-users [TR4, TE2-4].

SNSs as an additional burden: Both *tutors* and *tutees* considered SNSs to be an additional burden. One *tutor* referred to Facebook as "just another channel which has to be monitored" [TR2]. Several *tutees* and *tutors* felt the same, as they feared stress from information overload [TE2, TE3] and being constantly in touch with other people [TR1, TR3, TR4, TE3]. One *tutor* mentioned that using smartphones all the time was "abnormal" [TR1]. Among non-users of SNSs, feature phones are still very widespread [TR1, TE4].

Lack of knowledge: Several interviewees did not see any potential benefits of SNSs usage [TR2, TE2]. On the one hand, the non-users knew precisely about the potential dangers of SNSs usage (see sections "data privacy" and "social surveillance"). On the other hand, the same people lacked clear ideas about the purpose and benefits of SNSs. This became obvious

when we asked for known SNSs. Besides Facebook and Twitter, only two of the *tutees* had heard of Instagram [TE2, TE4], which was described as the social network for celebrities [TE4]. During the interviews, one *tutee* admitted to having a preconceived negative opinion on SNSs, without knowing what Facebook could actually be used for. This person concluded at the end of the interview: "Now I have the feeling that I must gather more information about Facebook" [TE4].

4.6   Further observations

One of the *tutors* said the fear of being spied on in social media platforms was unfounded. According to this interviewee, today's surveillance occurs everywhere and anytime [TR1]. Nevertheless, one SNS non-user added there were measures to protect one's privacy on Facebook [TR4]. During an interview, another candidate stated that some of the problems associated with social media existed in real life, too: manipulation and mobbing were well-known in our society before the era of SNSs had begun [TE4]: "[Today] it's basically the same for the [affected] people, who in former times [would have] stood in the pillory. It's only by different means and on a bigger scale" [TE4].

One *tutee* compared today's Google to the local church, as in the past, the local church commonly knew confidential facts about other people "who went to confession" [TE4]. The same interviewee stated that the acceptance of Facebook and other SNSs as a crucial part in future life was comparable to the discussions about the Internet in the past: "Whether we like it or not, we cannot stop this development". Today the Internet itself was not questioned by anybody and belonged to everyday life.

5   Discussion and conclusion

We have interviewed eight older adults from Regensburg, Bavaria, with at least some interest in and affinity to ICT technologies on their attitudes towards social networking sites, in particular their reasons for and against using such services. Our interviewees ran the gamut from Facebook power user (daily use, administrator of a sizable Facebook group) to Facebook sceptic (user with false name account, non-user with some interest in the service) to staunch opponent of SNS use (at least for their own purposes).

Among the reasons for SNS use are various forms of participation such as keeping up with news coverage and social interaction such as maintaining existing relationships, but also pastimes and hobbies. We found cases of false name accounts (sometimes not acknowledged as SNS use) for didactic purposes or for clandestine social searching. The reasons for not using SNSs are largely governed by privacy and data security concerns, but also comprise seeing SNSs as essentially superfluous or irrelevant to one's own needs. Some of the negative attitudes appear to be engendered or at least magnified by an (at times admitted) lack of knowledge on the features and affordances that SNSs have to offer. In these cases, attitudes appear to be in part derived from or fuelled by similar attitudes among the peer

group. Several of these findings conform to those of Lehtinen (2009) and Hope et al. (2014). This underlines the need to discuss concerns in an objective manner with all parties involved.

In addition, we found that traditional media (such as newspapers, radio and TV shows) play a strong, but ambiguous role in shaping perceptions of SNSs, on the one hand advertising and raising awareness for social media content, on the other hand often highlighting privacy issues or data leaks in their coverage.

In contrast to many other studies on social media use among the older generation we had different levels of computer skills represented in our participants by the two groups of computer *tutors* and *tutees*. However, we did not find any differences in their attitudes towards SNSs, which appeared to be salient or systematic. This may be an indication that computer skills are a weak predictor of such attitudes but naturally our small convenience sample does not support robust generalisations.

Future research could focus more on the permeation of older citizens' social circles by SNS use or how accurate knowledge on SNS features and functioning influences corresponding attitudes. In addition, cultural and sociodemographic particularities and their impact on the acceptance of SNSs should be considered more in future work. At the outset we cited two studies which point to differences in resistance to and acceptance of SNSs among U.S. Americans and Germans. Even comparing summary SNS usage statistics among the older population in both countries illustrates the need for further research on this topic.

6　Literature

Bell, C., Fausset, C., Farmer, S., Nguyen, J., Harley, L. & Fain, W. B. (2013). Examining social media use among older adults. *Proceedings of the 24th ACM Conference on Hypertext and Social Media - HT '13*, (May), pp. 158–163. Retrieved from http://doi.acm.org/10.1145/2481492.2481509

Chung, J. E., Park, N., Wang, H., Fulk, J. & Mclaughlin, M. (2010). Age differences in perceptions of online community participation among non-users: An extension of the Technology Acceptance Model. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *26*(6), 1674–1684.

Davalos, S., Merchant, A., Rose, G. M., Lessley, B. J. & Teredesai, A. M. (2015). "The good old days": An examination of nostalgia in Facebook posts. *International Journal of Human Computer Studies*, *83*, 83–93. Retrieved from http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhcs.2015.05.009

Davis, F. (1986). A Technology Acceptance Model for Empirically Testing New End-User Information Systems. *Massachusetts Institute of Technology*, 291.

Elo, S. & Kyngäs, H. (2008). The qualitative content analysis process. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, *62*(1), 107–115. Retrieved from http://doi.wiley.com/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2007.04569.x

Fittkau, S. & Harms, A.-K. (2011). Zielgruppe 60 plus – Entwicklung, Akzeptanz und Nutzung ausgewählter Felder aus Online, Social und Mobile Media. In *Online*

Targeting und Controlling. Wiesbaden: Gabler, pp. 223–242. Retrieved from http://www.springerlink.com/index/10.1007/978-3-8349-6742-8_14

Hope, A., Schwaba, T. & Piper, A. M. (2014). Understanding digital and material social communications for older adults. *Proceedings of the 32nd Annual ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems - CHI '14*, pp. 3903–3912. Retrieved from http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?doid=2556288.2557133

Initative D21. (2016). 2016 D21-Digital-Index. *Jährliches Lagebild Zur Digitalen Gesellschaft*. Retrieved from http://www.initiatived21.de/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Studie-D21-Digital-Index-2016.pdf

Jung, E. H. & Sundar, S. S. (2016). Senior citizens on Facebook: How do they interact and why? *Computers in Human Behavior*, *61*, 27–35.

Karimi, A. & Neustaedter, C. (2012). From high connectivity to social isolation: communication practices of older adults in the digital age. *Proceedings of the ACM 2012 Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work Companion*, pp. 127–130.

Lampe, C., Ellison, N. & Steinfield, C. (2006). A Face(book) in the Crowd: Social Searching vs. Social Browsing. *Proceedings of the 2006 20th Anniversary Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work CSCW '06*, pp. 167–170.

Lehtinen, V., Nasanen, J. & Sarvas, R. (2009). "A little silly and empty-headed": older adults' understandings of social networking sites. *Bcs-Hci*, pp. 45–54. Retrieved from http://portal.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=1671011.1671017

Marangunić, N. & Granić, A. (2014). Technology acceptance model: a literature review from 1986 to 2013. *Universal Access in the Information Society*, *14*(1), 81–95. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1007/s10209-014-0348-1

Paulussen, S. & Harder, R. A. (2014). Social media references in newspapers. *Journalism Practice*, *8*(5), 542–551. Retrieved from http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17512786.2014.894327

Pew Research Center. (2017). *Tech Adoption Climbs Among Older Adults*. Retrieved from http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2017/05/16170850/PI_2017.05.17_Older-Americans-Tech_FINAL.pdf

Valentine, A. (2013). Uses and Gratifications of Facebook Members 35 Years and Older. *Social Media Industries*.

Williger, B. & Lang, F. R. (2013). Alternssensible Gestaltung sozialer Medien für ältere Internetnutzer: Evaluation eines sozialen Innovationsnetzwerks.

Xie, B., Watkins, I., Golbeck, J. & Huang, M. (2012). Understanding and Changing Older Adults' Perceptions and Learning of Social Media. *Educational Gerontology*, *38*(4), 282–296.