Golden Baby Boomers’ Perceptions of Online Social Networking Sites

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate on older folks/ elderly people known as golden baby boomers’ feelings and beliefs (perceptions) concerning online social networking. The purpose was to establish on their perceived likelihood of participation on online social network sites. Golden Baby boomers in this context refer to individuals that are specifically born between 1945 and 1964. A qualitative research method and an interpretive research philosophy were followed in the investigation.

Results from the study exposed six main feelings and beliefs, which are; lack of security/privacy, difficulties in adapting to culture, too much exposure to information, lack of time, inability to authenticate other users, and, the perception that Social Network Sites provide no value to the elderly.

A number of studies pertaining to social networking focus primarily on the use of Social networks by young people and rarely focus on elderly people. The studies that do focus on older folks concentrate on technology barriers that hinder them from participation. This study is therefore original, hence, valuable because the technology challenges that older folks face are excluded as we focus solely on computer literate elderly people.

Keywords: Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), Baby boomers, Social network, elderly people, older folks, perceptions.

1. Introduction

A Social Network is: “the size, structure and frequency of contact with the network of people surrounding an individual” [23]. In reference to internet social networks/Online Social Network Sites (SNS), Boyd and Ellison [10] define social network sites (SNS) as:

“Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site” [10].

SNS are classified under Web 2.0, i.e. a recent set of technology tools that transform the internet into a dynamic, pervasive platform for technologically-mediated informational, commercial and social/communicative actions [42]. SNS exist in various forms, however, a common feature among them is that they revolve around the profile, which is a depiction or representation of users and their personal social circles or networks, which other users can check, link with, or be linked to others [19]. SNSes are “a category of web sites with profiles, semi-persistent public commentary on the profile, and a traversable publicly articulated social network displayed in relation to the profile” [10]. The use of SNS is growing in popularity [35]. Notess and Lorenzen-Huber [31] found that 84% of internet users participate in online communities.
There is, however, a noticeable gap drawn along age group on SNS usage [9]. This growing popularity mainly applies to the younger generation, because older individuals generally use social networks less than their younger counterparts [9]. It is also evident that the elderly people who have joined these networks do not fully utilise functionalities of the sites [24; 25]. This sparked the interest to investigate why there is a lack of participation on social networks by the elderly people and therefore led to the focus of this study.

1.1. Focus of study

Older individuals, who this study refers to as elderly people, are individuals known as Golden Baby Boomers (GBB). According to Jones and Fox [23] baby boomers are defined as those born between 1946 and 1964. They are a group of people born after the Second World War, who were part of the surge of births that took place after the war. Previous studies conducted on older adults’ lack of participation on social networks, focused on how technological challenges inhibit participation. These challenges include lack of access to a computer or the internet, and general low levels of computer literacy.

In the context of golden baby boomers, computer literacy has been explained as comprising of “declarative and procedural computer-related knowledge, familiarity with computers and self-confidence in using the computer” [3]. Although these challenges are a reality, there is growing evidence that a remarkable number of golden baby boomers are now better educated than their counterparts in previous generations [16]. Therefore, this study focuses on golden baby boomers who have access to the internet and are computer literate, but do not participate in social networking.

1.2. Motivation for study

Social networking can provide a number of benefits for older folks. Participation on online social networking (OSN) can improve golden baby boomers’ life satisfaction through their interaction with their geographically dispersed children and grandchildren. [40]. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), social ties with relatives and friends promote good health in elderly people [22].

Jones and Fox [23] noted that elderly people with heart problems who were socially isolated were frequently re-hospitalised than those who were socially connected. SNS come with diverse affordances to support a wide range of preferences, interests and needs. They allow strangers to link with people of similar or same interests, views and practices. They also have the capability to unite people basing of common identities such as religion, race, sex, language or nationality [10]. With the diverse technologies such as mobile technology, photo, and, video-sharing tools, and, blogging capabilities that SNS afford, golden baby boomers can benefit both socially/communicatively, and commercially-commercially if they are still formally employed [38].

1.2.1. Business benefits

On the other hand, GBB may venture into business as SNS providers, and perhaps be influential in tapping into the lowly tapped market of the elderly since they know exactly what they would require of online SNS while at the same time benefitting on the major exploitable capital of SNS, i.e. user profiles and the association and connection information [39] as they work towards the inclusion of other baby boomers. The SNS providers can use such targeted information for advertisements that capture on golden baby boomers’ needs. Customers develop attitudinal loyalty toward business and its products and this attitudinal loyalty converts into actual loyalty by the customer [35]. The customers rate the experience when using product and service and this will determine whether they will be using the service again [36].

It is therefore essential to ensure that customers have a positive attitude about SNS, and also have a positive experience when using them in order for them to become loyal customers. To achieve this understanding, knowing how they currently feel is a stepping stone towards catering for their needs. Therefore, having baby boomers engage in online social network sites will be beneficial to SNS providers too.

1.2.2. Social benefits

OSN has a significant potential to edify golden baby boomers’ well-being [25; 33]. Participation of the elderly people on social networks could also be a solution to their social isolation by allowing them to keep in touch with family, relatives and friends [36]. Another benefit that a number of studies refer to is Social Capital. Social capital as originally defined by Bourdieu and Wacquant [33] is “the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” [33].

Li [34] define social capital as the combination of social links considered together with norms or standards of the mutual exchange of goods, services, favours, or obligations, especially a mutual exchange of privileges and trustworthiness.
According to Hanson [39] social capital is the investment in people in order to create a reciprocity obligation, which can be viewed as an asset. The internet, through online social networks, has the potential to serve as a booster of social capital by providing a platform for individuals to maintain and enhance social links among family and friends [19]. Older folk can take advantage of the internet’s social networking platforms and enjoy the benefits of being in touch with relatives, friends, and peers who are dispersed around the world [13].

Previous studies show that at old age, people prefer to maintain ties with people they have known over the years (friends), and their children and grandchildren than establishing new ties [22]. It also shows that older folk generally have a lack of a large social networks offline [16]. This generation focuses more on the creation of smaller close-knit relationships within their respective offline communities that already exist [22]. These close-knit relationships serve as social capital for golden baby boomers.

Therefore, basing on this definition, social networks can assist in the accumulation of social capital. To realise these benefits, golden baby boomers would have to participate in social networking. However, barriers to their adoption of the social networking technology have been noted. In order to realise these benefits, golden baby boomers would have to participate in social networking.

1.3. Objectives, research questions and target sample

The objective of this study is to investigate the golden baby boomers’ perceptions and beliefs in order to establish their perceived likelihood of participation on online social network sites. This objective has the following key questions to be addressed:

1. What are golden baby boomers’ perceptions towards online social networking?
2. What are golden baby boomers’ beliefs about online social networking?
3. How are golden baby boomers’ beliefs about online social networking conceived?

The following sub-questions have been established to simplify the investigation meant to address the posed key-questions:

1. What is it that meets golden baby boomers’ social networking needs?
2. How do golden baby boomers keep in touch with family, relatives and peers?
3. How do they keep updated of what their family, relatives and peers are doing, and how do they, in reciprocation, keep them updated of their current state?
4. How do golden baby boomers know or link with/ meet new friends/ people of similar or same interests?
5. What is golden baby boomers’ understanding/ views of online SNS?
6. What factors influence golden baby boomers’ views of SNS?

The sample for the study was drawn from South Africa’s Western Cape Province. The next section is a brief literature review on barriers to the adoption of SNS by GBBs. The theory of planned behaviour (TPB) was adopted as the framework for the study. We did not use the theory in its fullness, but only relevant concepts of the framework were considered. The next section describes and explains TPB and how it is used in the study.

2. Barriers to adoption of SNS by Golden Baby Boomers

Whilst online social networking can be beneficial to them, golden baby boomers find SNS to be time-wasting, and, do not understand where the younger generation get the time to participate in Social networking activities [28]. The average number of hours that social network users spend online is approximately three hours a day [27]. The other noted reason for their non-adoption of SNS revolves around trust and privacy. Baby boomers may fear the possible infringement of their privacy, because strangers can gain access to other people’s networks [23]. When communicating face to face, trust is fundamental for building new relationships and sharing information [6]. Trust is also critical for thriving online communications [6].

In related literature, past research has established that trust is strongly interconnected to information disclosure [6]. Social exchange theory has trust as its central component [32]. The social exchange theory gives a cost benefit analysis with respect to social interaction. When a social interaction seems to be advantageous, then an individual has high chances of engaging into an exchange relationship [6]. If there is low trust, that would result in a perception of high cost and vice versa. There are millions of people on social network sites and their profiles show their personal information. People who join social network sites may not trust everyone on the network [5].

All interactions on online social network sites are recorded and kept for potential future use. This makes it difficult to guarantee online social privacy. Therefore, clear policies and data protection means are thus required [5].
Another deterrent to the use of SNS is harassment or bullying [37]. A friend accepted by one’s friend to a site might use the opportunity to send hateful messages. People can also create false identities as a way to harass others. Peers may also belittle one another on SNS. There is also the issue of identity theft, i.e., “the unlawful use of another’s personal identifying information” [5].

Personal information on SNS can be accessed by third parties and that might result in online confidentiality risks such as identity theft, online and physical stalking; embarrassment, price discrimination and blackmailing [19]. The other negative aspect of SNS is crossing of personal-public boundaries [41]. The confidential information supplied on SNS can be used to infer other people’s private information [11]. For example, a study by Griffith and Jakobsson [17] showed that people used public records such as marriage data to infer individuals’ mothers’ maiden names. However, although total security cannot be guaranteed, measures have been taken, and continue to be taken which deal with SSN users’ concerns [26].

Facebook has received criticisms on privacy and security concerns in previous years. Basing on these concerns, they made efforts towards addressing them. To date, measures continue to be put in place in response to users’ concerns [39]. The fact that young people are engaging on online SNS and the networks are continuing to grow is an indicator that benefits outweigh the negative side of SNS [39]. Other barriers to the adoption of SNS are computer-illiteracy and deterioration in mental and physical abilities at old age, e.g. poor eyesight, hearing problems, and deficient of movement precision [16]. Physical and mental challenges should not be ignored in the design of online social network sites for golden baby boomers to be accommodated. However, this study focused on golden baby boomers who are physically fit, computer-literate, and have access to the internet.

3. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) is a social psychological theory of human behaviour [2; 18]. The person’s intention to perform a particular behaviour in a given context is the central factor of the TPB. The intention is influenced by:

- Attitude towards the behaviour;
- Subjective norms, and,
- Perceived behavioural control,

Which in turn influence the behaviour. Attitude towards the behaviour are the values placed on the behaviour expressed positively or negatively. Perceived behavioural control refers to people’s perceptions of their ability to perform a given behaviour. Subjective norm is the perceived social pressure to engage or not to engage in the behaviour. The behavioural intention can find expression in behaviour if the person performing the behaviour decides at will to carry out or not to carry out the behaviour. Some behaviour may meet this requirement well, however, its performance depends with the availability of resources and opportunities.

All together, these factors give a person the actual control over a person’s behaviour. The baby boomers in this study have already expressed the intention to not participate on online social networking despite having access to resources and opportunities. Their attitudes and subjective norms towards this behaviour are what the researchers investigated to explain the intentions which led to the behaviour.

4. Methodology

A qualitative research method and interpretive research philosophy was followed. The qualitative approach gave us researchers an opportunity to interact with the subjects (baby boomers) on their own terms [27]. The research sought to understand the sensitivity of baby boomers on online social networking sites through their values, opinions, beliefs and behaviours.

To achieve the research objective, we followed Myers [29]’s argument that qualitative research method assists researchers to understand people and the social and cultural contexts within which they live. To gain conceptual understanding of the problem at hand from collected qualitative data, we followed the principal of Klein and Myers [17] for doing interpretive field study. However, some ideas on how to conduct interpretive study in information systems were also borrowed from Walsham [14].

4.1. Sample

The selection of the sample was based on purposive sampling technique. The sample constituted elderly people aged 45 years and above. A total of 12 respondents were interviewed. In an attempt to capture representative detail, respondents were randomly picked from a park, from an institute of higher learning, and from family circles. Table 1 shows the summary of respondents and their associated age ranges.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>45-49</th>
<th>50-54</th>
<th>55-60</th>
<th>61+</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of participants</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Respondents associated age-range
The participants were functionally literate, computer literate, and had access to internet facilities and related technologies. This was to ensure that only perceptions pertaining to SNS are dealt with. The researchers selected participants relevant to the research question under investigation. Only the baby boomers who were not participating in any online social networking constituted the participant group.

4.2. Data collection
The primary method of collecting the data was semi-structured interviews. The principals of Myers and Newman [30] for conducting qualitative interviews were followed. All the interviewees provided convincing evidence of awareness of the existence of online social network sites and their ability to use computers and internet. The interviews were in-depth and each interview took approximately thirty minutes. Seven of the interviews were recorded while the remaining five were not recorded but detailed notes were taken down. The interviews which were not recorded were transcribed soon after the interview while the conversation was vivid in the researcher’s mind. The interviews took place in the offices of interviewees. All the participants were assured of anonymity.

4.3. Data analysis
This study used a general inductive approach to data analysis to allow the research findings to come out from recurrent and prevailing themes inherent in raw data [38]. To achieve this, Thomas [38] argued that the following steps have to be followed:

- Reduce extensive raw text data into summary format.
- Find and create links between the research objectives and the summery findings established from the qualitative row data. Make sure these links are both transparent.
- Build up framework or theory about the underlying structure of experiences or processes which are evident from the raw data.

4.3.1. The process of inductive coding
We followed Thomas’ [38] process of inductive coding, which involves the following process:
1. Preparation of raw data files: The raw data is formatted into a common layout. A backup for each file is made.
2. Close reading of text: The research read the data several times closely and gets understanding of the themes
3. Creation of categories: The researchers define the categories or themes.

4.3.2. Implementation of the Process of Inductive Coding
The interview scripts were made available to all researchers. The researchers read the transcripts independently several times to come up with multiple meanings inherently in raw data [38]. The Interview responses were analysed manually, without the use of any software. This was done to fully understand and correctly report on what was discovered. The use of software could have led the researchers to be removed from the real data collected [29; 30]. Every researcher got an opportunity to identify text segments in the interview transcripts and labelled the themes. Categories linked to the theory of planned behaviour were developed. These categories were tied to the developed themes. As the process of data analysis progressed, the descriptions of meanings of each category were emerging. After we completed the coding process, we compared the results. Inevitably, the differences in the results necessitated rereading of the transcripts. All the differences were resolved. The resulting constructs were used to create a theory that explains the common reasons why baby boomers do not take part in online social networks. The process of data analysis gave rise to the following findings.

5. Findings
The following seven themes were established from the enquiries on GBBs’ perceptions of online SNS: Security/Privacy, Exposure, Authenticity of respondents, Culture, Esteem, Value of online and Physical-presence interaction, and, Time. Figure 1 shows the emerging themes against their corresponding categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>Security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exposure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Authenticity of participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjective norms</td>
<td>Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Esteem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Value of online and physical presence interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived behavioural control</td>
<td>Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Value of online and physical presence interaction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Categories and Themes relationship
5.1. Attitudes

There were a few aspects of social networking sites that were positively valued by the interviewees. One positive was cost of getting up-to-date information about an individual of common interest. Although this was viewed as a positive it also negated the notion of showing one’s commitment to a relationship by being willing to pay to stay in touch. Security was mentioned by all interviewees as a problem area. Initially, some interviewees were not clear on security as opposed to privacy. On probing, it came out that they were two issues under security. First, the aspect of privacy, how secure is the information provided from other users or hackers. Secondly, the interviewees doubted sites owners’ adherence to the data protection Acts. Exposure to unsolicited content came up as an area of concern.

Although most of the interviewees were not primarily concerned with how they felt about the content in general. They were concerned that they would find something unpleasant about their children. They felt they need to respect their children’s privacy. Authenticity of participants worried some of the interviewees. They expressed concerns on the genuineness of the content posted on participants’ walls.

This view is supported by [2] when he found that older baby boomers were of the view that people form superficial relationships. Table 2 portrays Attitude themes- Security, Exposure and Authenticity, against respondents’ verbatim responses.

Table 2. Attitude themes and verbatim responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>verbatim examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Security of Participant</td>
<td>Yeah, but the security is not enough, people can always hack my information. Can’t trust website owners with all that personal information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposure To Unsolicited content</td>
<td>We would not want to be embarrassed, because chances of getting to know what we do not want to know about them in their interactions with their peers are high. It’s ok to use online social network sites (the participant was hesitant) but I don’t want to see what my daughter is doing. I am concerned about privacy; I will be exposed as the father. Face book can be quite intrusive; a written word is very different from a spoken word.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.2. Subjective norms

Culture influenced participation through the phenomenon’s conformance to acceptable behaviours [2]. Interviewees did not appreciate some of the conversations that took place on social networking sites. They felt that they might be exposed to some content which violated social norms. Comments like “we were not raised to disrespect other people” were brought up in interviews. Friends and family’s views on SNS also played a role in shaping golden baby boomers’ attitudes towards social networking sites. Esteem, i.e. the value that baby boomers placed on the effort one makes to communicate with friends and family. One interviewee suggested that social networking sites are a “cheap” way to get in touch with people. According to this interviewee one should be committed to pay to communicate with people one values.

On the value of online and physical presence interaction theme, the respondents placed high value in face to face or voice either telephonically or in the form of conferencing. The golden baby boomers felt they could easily control this attribute giving them the feeling of being much closer to the natural or real environment of interaction. Baby boomers can easily choose the communication channel that suits their value system. Table 3 portrays these subjective norms- Culture, Esteem, and Value of online and physical presence interaction, against the respondents’ verbatim responses.

Table 3. Subjective-Norm themes and verbatim responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>verbatim examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>The older generation were groomed with the culture of always valuing personal privacy. The other major thing is that social network sites are replacing formal communication. They are eroding the normal social conduct and I don’t like that kind of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esteem</td>
<td>Quite happy to pay for these on people we want to keep in touch with. They also e-mail, but we prefer to hear their voices than read</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


| Value Of Online and Physical presence interaction | I use skype, We have e-mails and mobile phones. Friends outside our profession are with us through skype and g-talk. Skype, phone, email, visit, sms, telepathy |

5.3. Perceived behavioural control

Apart from the channel of communication, time is another attribute under the baby boomer’s control. They all mentioned how time consuming social networking can be and for that reason they opt not to use the sites. This was true for all the respondents. Table 4 portrays the perceived behavioural control theme of ‘Time against the interviewees’ verbatim responses.

Table 4. Perceived Behavioural Control Themes and verbatim responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>verbatim examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>SNS would disturb me from doing my work. It takes up too much time and sometimes people get carried away on such sites</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Discussion of findings

The findings from this study show that there are baby boomers who, despite of having physical access as well as intellectual access to SNS, will choose not to engage on online SNS. The respondents for this study included highly educated people who use information technology for both work and home life. Therefore, lack of access and techno-phobia do not come into question.

One of the reasons cited by the respondents is fear of exposure to content that violate their cultural norms. For example, most respondents felt there are certain things that should not be in the public domain e.g. not all aspects of one’s children’s social life should be public. Most of them felt this was too high a price to pay and opted for alternative communication channels. Another reason for not adopting is their sense of the conflict between culture as they know it on the one hand and as it is expressed on SNS on the other hand. Most respondents felt that SNS are eroding the social fibre [10; 19]. Some expressed the view of a degenerative society coming up because of the way people tend to conduct themselves on their pages [11; 42]. The difference in cultural perspective makes it difficult for the elderly to share the space with the younger users. Some respondents explicitly indicated that they would prefer to leave the space for the young people whose behaviour on online social platforms considered to be culturally unacceptable.

Another hindrance from adoption was security from a wide range of aspects especially from those in charge of securing the information [5; 6]. They feared that some of the companies providing online social networking platforms could abuse information entrusted them by users [9].

One of the selling-points for SNS has been the need to build a social network- i.e. connect with old friends and create new relationships. Most of the respondents felt they had no need to “artificially” expand their networks. They felt they had enough friends already through real-world connections. The cost saving benefit did not particularly appeal to most golden baby boomers interviewed. Most of the respondents were financially comfortable and therefore could use the alternative channels of communication. They felt cheap resources are for the young people who are still to make it in life financially.

From the analysis it appears that the baby boomers perceived the price of using SNS too high compared to the benefits they could potentially gain from the use. The way the older community perceive the benefits and the costs of using SNS could be culturally driven and may be addressed through training.

7. Conclusions

SNS can potentially contribute towards acquisition and maintenance of social capital for people of different age groups. However, the usage of such technologies amongst the golden baby boomers is notably low. This study investigated the barriers to adoption amongst the baby boomers, and hence contributed to the debate on the adoption and impact of SNS amongst the older generation. The findings of the study has the potential of influencing the design of technology.

Due to time-constraints, our target sample was limited to South Africa’s Western Cape Province. Whilst this study is not comprehensive enough considering the sample space and time-constraints, this study has provided a foundation upon which further research and practitioner effort can be made towards winning golden baby boomers’ to participate in SNSs and have a positive experience when using them in order for them to become loyal participants.

8. References


