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# Digital Leisure in Later Life: Facebook Use among Romanian Senior Citizens

Dan CHIRIBUCA[1], Adriana TEODORESCU[2]

## Abstract

Set against a double background, the sociology of ageing and the digital sociology, and using concepts and theories from the field of leisure studies, the present study approached Romanian elderly (60+) users of Facebook in an exploratory qualitative research, combining content analysis, interviews and participative observation. The main objectives are to explore the elderly online behaviour in terms of preferences, distributed content, as well as motivations, perceived benefits and challenges related to their online life, and also to investigate the connection between their digital selves and their offline identities. The paper also discusses the measure in which social media is understood by Romanian senior citizens as a digital leisure, beyond the instrumental role of connecting the lonely elders with their families and friends. The study reveals the tension between the attraction that Facebook exerts on Romanian seniors and the anxiety it generates. It highlights also that for Romanian elders, Facebook provides a fragile digital leisure, as they see their time spent on the social network as rather shallow and hedonistic. Moreover, seeing Facebook as a territory dominated by younger generations contributes to digital exclusion, sometimes along with a feeling of inadequacy and vulnerability.

*Keywords*: seniors, old age, digital leisure, social media, Facebook.

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# Introduction

Despite a growing number of public policies supporting social inclusion (Scharf *et al.*, 2001), elderly people remain, in various ways, a vulnerable social category in the entire world, from being exposed to ageism (Bower, 2011: 32-60; Gullette, 2017) to facing specific difficult economic or medical situations (Clarke, 2011; Gawande, 2014; Lehaci *et al.*, 2016). A significant number of previous studies have shown that using the internet and especially social media comprises a number of benefits for the elders, having a great potential to mitigate a variety of issues related to old age – loneliness, boredom, social disengagement, lack of information – and to create a sense of empowerment. Through all these, social media could substantially contribute to social inclusion, by allowing them to maintain relationships, reconnect with long-distance friends, engage in civic issues, educate themselves, preserve or improve good health, and by providing various forms of entertainment (Charness & Schaie, 2003; Blaschke *et al.*, 2009; Loos *et al.*, 2012; Xie *et al.*, 2012; Leist, 2013; VanBlarcom, 2018; E-seniors, 2019).

Still, the use of the internet by the elderly is not something that comes naturally and there is no simple solution for the seniors' lack of ability – often considered emblematic – to utilise it. As a matter of fact, since Marc Prensky's article (2001), the distinction between 'digital natives' (young people born into the digital world) and 'digital immigrants' (including the senior citizens who can only partially overcome their technological disadvantage) entered both the popular and the scholarly vocabulary, with the risk of oversimplifying complex social realities (Loos, 2012; Loos *et al.*, 2012; Domínguez-Rué & Nierling, 2016).

The truth is that although the number of seniors who use the internet has been steadily increasing in the last years, they still remain the age-segment the least likely to go digital. The discussion about the "digital divide" (Ragnedda & Muschert, 2018) – a source of perpetuating age stereotypes – between seniors and other age groups is followed by the concern with a less explored digital divide, that between the seniors themselves (Loos *et al.*, 2012), grounded in the fact that the majority of those who access the Internet are males, highly educated, married and affluent (Smith, 2014).

Anyway, the term of "digital divide" assumes that internet users are rather homogeneous and differences among various social groups are unequivocal. From this point of view, "digital spectrum" (Lenhart & Horrigan, 2003) seems more appropriate, as elders are more diverse in terms of their internet use than previously considered (Loos, 2012; Malta & Wilding, 2018). By putting aside the binary approach and the clear-cut distinction between users and non-users, "digital spectrum" allows us to highlight the differences between "truly unconnected" and "the home broadband users", both as social groups and social behaviours.

Nevertheless, simply pointing out the differences between seniors might not be enough. Until now there has not been much interest as regards the social features, attitudes and behaviours of the elders who inhabit the digital realm of social media (Chisnell & Redish, 2012). The fact that more and more elders become internet users is often celebrated not only as a proof of social inclusion, but also as an indicator that the internet and social media are instrumental for elders in achieving a sense of empowerment and (re)gaining social visibility (Sauer, 2018; Onibalusi, 2019; Retirement Living, 2020). The problem is that these benefits are asserted without taking into account the whole range of social and personal implications for the elders and without enough data to confirm what truly happens (Olphert *et al.,* 2005; Herold, 2012). For example, if the concerns related to the consequences of social media overuse in children and adolescents and the addictive side of the internet, from social media to video games, have been topics for social studies for over 20 years, the same is not applied when the users are the elders (Olphert *et al*., 2005; Bitner, 2018). Moreover, researches are arguing – somehow counterintuitively – that discourses over-confident in the idea according to which the use of information and communications technology leads to social inclusion are fostering a "growing exclusivity in society" that affects both elders and younger generations (Herold, 2012).

In such a context, we cannot ignore that the relationship between elders and internet technologies is both problematic and paradoxical. On one hand, the internet seems to help senior citizens to become less socially vulnerable and to achieve a sense of inclusion and independence, while on the other, it contributes in redoubling the social exclusion and social vulnerability of the elders. Some of the reasons for the latter effects are: the elders' documented delay and reluctance in adopting computer communications technologies (Charness & Schaie, 2003; Olphert *et al*., 2005), the fact that digital technologies are more accessible to young people, as they are predominately made by young persons for their peers (Hagberg, 2012), and the access dependable on disposable income (Herold, 2012). In other words, while internet technologies appear to have an emancipatory potential, it seems that the seniors remain the most disadvantaged in relation to them.

## Stakes in exploring digital leisure in later life

Being aware of the multitude of biases regarding the social effects of the information and communication technologies, but acknowledging the relevance of internet and ICT for understanding ageing and old age in contemporary societies, we approached Romanian elderly (60+) users of Facebook in an exploratory qualitative research with two objectives: a) to explore the elderly online behaviour in terms of preferences, distributed content (created, selected, shared), as well as motivations, perceived benefits and challenges related to their online life; b) to investigate the relation between their digital selves and their offline identities. Do

digital lives mirror and reflect the offline identities, or the former is nourished and developed cathartically as an anti-aging resource through compensatory fictions and/or virtual identities, different from and significantly younger than the real ones? If the online self is used as a Fountain of Youth, how are the elders rewriting and adjusting their life stories according to what is socially desirable for an older person?

Through all this, we will discuss the measure in which social media is understood by Romanian senior citizens as part of a cultural practice of leisure beyond the classical instrumental role of connecting the lonely elders with their families and friends. This is important as there are strong positive associations between leisure activities, and social connectedness and integration in old age (Toepoel, 2013; Nimrod & Shrira, 2016). However, in Romania seems to prevail a rather stereotyped framing of the meaning of old age and the roles ascribed to elders within family and society, making leisure appear rather as an exotic subject. According to this traditionalist perspective, old age is a passive and meditative age, bringing a substantial diminishment of energy that should be channelled into raising grandchildren, with little space for a culturally legitimised leisure in which social media could play a considerable role. Also, in the last years, there has been a proliferation of negative narratives concerning Romanian seniors: way too numerous in comparisons with the younger generations, they put incredible pressure on the retirement and pension system, and they can be easily manipulated by politicians, especially via television. Following this kind of narratives, old age appears as a sort of disease, consisting of social disengagement, obsolescence and anachronistic thinking (Teodorescu & Chiribuca, 2018). In such a context, social media stands for a forbidden land, a territory belonging to others, the younger ones who, unlike the elders, are skilled and prepared to use and benefit from the fruits of the digital realm. Even when the elders get temporary passes, the acceptance is limited and their presence inappropriate because it is believed they have a (closed) life experience too obsolete to be really and fully connected to the network. Thus, one of the study's main topics was to find out how the acknowledged emancipatory potential of social media correlates with the self-expression and participation of the elders in the online space. We also explored how the time spent on Facebook, specifically the one perceived as leisure, is related to better social inclusion, either subjective or real.

The study is set against a double background, that of the sociology of ageing and that of the digital sociology (DiMaggio *et al.*, 2001, DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2002 ), using also concepts and theories from the field of leisure studies that are built on the idea that leisure is a meaningful part of life, source of happiness and wellbeing (Caldwell, 2005) and thus needs to be investigated by social sciences (Argyle, 1996). There are two elements that need to be stressed out at this point to better understand our methodological choices. The first one is related to the internet. It is worth mentioning that Romania's internet landscape ('INS, 2017) is intriguing from a twofold perspective: based on the average broadband speed it is ranked

fourth among European countries with a penetration rate of 73,3% (EU average rate – 85,2%), but only 44,8% of people aged 55-74 have used at least once the internet (16-34 age – 91,5%; 35-54 age – 79,2%), in sharp contrast, for example, with the USA where 67% of the seniors aged 65+ are internet users (Anderson & Perrin, 2017). The second one is related to leisure in connection to the internet: the fact that leisure is always contextual and dependent on lifestyle and income (Henderson *et al.*, 2004) is relativized in the era of the Internet, when although processes of economic transactions and commodification are subtly articulating the online social life, "digital leisure appears to be seamlessly communicative and liberating" (Spracklen, 2015).

Studies interested in internet as a source of leisure for the Romanian elderly are scarce. An extensive research undertaken in Romania in 2015 (Rada, 2015) aimed to find out how people spend their leisure time and also to identify the impact of social and demographical features on it. The data concerning the seniors are collateral and says nothing about the socio-psychological particularities of this age group in relation to the use of the internet. Spending recreative time on the internet is viewed as similar to spending time watching television, both being put under the same judgemental umbrella: they diminish the interest in doing physical activity, thus having a negative influence on health. Another study (Cosma *et. al.*, 2018) examines the amount of time spent by Romanians in leisure activities. The research revealed that respondents spent 4,6 hours engaged in leisure activities during a working day and 9,3 hours in a non-working day and that people's free time decrease as they grow older. Unlike the previous research, the authors found that both in a working and a free day surfing on the internet was the most frequent activity (for around 60% of the respondents. However, it is not clear what conclusions could be drawn from here regarding the seniors, taking into account that what authors call seniors are people between 55 and 64 years and they represent only 4,61% from the total of respondents.

As concerns our study the data were collected through 16 semi-structured individual interviews and content analysis of more than 100 Facebook accounts of people of 60+ years. The Facebook accounts were selected taking into consideration two criteria: the diversity related to age, social status, education, location and the gender parity. We started by exploring the accounts available in our personal Facebook networks, then we extended analysis to the accounts of our contacts' contacts. At that stage, there were also some constraints: depending on their settings, not all relevant content was visible. Also, data were collected from more accounts belonging to women than men. The criterion of diversity was essential also in selecting the persons to be interviewed. We invited persons of which accounts we already analysed and also other persons of whom we knew they have a significant interest in using social networks or an interesting personal history related to it. Also, relevant information was obtained by participative observation as one of the authors of this study was involved as a volunteer trainer in a project dedicated to Romanian senior citizens (City Hall and Cluj-Napoca Local Council,

2019). The main objectives of the project were to teach senior citizens how to use the internet and social networks, specifically Facebook, and to acquire digital skills. The direct observation of the elders and informal discussions with them and other participants (trainers, managers, volunteers, etc.) were very useful in collecting information related to our topics of interest.

## A double denial of age and need for leisure

Although the elders are the fastest-growing age category of Facebook users (Pachana, 2017; Vogels, 2019), it appears that among the Romanian seniors the social media network has a rather controversial, if not negative reputation. This is the first conclusion that we draw both from the participant observations and informal discussions with the elders within the project *Digital Seniors* and from the reactions that the elders had when contacted to be interviewed for this study. The seniors expressed, often with a virulent tone, their disinterest in being helped by the trainers to create an account and insisted that they do not need Facebook because *it is a waste of time*. Asking them why they felt that way, they declared that it is well-known, and they can also add stories of their peers, that Facebook hinders seniors from doing their domestic tasks, such as taking care of grandchildren or doing house chores. Also, some of them said that Facebook is more suited for younger generations simply because they are *already* all on Facebook and because they do not look so ridiculous as the elders when sending photos and texting all day to friends. They provide examples by depicting their adolescent grandchildren that are 'all day on Facebook'.

Moreover, one of the ladies participating in the course dedicated to social media told us loudly and proudly, with a sense of superiority to those that, without being very excited about this and sometimes with a trace of shame and timidity, had just admitted they have Facebook accounts: "I don't have a Facebook account. My son does not allow me; he is an expert in cyber-security, and he does not want me to have an account; he tells me that it is useless, that I can do whatever I want by surfing the internet, but no, no Facebook. It is not safe, and you waste your time on it". We encountered relatively many similar situations when seniors mentioned their children as being against the idea of them using Facebook for basically the same reason: digital insecurity. It is interesting to observe here an infantilization that results from the reversal of the parent-child power relationship, with the parent being patronised by the grown-up child. In a way, it is a surprising form of age-denial. Facebook appears as a forbidden land – it might be attractive, but the seniors have to abstain, like good kids, from yielding into it, as it is not *safe*. If we couple all these attitudes towards Facebook, we will see an underlying paradox: on one side, seniors are similar to children – thus, they should rightfully have enough time to *get ridiculous* and enjoy using Facebook gratuitously, without another aim than pure leisure and on the other, they have chores to do (example: grandchildren

to raise) so Facebook seems inappropriate. Furthermore, the fact that they are restricted from enjoying Facebook by their children who act rather like parents, while they actually believe Facebook is for adolescents is also paradoxical. To put it in other words, when age is accepted, leisure is denied, but when age is in its turn denied, leisure is still not restored as a possibility.

In the second circumstance, that of the qualitative study about Romanian senior citizens' use and perception of social media, digital leisure also appeared as problematic from the very early stage, when we tried to set up interviews with social media users having over 60 years. Besides consents, we documented three patterns of responses, all of them being related to how digital leisure is understood by seniors.

Remarkably frequent was a firm refuse to participate in any form of interview. Regardless the approach (face to face, e-mail, or quite ironically, via Facebook messenger), the invitation decline was grounded in two main arguments: the person's self-presumed lack of expertise and the rejection of chronological age as a selection criterion (namely 60+), because that was perceived to be not so relevant as their subjective age. Six persons told us *I am not an expert on Facebook* and objected to our explanations – that we are not interviewing experts and that we do not test skills – saying that they are using Facebook social network extremely rarely (*I did not use the account for weeks/months now*) and thus they did not acquire a minimal knowledge or competence in using it. Some of them showed signs of anxiety and even resorted to lying. This fear may indicate a form of impostor syndrome, in the sense that those seniors see themselves as some sort of illegal residents in the digital, social media realm that actually should belong to the younger generations, confirming Mark Prensky's (2001) above-mentioned theories. In fact, it is more likely that confirmations interfere with self-views of the elders as disconnected from leisure and anxieties related to the interview as a special (unpredictable in content and consequences) social situation.

*I am not an old person, or I don't feel like being one; anyway, I am not suited to be interviewed.* After encountering this reaction in four cases, we learned our lesson and decided to apply a strategy effective in advertising (Sudbury-Riley *et al.*, 2015; Prieler & Kohlbacher, 2016): for the elders to be able to strongly identify themselves with the old people represented within the commercials, there has to be a difference of not less than 10 years between the targeted age in the commercials and the real age of the actors. Thus, in order to improve the acceptance rate, we told them we are interested in people aged 50+, avoiding mentioning terms such as *seniors*, *elders* or *over 60*. This reveals the fact that the seniors do not see themselves as old, that there is a gap between the chronological age and the subjective one and it could also raise questions regarding a possible negative perception of old age.

The second pattern of responses to our invitation was to decline to have a face to face interview or a telephonic one (we propose this form when the

person was too hard to reach geographically). The explanation was: *I am by far more able to focus and express my ideas in writing*. Other times, after agreeing together with proceeding with the interview, they never replied to our calls and messages. It would be too much to claim that, in this case, we are dealing with a direct and obvious denial of leisure. Nonetheless, this uneasiness in consenting to be interviewed on such a topic proved to be the sign of repressing or taming spontaneous behaviour as a forerunner of leisure. Anticipating the next part, where we will discuss the research findings from analysing the interviews, some seniors completely suppressed the playful side of Facebook and considering it rather as a 'serious' feature, between news and electronic agenda.

Another pattern was to accept the interview but only after emphasizing the idea that they barely use social media although they were passionate users (the invitations were addressed based on the analysis of their social media activity). Similar to children caught stealing sweets, these seniors denied the possible satisfaction they could have got from going online by choosing to narrow their online activities to one exclusively and asserting its utilitarian function and imperative nature: *I am 'only' searching for recipes/gardening tips/staying in touch with family* when *needed*. Moreover, they insisted that this exclusive activity happens rarely.

## Digital leisure at crossroad: allowing, controlling, avoiding

One of our main stakes was to understand the place of social media in the elders' life: how much time do they spend on social networks and how do they understand this time in terms of substance and meaning. The data generated by the content analysis of the Facebook accounts of persons aged 60+ were less generous, as it was hard to grasp all the invisible activity and its intensity such as reading news and posts or engaging with others via messenger. However, taking into account the available content, there is no doubt that Facebook is a part of elders' leisure. Some examples of the content they share include information related to themselves, such as pictures with grandchildren or family (both men and women), about their hobbies (such as fishing, cooking, gardening), jokes, funny pictures with children and animals, pictures with sexual content (exclusively men's case) or romanticised nature landscape (both men and women, but more frequent for women), religious pedagogical narratives, encouragements for diverse participants in sport competitions, lots of happy birthday or onomastic wishes, articles related to diet, food, recipes or medical advice (many of them pertaining rather to *pop* medicine, such as ideas about various correlations between cancer and emotions), posts of Romanian celebrities on a variety of topics, links to online fragments of TV shows, etc.

Conducting the interviews, it soon became clear that social media was perceived as being the same with Facebook social network, and to some degree with WhatsApp, the latter being preferred when interactions involve participants

without Facebook accounts. One person described Facebook as being, for her, almost the synonym of the internet, as Facebook fulfils completely her needs of spending time in an exciting way so that she does not need the internet (*i.e.* the internet *except* Facebook) anymore. All the interviewees acknowledged that Facebook is part of their life routine and that they know many peers enjoying the time spent on Facebook. The vast majority of them check their Facebook accounts daily or at least twice per day, having privileged times for doing this, as for example while having their cup of coffee in the morning, after finishing the daily house chores or when grandchildren had gone to sleep. Facebook is associated with pleasure and an intimate time dedicated to oneself that contrasts with the time spent for others' necessities and desires, and which could stand, even when they are retired, for work: "I am interested in Facebook and the internet. I am interested in all that is happening in the virtual world. And in the winter, I am every day on Facebook (…). I would surf more each day, but here, in the countryside, there is so much daily work to do. It is great being on Facebook, I really indulge myself, for me Facebook is extraordinary", or "I play four games on Facebook that drive me crazy: Candy Crush, Candy Crush Jelly, and two others. Now that I have to take care of my grandchildren I cannot play so much. But before they came to live with me, oh, you cannot imagine how much and how passionately I played. And now, I could play during the evening, after I put them to sleep, but I still don't have too much time".

However, the pleasure that Facebook provides is usually perceived (by almost all the participants in the study) as if it could unpredictably expand and thus needs to be carefully controlled. The most considerable risks of such an outbreak are: *staying too long on Facebook without planning to do so* or, worse, *without being capable of putting an end to the online activity even when it is too much*; interfering with household activities (it was the case especially for women); raising conflict with partners that do not use Facebook (also only for women); and even damaging the eyesight. The same risks were identified by the seniors participating in the *Digital Seniors* project, maybe with a greater emphasis on the first one. They tended to discuss these risks in conjunction with complaints about technical functionalities that preclude them from being active users. Some respondents confessed they experienced themselves an attraction towards Facebook that led to a sort of addiction ("I want to stay on Facebook for 30 minutes, and then I realise that three hours had gone too fast and I wonder where and for what did these 3 hours passed? And I feel I am going to die!"), while others did not, but revealed they fear it intensively, part of them admitting they could be on the brink of losing their power to say no to the variety of entertainment activities offered by Facebook. In some cases, the interviewed persons appeared to almost decide during the interview itself, to renounce using Facebook or at least to reduce the time spent there, an emotional reaction that could indicate a feeling of guilt: "It is so easy to like being on Facebook. But I realized latterly, yes, I truly realized that I am losing too much time on Facebook. At home, if I begin to look at what

others post, I look and keep looking so that I forget about doing house chores. Not that I am too busy, anyway. But, still, I cannot control too efficiently my time, and sometimes I have the impression that it is way too much. It is a waste of time! To think that you could do something more useful and good. I believe I am going to quit. Yes, I will. I am not interested in social networks. As a first step, I will decrease the time I spend on Facebook".

It looks like because of not being able to truly compete with something useful and good, and, on the contrary, carrying the risk of personal confusion and interpersonal dissension (if we consider here the domestic quarrels in a couple), Facebook tends to be constantly regarded with anxiety and even to generate shame in seniors that are confronted with analysing their online behaviour through the interviews. *Not to exaggerate* is a refrain for many seniors that translates their preoccupation with finding the right measure and it is also a mechanism of sanctioning what is considered inappropriate behaviour, of self-taming in relation to social media use: "I always take care not to exaggerate. I use it in the morning, after lunch and in the evening. But I am not staying too long. I do not exaggerate. And this not because it does not attract me, nor because I am afraid of becoming addicted to it. But I know it is not good. (…) ". The fact is, on one hand, that, here again, our seniors tend to deny their right to 'lose' time and on the other hand they measure leisure activities with the ethical instruments used to measure utilitarian activities. Therefore, there were moments when the interview has transformed, despite our efforts to create a warm and non-judgmental space, into the quasi-equivalent of a process: they pleaded guilty of enjoying Facebook.

On the other hand, seniors' concern with supervising the power that Facebook has or could have over them, as well as this impulse to cling on the one listening to them (in this case, the interviewer) as a support for their decision to limit the time spent online, could be analysed also in relation to the threat of addiction and not only as symptoms of denying leisure in general and digital leisure in particular. Indeed, many seniors were aware of the addictive potential of Facebook and some of them displayed consistent knowledge related to teenagers' addiction to social media. This finding may reveal the insufficiencies in the studies that focus almost exclusively on the positive outputs of the internet technologies and celebrate seniors' adoption of social media as naturally leading to empowerment while neglecting the addictive side on which other studies insist greatly in what regards the younger generations (Alter, 2015; Bitner, 2018). Interestingly, many of the interviewees have discussed the dangers of social media for their children and grandchildren, offering plenty of examples of them being over-absorbed into their online activities with negative consequences concerning family relationships, interest in school and education, personal security, etc. Taking into account both this awareness and seniors preoccupation with managing their time on Facebook, it becomes clear that aspects as the alteration of focus, attention, and memory due to multitasking behaviours promoted by computer and digital technologies, what tech philosopher Tom Chatfield (2012) called the *Darwinian competition*

*for attention* that characterises almost every internet page, need to be addressed also in conjunction with the specific cognitive and social features of the elderly.

We identified two apparent inconsistencies regarding seniors' attitudes towards Facebook that also contribute to complicating the idea of digital leisure both possible and fully socially authorized via Facebook. The first has to do with the perceived benefits of Facebook. The same individuals that narrated how Facebook is or was of great help in overcoming boredom and even depression after the loss of a life-partner or after going through a divorce, also surprisingly declared that it would be very easy for them not to have access to the social network for one week, a month, or even longer. An interviewee that glorified the role of Facebook in her life – having a sense of connection with the world when experiencing deep solitude after her husband's death – told us that she is seriously thinking to quit social media with no apparent motivation other than that she had enough, that everything is a huge 'waste of time': "I was alone for so long before Facebook. With its help, I filled my time with nice activities. I was alone at home for long hours. What would I have done without Facebook? Now I am bored with it, I think I am going to quit (…) It is a waste of time (…) It was a great pleasure surfing on Facebook, looking at what others posted. At a certain time, it was even extraordinary. It was my companionship when I was down". We could comment a lot on this, but what is clear is that such cases are indicators that the relation to social media is changing over time, that the online and offline experiences are tightly connected and that both the social and personal perception of leisure could be responsible for shaping this connection.

The second apparent inconsistency is related to the perception of the time spent on Facebook. Many seniors claim that they are not spending too much time on Facebook either genuinely (they simply do not have this impulse) or because of other constraints (offline obligations such as housekeeping) or that they manage by themselves to resist the temptation to do so (efficient self-management). Still, when asked how they would feel to live without Facebook, the same people answered they would gain significant time for other activities, including for writing books, and they see almost exclusively advantages in being forced, one way or another, to renounce to their Facebook activity. It could indicate that, on one hand, they conceal from us or from themselves the truth about the actual time spent online and on the other, they give voice to the difficulties of controlling the time spent on Facebook.

## Interpersonal and (not too) personal on Facebook

The need to limit the time spent on Facebook seems related, at least declaratively, to the need of resisting the pleasure generated by the limitless leisure made possible by Facebook. That could explain why the elders disproportionately insist on the practical side of their Facebook interactions and why they are reluctant to speak or

even recognize the pleasure-seeking side associated with socializing in the virtual realm. Many of the seniors that we interviewed described Facebook interactions as the main reason for being there and having two functions: reconnecting and maintaining. Reconnection refers to getting back in touch with lost friends from childhood and youth period, with ex-colleagues from high-school or work living abroad. Maintaining refers to online relationships with friends and family that they already have and take care of in offline space, but only in more modest terms of being up to date with what is happening to them. As regards the Facebook groups where the seniors get involved more or less but to which they belong as members, they declare they use them mainly as channels for finding new information (e.g.: fishing, cooking, medical advice, etc.), not for the acquaintance of new people. Moreover, many of them displayed a sort of conceit in telling us that they are not sending friend requests, some of them not even to the people they admit knowing, and when they do surrender to temptation, the main criterion is the existence of common friends. And the same goes for accepting friend requests.

In their research on what encourages the elders to use the internet to communicate with others, Loredana Ivan and Mireia Fernández-Ardèvol (2014) discovered that the fact of not being in the proximity of children and especially grandchildren, mostly by moving abroad, coupled with the will to share their daily life-experiences, represents the greatest incentive in learning or re-learning to use social media or other communication technologies. It is a finding that refers to Romania and also to other five countries (USA, Spain, Uruguay, Canada, Peru) and applies to persons over 60 years, irrespective of their socio-economic status, that reinforces previous studies (Loos *et. al.*, 2012) emphasising the utilitarian use of the internet and the obstruction or the absence of a pleasure-oriented approach. Another conclusion of their research is that once that the family overcomes physical separation, the motivation is lost and the interest in employing digital technologies diminishes. The research does not address the problem of diversity and different gender responses and it seems to disregard the latent social motivations or, on the contrary, apprehensions for going online.

All these aspects wouldn't be too problematic if they were a sheer reflection of seniors' patterns of using Facebook, capturing their authentic understanding of the reasons for which they use the social network. But there is a subtle process of leisure avoidance and mystification that can be traced in comparing how they present digital interaction as having practical aims and as being the main motivator for using Facebook ("I talk to people, cousins, family. It is why I use Facebook, always taking care not to be exposed, I don't like it") and other parts of the same people's responses where the joy, the enthusiasm they get from being on Facebook are almost palpable ("What I like best is that you can access your account and see so many things. For example, if I want to visit your page, I can do it. I can see the places that you travelled to, the images that you post. Some people do not post beautiful images, but I do not look on their pages (…) I search for food recipes, I enjoy watching commercials"; "Because on Facebook I can travel wherever I

want. In places I am convinced I will never get the chance to visit in this lifetime"). It might be that our elders feel they are not truly entitled to recreate and amuse via Facebook, that they have internalised the wrongful idea that having fun is inappropriate for old people (Coughlin, 2018). There were, however, also seniors that explained the idea of "being in contact" with other people in a different key: insisting on the pleasure they have in discovering photos with their friends and acquaintances, and in processing new information about them – the places they travelled to, how they grandchildren or spouses look like, implicit and explicit life stories that they decipher in what they post on their wall, etc. – that could not be interpreted as 'practical' or 'useful'.

Here may lie also some conflicts between a social, public image and a personal reality.

They must preserve their public image of people with a rich life-experience being in control and avoiding indulging themselves into social media distractions, continuing to work when they are no more formally employed. But their personal reality is that they really enjoy staying on Facebook and socialising with others, that they fear not being able of deciding and controlling the *right time* to spend on the social network, and the right number of *friends.*

Again, seeing Facebook as the provider for personal, individual pleasure could inflict feelings of guilt, stimulating seniors' desire to take distance from it, this being the case especially for women. In fact, studies have shown that leisure is more problematic for women in comparison to men, because of 'the uneven distribution of unpaid work' (Bittman & Wajcman, 2000). In a country that places much emphasis on the role of grandparent and, on the other side, has a poor infrastructure of child-care facilities, for many women the unpaid domestic work continues, in disguised, after retirement, in forms such as taking care of grandchildren and helping children with household activities.

An extended discussion of these data should take into account at least two elements. Firstly, the meanings the elders assign to *friend* in general and the measure in which these meanings overlap with the meanings of friend in Facebook's acceptance. Secondly, in connection with the topics of virtual friend and online friendship, the concern for digital security. For many seniors that we interviewed a new online friend brings the risk of being sexually harassed and poses problems related to digital or life security. As such, a friend request may be an attempt of stealing identity or finding information about the place where they live in order to rob them or simply do harm. Furthermore, both implications should be considered against the background of contemporary over-emphasis on friendship and extroversion, which are rather the assets of younger generations. Research has shown that the shrinkage of the social network in older adults is a reality but also that this reality should not be seen as a sign of disengagement or passivity (Pachana, 2017), but of a greater capacity of being selective and able to concentrate on qualitative and emotional relationships. The mechanism through which this

capacity is enabled is the change in the perception of time. As explained by Laura Carstensen, with ageing comes also the sensation that we have left to live less than we have already lived and thus the subsequent prioritization of relationships (Carstensen *et al*., 1999; Carstensen *et al*., 2003), so that the elders' social networks are composed of "well-known and emotionally close social partners" (Carstensen *et al*., 2003).

Another aim of our study was to examine if the ways in which the seniors see the relationships between generations – as they appear on Facebook – could influence their ability to pursue leisure activities on social media. This is important in the context of the still resistant general perception that the use of social media and the internet, in general, is representative for young adults (Prensky, 2001). The idea was to find out if consciously or unknowingly considering Facebook a typical leisure for the younger generation could hamper them to fully enjoy it by rendering the idea of spending time on Facebook improper or unethical. What we found is that in terms of perceived differences between generations, the seniors that we interviewed underlined as typical for the elders the careful selection of the information posted on the wall, as opposed to the freedom of expression of the younger ones (freedom often degenerating in insolence), the care for a *proper* language as opposed to the apparent lack of rules of the youth, and the reluctance in engaging in contradictory discussions, as opposed to the verbal impetuosity of younger people and their often-conflictual attitude. A special feature of the elders is believed to be the lack of interest in political topics. It is obvious that in such a context, seniors cannot enjoy a complete digital freedom and that they have to be cautious with how they act on social media, especially if they have in their lists of friends (and, from our research, they all have) a significant number of younger persons. However, more seniors affirmed that they did not notice any significant difference based on the age of Facebook users, character and personality differences being much more prevalent. Still, not all of them seemed very convinced.

In fact, we observed a partial veiling of the intergenerational tension. This tension is barely visible within the interviews, probably because of the elders' non-engagement in what could be considered conflictual situations. For at least some of the persons that we interviewed we knew they had smouldering conflicts with members of their families, especially with the younger ones, rooted in the elders' technological dependence on the younger kin, but not only (there were also, for example, dissensions related to raising grandchildren or important life decisions of their children). During the interviews, almost all the elders acknowledged that it was their son or daughter who helped them create their Facebook accounts. However, before or after the interview, they allow themselves to express their frustration for being scolded by their children, sometimes repetitively, because of not using Facebook properly or to declare they would prefer to seek tech help elsewhere than within the family. It was a complaint frequently encountered also within the discussions with the vast majority of elders from the *Digital Seniors* project that were more vehement in indicating various tensions between generations

in a polarised "us and them" narrative. Thus, we tend to believe that the participants did not express how they feel about age-related differences on Facebook because of this non-conflictual mantra that might be born, at least partially, from a certain sense of depending upon their children in relation to technology. This is another reason for which finding in Facebook an appropriate, non-contested, easy to reach realm of leisure is difficult for elders. Also, it is worth to mention that social media grounded conflicts between wives and husbands – especially when one of them is not a user – seem easier to be acknowledged.

Perhaps what surprised us the most was the fact that the majority of the participants declared they do not post personal, non-mediated content on their Facebook accounts. Only four interviewed persons did not follow this path: three men, a writer, a journalist, and a university professor, and a woman, writer and teacher. The finding is consistent with the results of content analysis which revealed extremely few posts containing personal thoughts, ideas, impressions of the accounts' owners. The relevant exceptions seem to be related to a certain level of social and cultural recognition, no matter if the users are in their 60's or 70's. It is a subtle memento that class and gender often matter more than age (Phillipson, 2013).

Asked why they eschew posting personal content, the seniors draw on ideas such as: 'I don't feel the need to do it', 'I use Facebook just for communicating with others via personal messenger', 'I have troubles expressing myself, so I choose to use others' words and post them', 'I am afraid I cannot satisfy the expectations and political opinions of all my Facebook friends', 'I don't want to upset my family' – part of them already mentioned in other contexts. It appears that despite providing leisure opportunities – no matter how problematic, contested and insufficiently assumed, as we saw – the expression of the self is not encouraged on Facebook, at least for the seniors that we interviewed. This raises questions regarding the authenticity of social inclusion that Facebook is capable of in the case of Romanian seniors. Seniors can indeed have access to a variety of information and a great advantage is the possibility to interact with family and friends, but does the risk of being discriminated based on age still persist? As it appears from our study, although Facebook can provide leisure opportunities for seniors, it is still far from being an instrument of empowerment as one could ideally expect, in the absence of a personal voice, of undreaded social media visibility, of civic engagement. On the other hand, most probably, the very fact that the seniors gain a certain online visibility, that they can share content and thus have an indirect, barrowed, neutral voice are indicative of a form of social empowerment. Further research has to be undertaken to have a more accurate perspective on all these aspects.

The anti-conflictual, fearful and reluctant attitude that characterises the online behaviour of Romanian senior citizens could have found some compensations in choosing to have an alternative identity or account on Facebook. At least theoretically, it could have offered an increased sense of freedom and creativity, bringing also the possibility to counteract, through a playful attitude, the weight

of the chronological age, by choosing a younger identity. Surprisingly for us, who were pretty sure we will find at least a few such cases, not only that all of the seniors from our study denied having an avatar, the majority of them also displayed strong contempt towards this ludic possibility or towards people believed to have an avatar. It seems that self-expression has to be produced exclusively through traditional routes and rejects a playful reconstruction of identity in an alternative reality. Moreover, this attitude could also correlate with their mistrust in any friend request that comes from unknown people: "there are also fake profiles. I don't like the idea. Who knows who will spy you if you respond to their friendship requests"? However, referring to other seniors that choose to resort to avatars in order to have more freedom, an interviewee seemed to be more tolerant with the idea and observed the social pressure that can be experienced by the elders in what concerns digital leisure and, perhaps, leisure in general: "there are people that considers that for the elderly Facebook stands for lack of respectability and entertainment. I too was scorned when I created my account. Yes, yes, I remember I really was derided. I did not care. Probably because I reached a certain age and that's why. To them, it seems that I do not have the right age. I was mocked, but I don't care. I feel good on Facebook and I do not owe them any explanation, it is entirely my problem. If they want to laugh, so be it".

## Conclusion

From our research findings, it came out that Romanian seniors tend to avoid acknowledging to others and also to themselves that they simply enjoy Facebook, as they associate the time spent using Facebook to a time of leisure understood narrowly, as shallow and hedonistic. Seeing Facebook as a territory dominated by younger generations, as mentality and predominance – and sometimes in relation to the process of infantilization generated by the reversed child-parent relationship – contributes to digital exclusion, sometimes along with a feeling of inadequacy and vulnerability. Leisure on Facebook is regarded with anxiety and often denied in various ways: completely, as in the case of seniors who refuse to have a Facebook account; by assigning almost exclusively utilitarian functions, expressed by the need to stay in touch, especially with the otherwise hard to reach significant others; by concealing or re-interpreting the amount of time spent on Facebook. When digital leisure is accepted, it is always subject to a strict (self)supervising, because it is believed to have disruptive powers and addictive potential. So, it is a leisure feared, among others, for the interference with seniors' obligations towards their families and disorders brought in their lives. Seniors frequently apply moral filters in their relationship with Facebook and contrast the pure pleasure of being online with the utility of being offline. They tend to deem digital leisure as something undeserved, and perhaps they do that at least partially because of their

own biases towards their age, while unconsciously assessing their life as worthy if dedicated to others.

Seniors proved to be very sceptical in accepting friend requests from the people they do not know or even from people they know, especially when there are not too many things in common. It is debatable if that is part of a control strategy applied to digital leisure, an old age psychological feature, of optimizing the relationships and interactions in terms of quality, or both.

Another important conclusion is that many Romanian seniors are reluctant to express themselves in social media and resort almost exclusively to prefabricated content (famous thoughts, viral posts, anonymous images, etc.). They seem aware of this digital withdrawal of the self from the Facebook public sphere and they confess that it comes mainly from the fear of engaging in contradictory discussions that could generate conflicts online and negative reactions in their families. They also have a sort of indifference against the possibility of having a public voice. However, not upsetting the others prevail over any other interpersonal concern.

The fragile digital leisure that characterizes Romanian senior citizens points out another two important aspects, both already known and discussed in the field of digital sociology but connected now with the topic of the elderly social inclusion. Firstly, that social media and the internet hold indeed an emancipatory and socially empowering potential and, secondly, that the digital divide happens also as a reproduction of social divide. As Liam Barrington-Bush (2011) observes when discussing the promises and dangers of social media: "The 'digital divide' is only superficially digital; until we start to unpick its social dimensions, many of our organisations may continue to have online conversations among themselves".

Public policies aiming to develop digital and internet-related competencies for the elderly could contribute not only to a better inclusion of the elderly in the digital realm of the internet and the social media but also will help them to become more independent, more self-confident and eventually better integrated into a society which was for too long used to look at seniors as marginal, dependent and normally deprived citizens. Digitally literate seniors will also easily accept the fact that leisure, be it digital or not, is a legitimate and desirable part of life that contributes significantly to the improvement and enrichment of personal and social life.

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