Older people think social media is superficial

Some elderly opt out of social media because they think its social conventions are cold and self-centered. Others enjoy seeing pictures of grandchildren and chatting with friends on Facebook.

It’s easy to think that retirees are clueless about the internet and thus are excluded from an important social arena in today’s digital society.

But a new study by a team of researchers from SINTEF, Scandinavia’s largest independent research organization, shows otherwise. Most seniors do take an active choice when it comes to social media: in some cases, they simply do not want to get involved with it.

“I’m not interested in Facebook. That’s the limit for me. (...) So much of what people write is just nonsense,” an 80-year-old woman said in an interview with Marika Lüders and Petter Bae Brandtzæg, the two SINTEF researchers who conducted the study.

A cold medium

Nearly 900 people aged 53 and older responded in 2010-11 to an online survey distributed by Lüders and Brandtzæg by email. That meant the individuals who responded were already comfortable with the use of email and web-based surveys, the researchers wrote in a publication about the study in Norsk medietidsskrift, an academic journal on Norwegian, Nordic and international media research.

Of those who responded, 290 people, or one in three, were not on social media. Most explained their decision by saying they simply weren’t interested in the medium and didn’t see a need to use it to communicate.

They said they thought social media was characterized by self-centered, nonsensical and uninteresting updates. Instead, they said, they preferred to communicate face-to-face and considered social media a waste of time.

“I have no need to post or read about ‘this and that’ to/from my ‘friends’,” a 70-year-old man wrote in response to the survey.

Researchers also interviewed 39 seniors in groups and 24 people separately. The average age of respondents in all three parts of the study was roughly 75.

“I cannot imagine a colder medium. I mean, being social means being part of real social interactions,” said one interviewee.

Natives versus immigrants

Younger generations can be seen as “digital natives”, individuals who do not think of the medium as an
option but rather as an integral part of daily life.

But older individuals, whom the researchers described as “digital immigrants”, are used to face-to-face communication, or at least communication with a specific recipient.

These immigrants are not interested in broadcasting news about themselves to 500 “friends”, the researchers said.

They perceive Facebook as a superficial gossip channel. “They do not see this as a positive culture of sharing, but rather an egotistical culture, where individuals broadcast content about themselves,” the researchers wrote.

Facebook and grandchildren

Nevertheless, more and more seniors are using social media, mostly Facebook.

The market research company Ipsos says 3.2 million of Norway’s 5 million citizens use Facebook. Sixty-six per cent of those over 60 have a Facebook profile versus 80 percent among those aged 18.

Around two out of ten interviewed for the SINTEF study, or 14 of 63 participants, used Facebook. Most of them already had a large social network before they started on the site.

What brings older Norwegians to Facebook?

A number use the service to be more involved in the lives of their grandchildren and younger relatives.

“I get pictures of my little great-grandson, and that is great fun!” wrote one respondent to the SINTEF survey.

Other individuals said they liked to chat with friends, and they liked Facebook because they could see when their friends were online to chat.

Privacy an issue

Overall, study participants aged 75 years and older were less likely to use social media. Around a third of these non-users said the reason for this was that they needed help to get started. Some were total beginners in terms of using the internet.

Some were also concerned about privacy and information security on social media. They were not confident that commercial operators such as Facebook, which require access into private matters, would protect them.

Some content themselves with email, telephone and other means of communication.

But others said they would be happy to use social media, and hope to begin soon.

Reference:
A majority of people aged 60 and older are on social media. But many older people remain skeptical about the trend. (Photo: Mike Schröder / Samfoto / NTB scanpix)

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