How Consumers of All Ages Interact With Social Media to Make Social Connections

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We aim to understand how consumers of all ages engage in social media to establish and maintain social connections. We discuss how consumers of different ages engage in social media, how their social media behaviors facilitate social connections, and whether their behaviors mediate the effect of aging on social connection.

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Roundtable Summaries

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Catherine Cole, University of Iowa, USA

Participants
Ying Ding, Renmin University of China, China
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The overall objective of the session is to better understand how consumers of all ages engage in and interact with social media in order to establish and/or maintain social connections. Knowledge on the different patterns of behaviors, if any, has significant contributions to both theory and practice. Theoretically, it sheds light on the conceptual relationship between aging and social connections. Empirically, it helps marketers design better products and develop more effective positioning and communication strategies for the different age groups.

Whereas the need for healthy social relationships is one of the most fundamental needs of all human beings (Baumeister and Leary 1995), young or old, the advent and popularity of social media is only a recent event. The conventional wisdom may have associated social media with a younger generation, partly because many social media sites started to gain popularity among younger generations and only later became more popular among older generations (e.g., Facebook). However, with 65% of people between the age of 50 and 64 and 49% of those 65+ actively engaged in various social media (PewResearch 2014), it is becoming more imperative for marketing researchers and practitioners to understand whether mature adults engage in and interact with social media in the same way as younger adults; and if not, what the differences are and why they occur.

In this session, we will have fun talking with researchers at all stages of their careers about aging, social media behaviors, and the ultimate goal of social connection (or avoidance of social isolation). By the end of the session, we will have generated an exciting discussion on the causal chains charted below, which are new to marketing and can serve as a research agenda going forward. Specifically, we will have answered: (1) How do consumers of different ages engage in and interact with social media? Are there systematic differences between the younger and older segments? If so, what are the differences? (2) How does the engagement in and interaction with social media establish and maintain social connections or avoid social isolation? and (3) Is there a direct link between aging and social connection or isolation? Do social media behaviors mediate the effect of aging on social connection or the reduction of social isolation?

We have planned a variety of pre-conference discussion activities. The session co-chairs will create an email list and online document sharing platforms (e.g., Google Docs, Apple iCloud, Dropbox, etc.). Each participant will first introduce themselves and their work briefly via email and then upload relevant papers, manuscripts, data, etc. to the sharing platforms. Via email discussions, participants will brainstorm topics that are of interest to marketing researchers and practitioners, and everyone will contribute to creating a comprehensive literature structure, developing new hypotheses, and discussing potential methodological opportunities and obstacles. We will also ask around our colleagues who conduct research in relevant areas to inquire their thoughts, questions, and recommendations. Depending on each participant’s specific schedules, we will also try to get together in person before the conference starts to touch base on the issues to be discussed.