

UNDERSTANDING HOW BABY BOOMERS USE THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA TO IMPROVE THE ENGAGEMENT WITH BRANDS

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of the baby boomers, as a new group of people aged 55 to 75, with unique interests, media exposure and shopping habits, set a before and after in the language that brands must speak. The main objective of social media is to build engagement, and in the digital environment, it means engaging both seniors and companies. For this, learning how they act in the digital environment is key. This paper aims to show how baby boomers behave in this environment, showing the challenges and advantages brands have to reach them effectively. Based on an exploratory and qualitative study with focus groups of senior internet and social network users from Portugal and Spain, the results show that analysing their habits of exposure to these media and the interests, brands do not seem to speak the same language they do, and that is why baby boomers do not feel engaged with them online. This work provides recommendations to get this engagement and improve the digital experience. In this line, to build this engagement, brands need to understand the variables of interest for baby boomers stemming from this study: affiliation and support. On the other hand, they must assume that this level of engagement will depend on establishing an active dialogue, with content targeted at different segments of the population, related to the variables above (affiliation and support), and to a degree enough to reach baby boomers emotionally.

KEYWORDS

ageing, social media, motivations, brand engagement, baby boomers

COMPREENDER COMO OS *BABY BOOMERS* UTILIZAM A INTERNET E OS MÉDIA SOCIAIS PARA MELHORAREM O SEU *ENGAGEMENT* COM AS MARCAS

RESUMO

O aparecimento dos *baby boomers*, como um novo grupo de pessoas/consumidores entre os 55 e os 75 anos, com interesses, hábitos de exposição aos média e padrões de compra únicos, assinalou um marco importante sobre a linguagem das marcas. O principal objetivo dos média sociais é criar *engagement* com o intuito de gerar ligação e impactar tanto os seniores como as empresas, sendo necessário, para isso, compreender como atuam no meio digital. Este trabalho tem como principal objetivo mostrar como os *baby boomers* se comportam no meio digital, apresentando as vantagens e os desafios que as marcas enfrentam para os envolver de forma efetiva. Partindo de um estudo exploratório e qualitativo operacionalizado através de grupos de foco com internautas seniores, de Portugal e Espanha, que analisou os interesses e os hábitos de exposição deste público a esses meios, os resultados mostram que as marcas parecem não falar a mesma linguagem deste público e, por essa razão, os *baby boomers* não se sentem comprometidos com elas na internet. Este trabalho avança com um conjunto de recomendações passíveis de melhorar o *engagement* e a experiência digital dos mais velhos. Nesse sentido, para criar *engagement*, as marcas devem conseguir entender e descortinar quais são as variáveis e pontos de interesse dos *baby boomers*, como é o caso da afiliação e do apoio. Por outro lado, devem assumir que o nível de *engagement* depende da capacidade de estabelecerem com eles um diálogo ativo, com conteúdo dirigido a diferentes segmentos da população, tendo em consideração as variáveis anteriores (afiliação e apoio), e emocionalmente relevante.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

envelhecimento, média sociais, motivações, *engagement* com a marca, *baby boomers*

1. INTRODUCTION

The ageing population is a fact worldwide and has had a significant social and economic impact this century. In this line, for Aboim (2014), the older population reveals a certain degree of resignation to ageing as a natural process. However, a series of aspects emerge as problematic for them: deterioration of the body and health, sexuality, loss of activity, isolation and social discrimination, as particularly relevant dimensions to consider.

According to the United Nations (2015a, 2015b), in the European Union, people over 65 will be around 30% of the total population by 2060. In this context, the so-called “baby boomers”, men and women aged 55 to 75, who are not digital natives, have developed skills typical of natives but with different dynamics (Coolhunting Group, 2017), making them a new target for brands (Boardman, 2019).

According to Miranda et al. (2020), the internet and social media networks have been introduced into the daily lives of these senior people, influencing communication, engagement and participation with their social environment (Fuchs, 2017). That makes older people an attractive market segment due to their high purchasing power and improved life expectancy (Friemet, 2016). In fact, the challenge was already raised by Coleman et al. (2006), when they started talking about the baby boomer generation as

people with active positions in life, interesting from an economic point of view, for the creation and promotion of a wide variety of products and services, specially tailored to their needs, using marketing methods also adapted to this group and using segmentation strategies based on psychographics and to demographics.

More research on the attitudes and behaviours of baby boomers is needed to understand how to engage these customers effectively on social media (Nunan & Di Domenico, 2019). Although studies and reports exist (Coolhunting Group, 2017; “La Generación Senior 4.0: Cómo Seducirlos”, 2019), little academic work has been developed on this topic. According to Towner and Lego Muñoz (2016), less academic research has been carried out on the influence of social media on this group, as research has been more focused on millennials. According to Hutto et al. (2014), “very little research has examined how older people use digital platforms” (p. 1755), reinforcing the need to understand how, in this context, they relate to brands and how brands relate to them to generate engagement.

According to Miranda et al. (2020), although the specialised literature provides some theoretical and empirical evidence, above all, it exposes the limitations and weaknesses of research in the area. If, on the one hand, the literature is still scarce and fragmented, on the other hand, some focus is placed on the reasons for the use of social media networks, seeking to understand their effects and benefits in dimensions such as quality of life (Yang et al., 2016), stress reduction (Wright, 2000), depression (Cotten et al., 2013), life satisfaction (Nimrod, 2010), or the promotion of well-being. However, there is a lack of knowledge about this specific new audience so that brands can adapt to it.

Therefore, this article aims to identify how baby boomers relate to social media networks within the current digitalisation, based on the assumption that baby boomers may be potential audiences of interest for brands that want to target them in the future.

The research question arising is: are baby boomers in Spain and Portugal ready to engage with brands? That would drive us to address the question: what can brands do to improve this relationship with them?

Therefore, the particular objectives of this paper are:

- to deepen our understanding of baby boomers’ uses of the internet and social media networks to improve affiliation with their peers (in terms of peers’ common interest and brands they use as groups),
- to discover the main motivations and barriers that baby boomers face when adopting these new digital technologies to seek support and socialise,
- to provide some keys to improve baby boomers’ digital engagement with brands.

To this end, this paper first reviews the literature, then explains the study methodology and provides the main results, concluding with a series of recommendations for brands that want to include baby boomers as target audiences.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to the report of the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC; Abellán García et al., 2019), the European Union countries with the highest number of older

people are Germany (17,500,000), Italy (13,500,000), France (12,900,000), the United Kingdom (11,900,000) and Spain (8,800,000). In relative terms, Italy (22.3%) leads the way, followed by Germany (21.2%), Greece (21.5%) and Portugal (21.1%) as the most ageing countries, with their proportion increasing every year. Spain is slightly below the European Union average (19.4%) and very close to Portugal.

Particularly in the case of Portugal (Miranda et al., 2020), this trend occurred late. However, it accelerated from having the least aged population in 1980 to having one of the highest ageing rates in 2012 (Rosa, 2012). Statistics Portugal (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2020) forecasts that in 2080 “the number of older people (65 and over) will increase from 2.2 to 3.0 million” (p. 1). Thus, “the ageing ratio in Portugal will almost double, from 159 to 300 older people for every 100 young people, in 2080” (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2020, p. 1).

According to the data from the Spanish National Statistics Institute for the year 2019 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2021), this deterioration will tend to continue over the next 40 years, from 2,100,000 to 2,800,000 older people, from 147 to 317 older people, for every 100 young people.

In the case of Spain, according to the CSIC (Abellán García et al., 2019), the population pyramid continues its ageing process, measured by the increase in the proportion of people over 65 years. For the Spanish National Statistics Institute (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2021) in 2018, 19.1% of the total population were older people, thus increasing both in number and proportion in 2019. Projections from Instituto Nacional de Estadística (2021) indicate that in 2068 there could be more than 14,000,000 older people, 29.4% of the total Spanish population. In the case of Portugal, as mentioned above, in 2080, there could be around 3,000,000 older people, 36.6% of the total Portuguese population forecasted (8,200,000), whereas “the working-age population (15 to 64 years old) will decrease from 6.6 to 4.2 million people” (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2020, p. 1).

3. DIGITALISATION AMONG BABY BOOMERS

According to the latest published data on the digitalisation of older people in Portugal (Cardoso et al., 2015; Miranda et al., 2020), internet use by age group showed a 12% rate for 65+ people. Among non-users, the reasons seem to be lack of skills (60%) and lack of interest and perception of the resource’s usefulness (22%).

According to the CSIC (Abellán García et al., 2019), there is a perceived digital divide between the over-55s and the rest of the population in Spain. However, this gap has been narrowing rapidly in recent years, especially because people who were already using the internet came of age, not due to the digital literacy of older people. In 2007, the gap was 78.6 % between the most connected age group (16–24 years) and the oldest (65–74 years); in 2018, it narrowed to 51.6 %. In 2008, seven seniors out of every 100 used the internet; in 2018, this figure stands at 47 per 100 seniors. This increase has been more significant among women.

4. BABY BOOMERS' CHARACTERISATION

Baby boomers are men and women aged 55 to 75 (Coolhunting Group, 2017) who want to stay active. They consider themselves “digital immigrants”, but this does not mean that they use digital media for basic communication. They have high purchasing power, and their health is a priority, especially among women (Saucedo Soto et al., 2018), who are concerned about their family’s financial well-being and are interested in providing support to their community, want to stay young and integrated into society and context (Aboim, 2014). Therefore, according to Majón-Valpuesta et al. (2021), the popularity of the baby boomer generation will expectedly lead to claiming new spaces for social participation.

Work from Miranda et al. (2020) shows that age seems an explanatory factor for people’s digital behaviour, while Loos (2012) warns that it is a big mistake to look at older people as a homogeneous group. Variables such as gender, educational background and income level (Abellán García et al., 2019) should also be considered to characterise them. White and Cornu (2011) talk about attitudes, behaviours and usage practices they consider to be much more related to the level of motivation and context than to age.

Thus, according to “La Generación Senior 4.0: Cómo Seducirlos” (2019) and following Lasierra-Esteban (2020) thesis, perhaps the division by age should not be the most appropriate. However, from a commercial point of view, the senior segment can be said to have four main groups, which may be juxtaposed in age:

- *Early retirees* (50–65). Although this group starts at 55, many people turning 50 are already thinking about retirement. In addition, younger spouses married to retirees may also be in this segment, as they make decisions prior to their partner’s retirement. In fact, for Lasierra-Esteban (2020), although the division by age should not be the most appropriate, she recognises the true boomers in this bracket, considering those who have reached the age of 60 as seniors.
- *Grandparents and relatives* (+50). Grandparents and family seniors deserve a separate segmentation, as they often invest a lot of time and money in relatives and respond well to targeted ads.
- *Late retirees* (65–75). This segment comprises age groups above the standard retirement age who are still working.
- *Active retirees* (+65). This group of adults no longer earns active income. Their money comes from savings.

Certainly, the older they are, the more security-conscious, health-conscious and conservative they are, and there need not be major geographical or contextual differences between the different groups, as Lasierra-Esteban (2020) also explains.

5. BABY BOOMERS AND THEIR SOCIAL MEDIA EXPOSURE HABITS

Work by the Coolhunting Group (2017) shows that 91% of baby boomers use one or more social media networks, with no other demographic group increasing their presence on social media platforms as much, doubling from 24% in 2016 to 48% as of 2017. Furthermore, baby boomers are more stable in the digital context, are more predisposed to receive quality content, read more and visit brand websites longer. In addition, around 70% enjoy watching videos. On the same note, based on work by Lehr (2015), around 25% of baby boomers consume more than 20 hours of online content per week.

However, they have different design needs and different content interests, so creating tailored content should become a priority.

The IAB Spain (2021) study concludes that Spaniards' most used social media networks are WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram. Compared to 2018, Facebook lost the first position to WhatsApp. This study concludes that WhatsApp is the most used app by adults aged 65+ because, as their entire environment has the app, it drives their need to feel connected with family and friends. The study provides that this does not mean that they are permanently attentive to the phone during the day but repeatedly make brief consultations over time. Apart from WhatsApp, their preferred social media network seems to be Facebook, with Instagram becoming increasingly popular (IAB Spain, 2021). Older people thus tend to make more selective and rational use of social media networks, usually in a different order of priority (Boardman, 2019). According to Bento et al. (2018), when people were born in the digital era, they actively contribute, share and consume content on social media networks, whereas older adults use the "active" features of Facebook, such as Facebook chatting and uploading photos much less than younger users (Hayes et al., 2015). Moreover, young users tend to engage in conversations and are both producers and consumers of information, which sets them apart from people. Therefore, following Bento et al. (2018, p. 236), if there are different behaviours in different generations, it would be relevant to investigate these behaviours in different generations concerning engagement on social media networks.

6. SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORKS FOR CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

As baby boomers become a natural trend (Balcerzak & Nielek, 2017), their enormous consumer potential is highlighted. According to Peregrina et al. (2017), baby boomers shop online with the same frequency as millennials but spend more. Kantar World Panel (Centromarca, 2018) underlines that besides their purchasing power, they value quality, are more loyal to brands and, finally, are sensitive to the way brands communicate with them.

Thus, according to Carrillo-Durán and Tato-Jiménez (2019), it is necessary to reflect on the use of social media networks that brands make with different stakeholders to evaluate the real interest of brands in communicating with baby boomers through social media networks.

It is assumed that companies need corporate communication channels (not only commercial communication channels) that facilitate the fulfilment of their objectives and ensure contact between brands and stakeholders. In this sense, it is important to set up a social media strategy that includes social media networks, not only considering them for commercial online interactions. Thereby, gaining competitive advantages through social media networks should not be understood only as making it possible to generate traffic (Narváez & Montalvo, 2014) through interaction among users. Therefore, "users" must be understood broadly, encompassing different stakeholders.

If social media networks are a good channel to engage stakeholders, they will be a good channel to build corporate communication through engagement with brands. Social media networks have become a tool for companies to get to know their stakeholders whose needs and views they cannot ignore. In sum, the most relevant barriers to companies using social media networks in their social media strategy are economic issues, staff training, lack of control, and, above all, mixing different targets and generations.

Therefore, there is a need to reinforce research on the impact of social media networks on different targets. On the one hand, a quantitative measure of the effectiveness of social media networks could show any lack of expertise related to the benefits of creating a dialogue with different stakeholders. On the other hand, a qualitative approach would be in line with the possibility of actively listening to stakeholders, not just hearing their online conversations.

Establishing and maintaining appropriate contacts with stakeholders through social media networks is vital to managing corporate communication. It requires the definition of a map of the firm's groups of stakeholders (consumers, new potential customers, and of course, baby boomers should be considered a new stakeholder...) and combining them with the possibilities provided by each type of social media network. It is also important to establish the level of relationship and active communication necessary with each of those groups. To this end, some variables can be considered to help determine the relative importance of communication with each stakeholder group. For example, one might establish general variables to help delimit the firm's strategy, each group's importance for the organisation, and the capacity of each group to influence the opinions of the other stakeholder groups. In this line, it is relevant to know what motivations can prompt action of different stakeholder groups, especially baby boomers, as a new target to consider. This work is trying to look into this issue to know more about baby boomers' behaviour in the context of the Internet and social media networks.

7. THE ENGAGEMENT IN SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORKS

Engagement understood as a permanent commitment between brands and users, is a concept that stems from another, which is dialogue. Calder and Malthouse (2009) suggest that engagement links audiences and brands to establish a dialogue and continuous interaction in both directions, co-creating value.

According to Taylor and Kent (2014, p. 384), the term is commonly used in the literature but rarely defined. For Dijkmans et al. (2015), it is a multidimensional concept defined as "a combination of cognitive aspects (e.g. being interested in a company's activities), behavioural aspects (participating in the company's activities), and/or emotional aspects (having positive feelings in relation to the company's activities)" (p. 59).

Therefore, three dimensions of engagement can be established: the behavioural or dialogical dimension (based on social interactions), the cognitive dimension of interest in the brand and its contents, and the emotional dimension based on feelings towards

the brand. Therefore, brands must strive to work sequentially in these three directions, as it is not possible to reach the emotional level without establishing dialogue and creating content.

According to Carrillo-Durán and Tato-Jiménez (2019), there are many expressions of online behaviour of engagement with a company based on experiencing interest and interacting, contributing or participating with the company. Social media networks have this capacity, but organisations have to activate it. For example, a question to generate debate can foster interactivity and dialogue. Nonetheless, while interactivity must be guaranteed, what is important in generating value is that the public feels committed to the firm. For this, the dialogue must be effective and not simply seek commitment just through actions that produce a one-off type of gratification.

Regarding the cognitive dimension, the organisation has to work both on the content it posts to social media networks and on that generated by its stakeholders. About content posted by the organisation, García García et al. (2017) suggest there is a need to prepare information showing what the firm is like and what its values are. Concerning user-created content, the firm's intention must be to reduce content consumption without the participation and increase the contribution and creation of content.

Concerning the emotional aspects of engagement, social media networks can present an emotional dimension of the company while dealing directly with its different stakeholders (Dijkmans et al., 2015). According to the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001), personal information accumulated while exposed to positive emotions lasts longer than temporary ones. Therefore, one can say that users whose experiences through social media networks are positive extend their well-being to other aspects of their lives. This connection can be achieved through such techniques as branded content (communication designed to transmit values and emotions, which, with a well-constructed discourse, generate a connection between the firm and the public). The goal is to generate affinity rather than to sell a product. Connecting with your audiences through a story with a character and plot appeals to the emotional side.

In sum, engagement can be improved by being clear that, firstly, the messages must be adapted to the different stakeholder groups — a single message cannot connect with everyone. Secondly, the firm's audiences must learn something useful, not wasting their time. If something does not work on social media networks, the firm can redirect it. Thirdly, the firm must always consider the public's perspective. An organisation without empathy will not reach people because it does not listen to them.

In this context, engagement between brands and baby boomers is essential to meet their needs. However, this is not possible without understanding the motivation and behaviour of baby boomers on social media, hence the real interest of this paper.

8. KEY VARIABLES IN THE BABY BOOMERS' RELATIONSHIP WITH SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORKS

Regarding the possible motivations of older people for the presence and use of social media networks, Krishen et al. (2016) talk about affinity, affiliation, belonging,

interactivity and innovation as relevant variables. Similarly, Berezan et al. (2020) suggest that, for older people, interactivity and belonging are fundamental elements to improve. Majón-Valpuesta et al. (2021) also established in their study three axes/variables that allowed them to interpret the data extracted from the focus groups carried out: interaction with others, forms of participation and social contribution.

Therefore, following these authors, we established the following variables as the most representative in the baby boomer segment.

8.1. AFFILIATION VARIABLE

This variable is related to the fact of looking for community interests. According to Oh and Syn (2015), social media networks may gather people connected by the same interests to develop community identification and encourage various activities within this community.

Work by IAB Spain (2021) shows that social media networks allow baby boomers to carry-out everyday actions, such as saying what the members of this population group think, commenting on news, chatting, listening to what others who agree with them are doing and thinking, knowing where they are and knowing what those who belong to their group are doing. Along these lines, baby boomers tend to be more inclined to share political content on social media networks (Coolhunting Group, 2017). However, rather than exposing their privacy, these users enjoy sharing articles, photos and videos related to their interests.

While they like to feel integrated and part of the lifestyles and habits of younger generations, they also like companies to offer them solutions for their specific and unique needs. An example in this line is Silvernest, a vertical social media network for people who want to share a home to avoid loneliness or share expenses.

All of this is influenced by the person's social and professional profile, their digital background, the networks they use, and the use they make of them to seek to follow brands. Thus, this variable is connected to brand affiliation motivation, so they generally will follow the brands on social media networks they often buy/consume, brands that are consistent with their lifestyle or they wish to buy in future, although they cannot afford or do not want to buy immediately.

Bento et al. (2018) states that "brands should adapt their posted online content to the characteristics of their specific audience. Accordingly, value co-creation among community participants acts as a prominent driving force in the context of social media" (p. 234). In this sense, in environments such as social media, people can align around particular values even without directly interacting (Zappavigna & Martin, 2018, p. 6). Zappavigna and Martin (2018) developed a model for social media communication's "ambient" nature, where social bonding can occur even without direct dialogue between users. They proposed a discursive system, referred to as "communing affiliation", for describing how values are positioned in three ways very close to the engagement stages: by being directed

at particular communities (convoking), entering into relationships with other potential value positions, and being foregrounded interpersonally in various ways (promoting).

8.2. SUPPORT VARIABLE

Supporting behaviour is a strong motivating factor. According to Oh and Syn (2015), social media is a venue for people to gather to provide and receive social and emotional support. Social theories mostly focus on how one can benefit from social activities with others. Supporting behaviour has to do with caring for others' feelings or situations.

Although according to Kelly et al. (2017, p. 14), social support has been shown to promote resilience, whereas simply engaging in social activities or having a larger network of friends may not translate to the kind of social-emotional support required for older people. However, it is a fact that older people are looking for support outside and within social media networks. In addition, according to Wohn and Lee (2013), the main driver for older users in the social media networks is reciprocity (i.e., baby boomers look forward to getting some supporting behaviour, whereas younger users' main driver is hanging about). In this sense, if that is the goal, baby boomers need to learn to engage with brands in social media networks.

This goal can put them under pressure, so according to IAB Spain (2021), the best way to help them is to take the pressure off. Do not urge anyone to enter social media networks or interact with them, but teach them how to use the channels to get the most out of them. Thus, when people start sharing content on social media networks, they become an active part of these social spaces, seeking to be supported and willing to engage with their sender.

Thus, according to Rebelo (2013), social media networks (in this case, Facebook) are instruments that enhance the reinforcement of social ties through a constant dialogue with the past, multiplying reunions with people, friends and family or meeting other people in the same situation. Indeed, for Davalos et al. (2015), nostalgia is an important catalyst for baby boomers to access social media networks.

Therefore, feeling supported is directly related to why baby boomers use networks (making friends, communicating with family...) and their network behaviours, that is, the time they spend on networks and which devices they use more or less flexibly. All these indicators will also be observed in this study.

9. MATERIAL AND METHODS

To meet the proposed objectives, a qualitative analysis was carried out using a focus group as a data collection technique used in studies on the same group (Majón-Valpuesta et al., 2021). A methodology based on the definition of the dependent and independent variables was used to conduct this work. The dependent variable is the study of the perceptions and uses that the people who voluntarily participate in this work (included in the baby boomers) make of the digital context. For this purpose, four different focus groups were analysed in this study, two in Spain and two in Portugal. The reason for choosing

the two countries is not to seek differentiation as diversity. In this, we follow the thesis of Lasierra-Esteban (2020), whose work did not seem to be great differences in values between different countries but within the groups observed as older (boomers and seniors for the author). “In our case, we reject the idea that generations have a set of values that hardly change and we observe, on the contrary, that the value system of individuals is quite similar across generations in the countries studied” (Lasierra-Esteban, 2020. p. 366).

The independent variables that explain the dependent variable and that have been previously defined are affiliation and support/socialisation. Thus, according to the description of each variable above, the following indicators have been used.

First independent variable, *affiliation*:

- professional and social profile of members;
- members’ digital training;
- networks where they have profiles at the time of the study;
- members’ use of social networks to search for products and interest in brands on social media networks.

Second independent variable, *support*:

- reasons for using the networks: to communicate, to make friends (socialise), to publish;
- behaviour on social media networks, that is, the time they spend on social media networks and which device they use.

10. SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

In order to carry out this study, the researchers of the project approached the universities for seniors. These university programs are aimed at all people over 55 years of age who want to learn and enjoy university. Their objective is to facilitate adults’ personal and social development, regardless of their residence and income level. It incorporates older people into the opportunities offered by the new information society, encourages the participation of older people as future facilitators in their own socio-cultural context and provides a space for technological debate. With all this, these university programs have provided a very heterogeneous sample that is distributed as follows.

10.1. SPAIN

Two groups with 22 people, 13 women and nine men, with a minimum age of 60, maximum age of 73 and an average age of 67. Regarding the academic level, 11 have university studies, bachelor degrees or vocational training; the rest do not specify. All the participants are retired and are students at the senior university.

10.2. PORTUGAL

Two focus groups with 18 participants. Of these, 11 were women, and seven were men. The average age is 68.3 years, with a minimum age of 60 and a maximum age of

79. Education-wise, participants are evenly distributed between graduates up to the 9th grade (nine) and between 10th and 12th grade (nine). All participants are retirees and students at senior universities.

11. METHODOLOGY

The focus group sessions took place in Badajoz (Spain) and Lisbon (Portugal) between September and November 2019 (Portugal) and November 2019 and January 2020 (Spain). The group interviews were conducted in spaces provided by the educational centres adapted to the needs of the research. An authorisation to record the sessions' audio, always ensuring data confidentiality, was requested from the participants. The interviews lasted approximately 1 and a half hours and were led by a moderator, who guided the semi-structured interview questions according to the group dynamics and the study's objectives.

Once completed, they were transcribed, and their content was analysed according to the indicators of each study variable.

12. RESULTS

In addition to the information on the volunteer participants' profiles above described, the main results are as follows.

12.1. SPANISH FOCUS GROUPS

About the participants' level of competence on social media networks and their presence on them through profiles, certain differences can be observed between the two groups. The participants in the first Spanish focus group (FGE1), although they do have a profile on the social media network Facebook, state that, in general, they have a medium-low knowledge of what they can do on it. However, the second Spanish focus group (FGE2) is a group with medium-high knowledge of the social media network Facebook (some have even taken courses), all participants have a profile on the social network Facebook, some of them also on Instagram. Two people have a Facebook page and post photos and videos on YouTube.

Overall, they created a Facebook profile because other people (family or friends) suggested it, and, in some cases, the rest of their circle of people had a profile, and they did not want to be "left out".

In terms of use, in FGE1, the average frequency of use is low, with occasional use for half of the sample. In FGE2, the general frequency of use is daily. In this group, some people posted content every day on Facebook. Moreover, in FGE2, they are clear about the limits of this tool and how they should use it, which is not the case in FGE1.

Although they also report using WhatsApp in their daily activity, Facebook is the social media network they use the most. Their use of Facebook is mainly to communicate within their group and post photos of their excursions, videos, or share opinions, and so forth.

In FGE1, two male participants say that they go on Facebook for professional interests in business and music to find out what is new in their fields of interest. A participant in FGE2 defines Facebook “as a neighbourhood playground where everyone is connected and finds out about everything” and where “some want to find out about everything and remain anonymous”.

The main time of use is at night (not in the early morning), although some use it at any time of the day. The average time spent on Facebook is less than 1 hour per day (in the FGE1, almost all report spending more than 1 hour per day on WhatsApp).

In terms of devices, the mobile phone is a widely used device and the preferred device in FGE2 (seven participants use it to connect to social networks), while in FGE1, the computer is the preferred device for eight participants (for only three in FGE2).

The higher the consumption, the higher the use of the social media network from the mobile phone, and the lower the consumption, the lower the use of the social media network from the mobile phone. Connections are mainly made from home. They use it mainly to share content, meet people, seek their peers' support.

When asked if using social media networks improves or worsens their quality of life, they say that it is good for them to obtain information and as a benefit and company for those who live alone; Facebook helps them be more active, and their minds are more occupied.

The negative point is that it takes away hours of rest at night and hours of reading. Similarly, people who say they do not know how to use it well are afraid of possible security-related problems. Similarly, some say that there is a certain invasion of their privacy. In short, as expressed by one of the participants, “if it were a person, I would define Facebook as a well-informed, well-connected and somewhat ‘gossipy’ person”.

As for the use of Facebook to access the profiles of specific brands, they see this as a drawback; they feel intimidated by the subsequent use of their data for advertising. Therefore, they are not consumers of brands through their Facebook profiles, nor do they show much interest in searching for brands on any other social media network. They would like to find accurate product information and discounts if they did.

12.2. PORTUGUESE FOCUS GROUPS

In Portugal, this study involved 18 volunteer participants in two focus groups. Participants use Facebook as the predominant network, although they indicate that they have profiles on several social media networks: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Skype, WhatsApp and YouTube. Facebook is the social network where the majority, 16 out of 18 participants, have an active profile. The second social media network with the highest number of users is WhatsApp, with four people with an active profile. Twitter and Instagram are the two social media networks least used by the participants. As for Skype and YouTube, each network is used by one participant.

As for the reasons that made them join social media networks, the data show four reasons for creating a profile on social networks: to seek support from others, be where others are, apply acquired knowledge about the internet environment and work reasons.

The people who played an important role in creating these profiles are family members or co-workers.

In terms of devices, the mobile phone is the most used device to access social media networks in the groups in Portugal. Out of the 18 participants, 17 use their mobile phones to access social media networks. The computer is another device used by most participants in both countries. Tablets are not used as a form of access in Portugal.

Participants indicated they access social networks from several places, such as their homes, bus, supermarket and café. Home is where Portuguese participants spend the most time on social media networks. However, some mentioned that they could access them anywhere.

As for the time of day they access social media networks, most people did not specify a time. Regarding their interest in brands through Facebook, of the 18 participants, only seven showed that they were engaged and interacting with brands through Facebook, although at different intensities.

Table 1 shows a comparative summary of the most relevant results.

VARIABLE	INDICATOR	SPAIN	PORTUGAL
Affiliation	Participants' profile	Of the 22 participants: 13 women/nine men, average age of 67; 11 with university studies/ the rest do not specify; retirees (not exercising any professional activity), students at seniors universities	Of the 18 participants: 11 women/seven men, average age of 68.3; nine between graduates up to the 9th grade/nine with 10–12 years of age studies; retirees (not exercising any professional activity), students at seniors universities
	Digital training	First Spanish focus group (FGE1): medium-low knowledge; second Spanish focus group (FGE2): medium-high knowledge	Some of them medium- low knowledge, and some of them medium-high
	Networks used	All use Facebook and WhatsApp; some Instagram; two use YouTube (uploading content)	Of the 18 participants, 16 have an active profile on Facebook; four have a profile in WhatsApp; others used: Instagram, Twitter, Skype (one), and YouTube (one)
	Brands-related use	None for that purpose. They see the use of Facebook to access brand's profiles as a drawback (they feel intimidated/fear of using their data for advertising)	Seven showed that they were engaged and interacting with brands through Facebook
Support	Reasons for using	Because people around them (family/friends) had profiles. Mainly to share content, and secondarily to meet people, to seek the support of their peers	To seek support from others, to be where others are, to apply acquired knowledge about the internet environment and for work reasons
	Behaviour on social media (time/devices/ where)	Time: FGE1 occasional use/ FGE2 daily use; devices: FGE1 computer/ FGE2 prefers mobile phone; where: they use it at home	Time: they did not specify; devices: 17 out of 18 use the mobile phone (computer is also used; no tablets used); where: mainly at home, but also outside (mobiles)

Table 1 Comparative table (Portugal–Spain) with a summary of the most significant results

13. DISCUSSION

The results show a certain balance between the Spanish and Portuguese groups. Both groups state that they connect to Facebook for support and socialisation (Rebelo, 2013). Several participants from Portugal say they use Facebook to connect with friends, mainly, but not so much to meet people. Some confirmed that Facebook had been used to contact old friends (Davalos et al., 2015). However, in the same group, this type of connection was viewed with some fear due to the possibility that the person requesting friendship might not be the person they claimed to be (it could be another person with the same or a similar name). On the other hand, some say they have met new friends through Facebook, believing that it should also be used for that purpose, and explain they do not accept a friend request from anyone with whom they do not have at least one friend in common (they look to see who this common friend is and then make sure that the requester is from their area).

Therefore, it can be said that baby boomers use Facebook to socialise and seek the support of their acquaintances, as the possibility of being cheated makes them very cautious, generally stating that they know the basic functions of Facebook but do not master all its possibilities. Some users are more open and do not mind accepting friend requests from strangers but seek mechanisms to verify the origin of the requester, and may limit the acceptance of requests to their immediate geographic environment.

Baby boomers are therefore looking for support, although, as noted, some created their Facebook profiles because “everyone was doing it”, it does not seem that, in that sense, they participated in it under pressure (IAB Spain, 2021), but rather out of fondness, which would have more to do with group affiliation. In fact, most of the participants are happy to have done so, as they feel they are more in the company of others. One participant from second Portuguese focus group explains that “in social networks, I also looked for the company”. Another from the first Portuguese focus group concludes that the network “ends up being a companion itself” (implying that, even if it is not explicitly sought, it ends up being one).

Therefore, the social media network Facebook is used by participants to feel accompanied and supported by their friends and acquaintances and by people with whom they share interests in certain groups. This support is essential, but especially for baby boomers due to their personal situations, in many cases of loneliness. That is in line with Berezan et al. (2020), whose findings suggest that for the loneliest people, interactivity and belonging may be psychological needs that drive Facebook usage and, at the same time, can also be seen as rewards for less lonely people.

On the other hand, Facebook has been found to offer baby boomers the possibility to strengthen their affiliation (IAB Spain, 2021). All four focus groups use Facebook to participate in common interest groups, as discussed in Coolhunting Group (2017). For example, in FGE1, they shared interests and hobbies such as hiking and music. Some claim to follow people they do not know because they like the work they share on their Facebook profiles.

Therefore, it can be said that participants use Facebook to reinforce their feeling of belonging to a certain group of people with common interests. The profile of the

volunteer participants in the study is that of proactive people, that is, people interested in staying active, meeting people, doing new activities, continuing to learn, and so forth.

As for their relationship with brands, they do not express, in this study, a great interest in them in the digital environment. However, it is interesting to note that participants explained that they would like brands to offer them truthful product information and discounts, as referred to in Kantar World Panel (Centromarca, 2018) when it exposes that baby boomers are sensitive to the way brands communicate with them. In this case, participants were more restrained than proactive, not in line with previously published reports (Peregrina et al., 2017). However, this report does refer to the brakes detected in our study related, above all, to security and privacy.

14. CONCLUSIONS

Firstly, it is worth noting that the average profile of the participants in this exploratory is people with a mainly professional background, although some have also had academic education. As for the initial objective of building knowledge about the uses that baby boomers in the sample make of social media networks to seek affiliation, it can be said that, along the lines of IAB Spain (2021), participants use mainly Facebook but have limited knowledge of it.

The second most used social media network is WhatsApp, and some also have profiles on other social networks, such as Twitter or Instagram and, to a lesser extent, YouTube or Skype. However, even if participants are cautious, it is clear that the greater the knowledge of the network, the more it is used to seek affiliation and to be able to express opinions, including political ones, without fear, as was stated in the Institute of Digital Economy report (Coolhunting Group, 2017).

Regarding the objective to determine the main motivations and impediments that baby boomers face in adopting these new digital technologies to seek support and socialise, the conclusion is that their main motivations are to relate to their loved ones, and, to a lesser extent, to make new friends, and seek support, joining groups of people, known or not, with similar tastes and interests (IAB Spain, 2021).

They find social media networks very interesting and useful, although they also express as obstacles certain reticence related to privacy and security, as well as the possible loss of time that they may entail with other activities such as reading, a habit developed offline and online by baby boomers (“La Generación Senior 4.0: Cómo Seducirlos”, 2019). In this sense, they do not usually use Facebook for more than 1 hour a day, preferably via mobile phone or computer and at night, at home, before resting. However, they may also connect from other locations. Although their use is not very extensive over time, Spanish and Portuguese participants tend to participate actively in social networks, especially Facebook, but they are selective about the content they choose (Coolhunting Group, 2017; “La Generación Senior 4.0: Cómo Seducirlos”, 2019).

Regarding the participants’ relationship with the brands’ Facebook profiles and their relationship with them, according to their preferences and tastes, the groups do not

seem to behave as active consumers on Facebook. Still, they neither seek information about their favourite brands on any other social media network. Even so, the Portuguese focus groups admitted a greater interaction with brands, with different intensities, which suggests a certain openness to this possibility if brands improve the experience they offer to the baby boomers (Boardman, 2019). According to Davalos et al. (2015), it would be useful to carry-out communication campaigns that use nostalgia as an integrating element aimed at this age group, given that this contributes to improving the feeling of belonging and affiliation. In this sense, it can be said that brands are not working along the same lines that baby boomers need and that are not taking into account their needs for affiliation and support to generate the necessary commitment (engagement) between both groups (IAB Spain, 2021).

15. RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

The study's main limitations are the digital divide and the geographic dispersion of the population under study. For this reason, the sample was selected from among participants in universities for seniors. It is relevant when the demographic reality is noted, implying that it is necessary to know more about the baby boomers to design strategies and policies that promote active and healthy ageing. However, their roles, needs, practices and competencies have changed in recent decades, as has the internet. As a result, there is still much to research on this age segment's adoption of technologies. The issues raised by this paper are of utmost importance when it is noted that the state of research on these topics is rather limited. That translates into fragmented, atomised and quite incomplete actions. A perspective of this social phenomenon is observed at a global level and specifically in the sample analysed in Spain and Portugal.

16. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING BABY BOOMERS' EXPERIENCE WITH BRANDS

Brands need to understand that the engagement they wish to achieve with this population group will depend on establishing an active dialogue, with content targeted at different segments within this population group, relating to the variables (affiliation and support/socialisation), and a sufficient degree to emotionally reach baby boomer audiences.

16.1. CREATING DIALOGUE

When we talk about engagement, the dialogic dimension (participation based on social interactions) sometimes seems to be confused with the possibility of obtaining a response from the audience. For Carrillo-Durán and Tato-Jiménez (2019), dialogue is not only possible by obtaining feedback from the subject but when there is real interactivity. Real interactivity begins with the feedback, but it does not end there. Feedback only opens the door to real dialogue but does not guarantee it. Thus, it can be said that getting feedback from the other is not interactive communication but only the initiation of it.

In this line, Men and Tsai (2015) extracted two ways of engaging in dialogue: reactive mode (consuming information) and proactive mode (contributing and generating value). Thus, it can be said that dialogue will occur when there is proactive dialogue from the subject and at different levels: low (e.g., giving a “like”), medium (commenting) and high (sharing content).

To achieve an active dialogue, brands should consider the profile of baby boomers, not underestimate them, since, given the results, although they do not participate in active dialogue with brands, they are professionally and academically prepared to do so. However, to establish dialogue as the first necessary step to achieve engagement, brands must take special care with privacy and the misuse of the data of these audiences; thus, brands have to work on building loyalty on social media networks, basing their strategy on generating trust.

16.2. CREATING CONTENT

Engagement is developed through the content presented in digital communication channels. Thus, Muntinga et al. (2011) proposed a typology that classifies forms of online participation into three levels: content consumption (mere passive recipients), contribution (contributing something to the content of another) and content creation (actively generating information). When it comes to content contribution or creation, it is critical to consider the content’s positive or negative meaning (Ji et al., 2017).

Based on this work, the participant baby boomers analysed are at the initial level, mere content receivers. Only in some cases did they move to the creation level. That would be possible for all of them if brands made an effort to create specific content, seeking above all to encourage affiliation, speaking the same language and creating an identity in line with the subgroups of baby boomers indicated above (“La Generación Senior 4.0: Cómo Seducirlos”, 2019). The baby boomers’ mode of expression should be the one each of the brands created for them, and this should lead them to participate in the brands’ content and create content of interest to the brands.

16.3. CREATING EMOTIONS

It is not just a matter of assessing whether the brand is friendly. Work by Chung et al. (2017) shows that commitment is possible, firstly, when an individual accepts to be influenced because he or she expects to achieve a favourable reaction from another person or group and then when the result is intrinsically rewarding, and he or she wants to maintain it (internalisation of commitment).

For Carrillo-Durán and Tato-Jiménez (2019), internalisation of commitment can occur when the subject shows long-term conformity with the values represented by the brand and coincides rationally and emotionally with it.

According to what the participants expressed and their needs, it is safe to say that brands do not capitalise on the baby boomers’ needs as consumers of emotions. Baby

boomers feel alienated from brands because they do not believe that brands treat them right (they use their data, flood them with unwanted advertising, and do not offer them special discounts, which is very important to them, as most participants stated in the focus groups).

Finally, brands must consider that facilitating support and affiliation for baby boomers is key to building engagement, as long as it is achieved at all three levels. There is no point in engaging in an effective dialogue that is not fed by content reinforcing these two fundamental needs of baby boomers' relationship with social media networks (support and affiliation). Of course, completing this step will lead those engaged at the last level, which is building an emotional relationship with brands.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

María-Victoria Carrillo-Durán did conceptualization, formal analysis, funding acquisition, investigation, methodology, supervision, validation, writing — original draft, writing — review and editing. Soledad Ruano-López did conceptualization, formal analysis, funding acquisition, investigation, methodology, supervision, validation, writing — original draft. M-Rosario Fernández-Falero did conceptualization, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, supervision, validation, writing — original draft. Javier Trabadela-Robles did conceptualization, resources, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, supervision, validation, writing — original draft, writing — review and editing.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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