

Social network sites and ageing: roles of Facebook in enhancing seniors' well-being

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Abstract

Purpose of the paper: Use of social network sites (SNSs) among the elderly is on the rise, providing opportunities to facilitate their connections and restore social interaction. The purpose of this paper is to frame the role of Facebook in enhancing seniors' well-being.

Methodology: The authors carry out a netnography to explore the role of Facebook groups in ageing people's well-being. A total of 411 postings in 10 online communities were collected and analysed.

Results: Building on an extant framework on psychological well-being, this study highlights three roles that Facebook groups can fulfil to enhance seniors' well-being: information provider, social facilitator, and loneliness reductor.

Research limitations: The study has some limitations related to the generalizability of the research results. However, these limitations may represent potential avenues for research.

Practical implications: This paper provides practitioners with helpful insights on how Facebook can enhance various well-being dimensions. Service providers can use these results to devise effective communication and services tailored to seniors' needs.

Originality of the paper: Research examining SNSs and psychological well-being is still scarce. The proposed integrative framework offers initial evidence of how Facebook groups can improve psychological well-being among older adults.

Key words: silver economy; social media opportunities; seniors' well-being; psychological well-being; netnography

1. Introduction

In recent decades, Western societies' populations have undergone progressive ageing. According to the World Health Organization, the 2050 population of those aged 60 years and older will be 2 billion people; in other words, one in five people will be elderly. The increased presence of older people and their acquired longevity can be viewed as either a burden for society or a great opportunity for economics and businesses (Vigolo *et al.*, 2017).

As life expectancy increased in the past 30 years, another revolution was concurrently changing society profoundly: the digital revolution (Matarazzo *et al.*, 2020; Mele *et al.*, 2022b). Although the elderly are often viewed as being reluctant to use new technologies (Baisch *et al.*, 2017), the age group between 55 and 74 years has actually consistently increased its usage in recent years, particularly the internet and social networking

sites (SNSs). Worldwide data show that among the elderly, the use of social networks increased especially: As of 2021, 43% of those aged 65 years and older used social networks, and Facebook was the most used (Jung and Sundar, 2021; Cotten *et al.*, 2022; Gil-Clavel *et al.*, 2021). This phenomenon saw its biggest increase during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the elderly increasingly turned to social networks (e.g., Facebook) and online video conferencing apps (e.g., Zoom) to help them stay connected with their family members and friends (Chen *et al.*, 2021; Colurcio *et al.*, 2022). The containment measures to control the spread of COVID-19 starting in March 2020 imposed serious restrictions on face-to-face social contacts, with negative effects on the quality and satisfaction of life of older people (Tuzovic *et al.*, 2021). In this sense, information and communication technologies and social media have been useful tools to help the elderly population maintain and strengthen social ties, especially intergenerational ones (Cugmas *et al.*, 2021; Zerbini *et al.*, 2022). Older adults' use of Facebook continues to grow (Bianchi, 2021), and recently, communities of seniors gathered in Facebook groups have proliferated (Yachin and Nimrod, 2021). (Facebook groups are pages "that any Facebook user can create that others can join, allowing group members to interact based on a common interest, affiliation or association" (Techopedia, 2017).

Scholars from disparate disciplines (i.e., psychology, communication, computer science, and social science) have investigated the association between SNSs and well-being over the past two decades (e.g., Schiffrin *et al.*, 2010; Liu *et al.*, 2019; Simons *et al.*, 2021); these studies produce disparate outcomes (Castellacci and Tveito, 2018; Liu *et al.*, 2019). For example, some provide insights into the associations of social media use (SMU) with cognitive well-being (e.g., life satisfaction) and affective well-being (i.e., the elderly's affective evaluations of their moods and emotions) (e.g., Hsu *et al.*, 2021). Others investigate the impact of social networks on elderly well-being in terms of reduced depression symptoms (Matthes *et al.*, 2020). In business studies, only a few scholars have examined the associations of SNS use and well-being (Luqman *et al.*, 2021) in relation to the elderly (Pera *et al.*, 2020).

We focus on psychological well-being, a multidimensional, dynamic construct composed of a framework of dimensions in which enjoying positive experiences and meeting basic needs are essential (Ryff and Singer, 2008). It involves subjective, social, and psychological dimensions, health-related behaviours, and practices that add meaning to people's lives and allow them to attain their maximum potential (Ryff, 2014). It relates to growth and human fulfilment and has consequences for health (Ryff and Singer, 2008). In addition, recent studies have recognized that psychological well-being can substantially contribute to better health and positive ageing (Bar-Tur, 2021). Building on this reasoning, we state our research question as follows: What roles do SNSs (e.g., Facebook groups) play in fostering seniors' psychological well-being?

To address our question, we carried out a netnography analysis of 10 Facebook groups to obtain empirical insights into the roles of SNSs for the elderly. In particular, we selected online posts and reviews from senior groups on Facebook, the most popular social network used by ageing

people (Auxier and Anderson, Pew Research Center, 2021). The main contribution of this study is that we provide a better understanding of how SNSs (e.g., Facebook groups) can enhance elderly psychological well-being, as sites for social interactions that improve their daily quality of life. We provide an integrative framework of the three roles that Facebook groups play for elderly well-being: information provider, social facilitator, and loneliness reductor. First, Facebook can provide the elderly with information and foster their knowledge. Second, it can function as a social facilitator, by improving seniors' social lives and interactions. Third, it can mitigate a sense of solitude and overcome a lack of intimacy.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows: We present the theoretical background next, after which we describe the research method and the empirical results. Finally, we discuss the findings and contributions, as well as some limitations of our research.

2. Literature review

2.1 Connectivity and SNS opportunities for seniors

Catering to and caring for older adults is an increasingly multidimensional concern, due to their evolving needs, perceptions, and evaluations (Kabadayi *et al.*, 2020). Some scholars consider the elderly a vulnerable population (Berg, 2015; Amine *et al.*, 2021), such as when they are exposed to psychological disabilities due to loss of social communication and declining interactions (Courtet *et al.*, 2020; Ruggiero *et al.*, 2022). In the early 2020s, not only was this group exposed to the natural decline of physical health, but it also experienced the most extensive social and emotional loneliness exacerbated by, among other things, the COVID-19 pandemic (Odekerken-Schröder *et al.*, 2020). According to Coelho and Duarte (2016), the leading way to fight isolation and loneliness is to meet social needs through participation in SNSs (Vrontis *et al.*, 2015), particularly in later life (Bruine de Bruin *et al.*, 2020). These sites offer potential opportunities to address the elderly's lack of connectivity (Hsu *et al.*, 2021). In contrast with common stereotypes of older adults as tech passive, the elderly are actually increasingly adapting social networks to stay connected with society (Chen *et al.*, 2017, Vigolo, 2017). Online community usage is proliferating, and millions of people aged 60 years and older are logging onto Facebook, the world's largest digital platform (Statista, 2021; Caridà *et al.*, 2022). Technology and recent computer-based communication provide seniors a chance to take part in a wider part of society, making it possible for them to connect with people who have similar experiences (Iancu and Iancu, 2020). Studies show SNSs such as Facebook groups can function as a therapeutic tool, helping the elderly maintain and strengthen social connections, as well as affectional and social relationships, favouring greater integration among individuals (Spineli Silva *et al.*, 2020). Specific activities such as posting, commenting, and sharing with family, friends, and community members provide cognitive and social benefits to older adults (Nimrod, 2014; Pera *et al.*, 2020). For example, older adults who

regularly customise their social network profile and often share personal stories on their Facebook wall feel a greater sense of community and control (Solima, 2011; Hsu *et al.*, 2021). From this perspective, several scholars posit that SMU generates positive effects in terms of combating loneliness, fostering social support, and reducing social pain, especially during the pandemic (Bruine de Bruin *et al.*, 2020; Courtet *et al.*, 2020; Yang *et al.*, 2021). Scholars also have observed that SMU has some positive effects on older adults' well-being that involve their social connections and life satisfaction (Courtet *et al.*, 2020; cotton *et al.*, 2021). However, no studies address which types of well-being SNSs support.

2.2. Well-being: Ryff's model

Well-being is a dynamic concept, closely related to other concepts such as happiness, wellness, and quality of life (Ryan and Deci, 2001; Mele *et al.*, 2021; Boccoli *et al.*, 2022). An integrated conceptualization reflects the multidimensional status of well-being, spanning positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (Keyes *et al.*, 2002). Mele *et al.* (2022a, p. 7) offer a value-based definition of well-being "as individual positive effects that arise from utilitarian and hedonic value but also from ethical, environmental, and social value, which depend on the current and/or potential uses of resources by individuals and/or other people, within a narrow and/or wider context." In contrast, mainstream literature categorises the concept as eudaimonic or hedonic well-being (Ryan and Deci, 2001).

Researchers have proposed several theoretical models of well-being in agreement with these two philosophical positions. On the one hand, drawing on hedonism, Diener (2000) proposes the construct of subjective well-being (SWB), which refers to affective and cognitive evaluations of an individual's life. Other studies espousing this view posit that the feeling of happiness and satisfaction with life is universal, though what brings happiness and satisfaction may differ across societies and cultures (Diener and Suh, 2000; Diener *et al.*, 2009). On the other hand, eudaimonic theorists argue that it is important for people to have a sense of meaning and fulfilment in life (Deci and Ryan, 2008).

Herein, we adopt Ryff's (1989b) theoretic model of psychological well-being, which falls in the eudaimonic tradition and encompasses six key dimensions: "Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Personal Growth, Positive Relations with Others, Purpose in Life, Self-Acceptance" (Ryff, 1989b, p. 35). This model serves as the basis of our netnographic investigation, as we depict in the proposed framework. Ryff's model of psychological well-being draws extensively from various theories, such as Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics; the humanistic conceptions of Maslow, Allport, and Rogers; existential and utilitarian philosophy; and clinical, developmental, and humanistic psychology (Ryff and Keyes, 1995). We integrate all these perspectives to create a multidimensional model of psychological well-being. One of Ryff's criteria, autonomy, is also known as the final stage of ego development (Loevinger, 1976); it pertains to self-determination and independence-that is, the ability to make one's own

decisions without relying on, or waiting for, the approval of others (Ryff and Singer, 2008). Environmental mastery refers to the effective ability to choose or create contexts suitable to psychic conditions, such as personal needs and values (Jahoda *et al.*, 2021). Personal growth is correlated with the constant development of one's own potential and self-expansion as a person, working towards optimising one's full potential (Henn *et al.*, 2016). The concept of positive relations with others refers to warm, satisfying, and trusting interpersonal relations. It involves the welfare of other people and the capability to experience strong empathy, affection, and intimacy. In Ryff's model, the definitions of autonomy and positive relationships with others correspond to the basic needs of autonomy and relationships for any individual (Gao and McLellan, 2018). Ryff (1989a) and Ryff and Keyes (1995) propose that these needs represent a central component in a model that integrates other perspectives. Self-acceptance refers to a positive attitude toward the self and positive feelings about one's past life (i.e., having a realistic perception of oneself, including both good and bad qualities, and still being able to accept oneself). Finally, purpose in life is a high sense of meaning and emotional integration in life. It pertains to having life goals and a sense that one's life has purpose and meaning, while living intentionally and with clear direction (Birren and Renner, 1981; Ryff, 1989a, b).

We'll adopt the Ryff's model on psychological well-being to understand how SNSs (e.g., Facebook) affect the elderly.

3. Method

We adopted netnography, a qualitative research approach, which is appropriate when a deeper description and explanation of a multifaceted phenomenon is needed (Kozinets, 2002; Thanh and Kirova, 2017). Compared with other qualitative research techniques, the distinctive value of netnography is that it excels at telling a story, allowing readers to understand complex social phenomena, and assists the researcher in developing themes from consumers' points of view (Kozinets, 2002; Rageh *et al.*, 2013). Netnographic data are often described as rich and naturalistic, with the ability to represent people's lived realities accurately (Kozinets, 2002; Sandlin, 2007). For this study, we became "insiders" in some senior Facebook groups. We used a participant observation diary to capture key moments among participants in Facebook groups (Kozinets, 2020). The source of the data for the analysis occurred naturally in the expression of the participants in the text, without them being aware of being questioned, as would be the case with a formal interview in traditional ethnography (Kulmala, 2011).

3.1 Data collection

We identified the online communities most relevant to seniors on Facebook, the most popular social network used by ageing people (Pew Research Center, 2021). To this end, we followed Kozinets *et al.*'s (2010)

guidelines when choosing which channels would be relevant to the community under study: those that were active, interactive, substantial, heterogeneous, and data-rich at the time of study. Furthermore, the SNSs had to be written in English and used by ageing people for several purposes (e.g., interacting, sharing news, staying connected with family and friends). The context was international, though the prevailing target in terms of nationality was U.S.-based. We also collected archival data, such as texts or pictures, and copies of pre-existing communication, such as posts shared by the participants. With this observation diary, we identified posts that were most relevant and active for further analysis.

Tab. 1: Facebook communities, self-descriptions, and details

Community	Facebook Description	Members	Foundation
Ageing gratefully	"It's about aging with grace"	529	01/03/2021
Group of Seniors Citizens	"I made this group for senior citizens like me, THIS WILL BE OUR SHOULDER TO LEAN ON We can post what we feels, You are not alone in this journey... Think positive we are just starting our new normal life... May God bless us all!"	5,605	11/04/2021
J.O.Y just older youth	"J.O.Y is a group for adults ages 50 & under that will meet once a month. We will get together for around an hour, eat, play game(s) & fellowship. You do not have to be part of our church to attend. This is a casual, fun get together.. a time we can enjoy getting to know each other & fellowshiping. If you have kids let us know & we will have a babysitter available"	526	06/04/2018
Elderly We Care	"To provide peace of mind to Seniors and to their loved ones, that their Seniors are being taken care of; whether they are in their own home or retirement homes."	1,875	03/05/2021
Elderly Care	"Living & health care tips for elderly parents, aging people, grandparents, senior citizens, old age persons, dementia & Alzheimer patients."	4,294	28/06/2017
Elderly Care Group	"A group where we can share our problems and what concerns us. Probably we could connect better as we can't go out in these tough times. I also intend to come up with some solutions to your problems"	1,457	11/05/2021
Senior Citizens	"The group has been created to help Senior citizens with the latest information on various topics including health... science...welfare"	7,237	01/08/2018
Senior with humor	"A PLACE TO RELAX and have a laugh, chat and tell jokes: NO PORN, No POLITICS No NEGATIVITY, and NOTHING on Covid-19 !!!!! We are all adults so let's have fun here . ALL, AND I MEAN ALL, ARE WELCOME IN HERE ! NO RACISM OF ANY KIND !!! To SHARE a POST on your own page: GO to top of the post and press "post" or the 3 dots top right and follow directives. We encourage sharing joy with everyone."	16,453	09/12/2012
Aging in Place: Exploring Alternatives in Senior Living	"Aging in Place: Alternatives to Senior Living is a closed Facebook group for people concerned with being able to continue living at home independently as we age. We will look at current models around the country and discuss our experiences and share stories as we go"	1,617	25/10/2018
Seniors Only - Active, Online Group for 50+	"This Group is for SENIORS only. Must Be 50+ to Join. Inside We Share Lots of Great Information About: - Getting the Most Out of Your Retirement - Daily Deals We Find - Discounted Rates on Services and Things We Use - FUN Ideas and Activities We've Come Across - Hilarious Pictures and Stories - Books We're Reading - Places We're Visiting - and MUCH More!"	9,715	28/06/2018

Source: Authors' elaboration

We ultimately selected 10 online Facebook groups from which to collect posts and comments (see Table 1). We selected groups created specifically for elderly users with more than 500 members and that were English speaking. Two researchers searched for groups whose title contained at least one of the keywords elderly, seniors, silver, aging, or ageing and that had a fairly detailed group description. In addition, we excluded groups in which interaction was low, according to the average number of daily posts, and dismissed groups predominantly characterised by product advertisements or various sponsorships. The netnography that informs the current study encompasses online contributions posted between 2019 and 2021. However, the review was limited to contributions in English and those that focused on elderly experiences and thoughts, rather than technical concerns and company promotions (e.g., we excluded suggestions from administrators or people about products and services). Using a filtering process, we analysed these posts initially to determine if each contribution revealed information about one or more of Ryff's well-being dimensions, looking for expressions of joy, sadness, or knowledge acquisition (e.g., asking for help or information). The final selection of online contributions for further review resulted in 411 posts detailing elderly activities, opinions, questions, thoughts, and memories, which we subsequently analysed with the aim of addressing our research question (Heinonen and Medberg, 2018).

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3.2 Data analysis

For the data analysis, we employed qualitative content analysis (Altheide and Schneider, 1996; Bryman, 2008; Heinonen and Medberg, 2018). The qualitative content analysis of comments and posts revealed well-being topics through combinations of lexical (signal words in the text) and semantic (content interpretation and meaning) assessments (Heinonen and Medberg, 2018). This method is based on reflexive movements across concept development, data, analysis, and interpretation (Altheide and Schneider, 1996); it requires an orientation toward discovery and constant comparison. The focus was on what users were talking and writing about in their experiences, thoughts, memories, opinions, and questions. As elderly posts and comments revealed well-being facets, including all the six dimensions detailed by Ryff (1989a, b), we first coded a dominant element per post/comment (See Appendix I). Table 2 provides a frequency distribution of dominant codes across Facebook posts and comments. Then, through iterative discussions among the researchers, we realised that the dimensions could be grouped in three clusters because they provided common outcomes. These groupings ultimately resulted in the integrative framework detailed in the next section.

Tab. 2: Frequency distribution of dominant codes across Facebook posts and comments

	Number of Posts	Number of Comments	Total
Environmental mastery	43	24	67
Personal growth	36	16	52
Purpose in life	51	21	72
Autonomy	26	14	40
Self-acceptance	41	13	54
Positive relations with others	75	51	126
Total	272	139	411

Source: elaboration

4. Findings

Our analysis of 411 posts and comments led us to differentiate three roles of social network sites (e.g., Facebook groups) in enhancing the elderly’s well-being: information provider, social facilitator, and loneliness reductor. We provide several illustrative coding examples and descriptions in Table 3.

Tab. 3: Facebook groups quotes related to well-being dimension

	Well - Being Dimensions	Illustrative Coding Examples	Description
Loneliness reductor	Self-acceptance	“I have been widowed twice. I am a retired member of the medical community and I live in Florida... I am upbeat and wish everyone here a wonderful life :)” #male, post 312	In the process of telling their stories, including sad events, users open up and overcome difficult moments, accepting themselves and even unpleasant situations
	Positive relations with others	“Hello dear, I’m new to this page, a friend of mine introduced me to this group weeks ago. Your comments are wonderful. If you don’t mind sending me a friend request so that we can be best friends and also get to know more about each other!” #female, post 56	Elderly users look for deep and true friendship in communities, beyond just having fun and reading some posts.
Social facilitator	Autonomy	“I’m looking for input from lo-distance caregivers. What are your thoughts and/or experiences with remote monitoring services? Good? Bad? Meh?” #male, post 402	Users find valuable sources in Facebook communities to obtain knowledge and contacts to improve their life and autonomy, avoiding in some cases nursing homes.
	Purpose in life	“I love the holidays and I desire companionship. I also emailed my sister and I asked if we could celebrate together.” #female, post 167	Through interactions in Facebook groups, the elderly think about their deep desires and purposes. They are also driven to make decisions that make them feel good and enjoy life.
Information provider	Personal growth	“Any suggestion to fall asleep?” I was so proud of myself, when after several attempts I learned how to write in cursive” #male, post 348	Users experience a digital self-development when they interact in SSNs, contributing to a personal growth that they deeply pursue.
	Environmental mastery	“A good song is not based on how many people like it, but on how many memories you get. That’s the true beauty about music.” #male, post 298	Users express a sense of mastery in managing environmental factors and activities.

Source: Authors’ elaboration

4.1 Information provider

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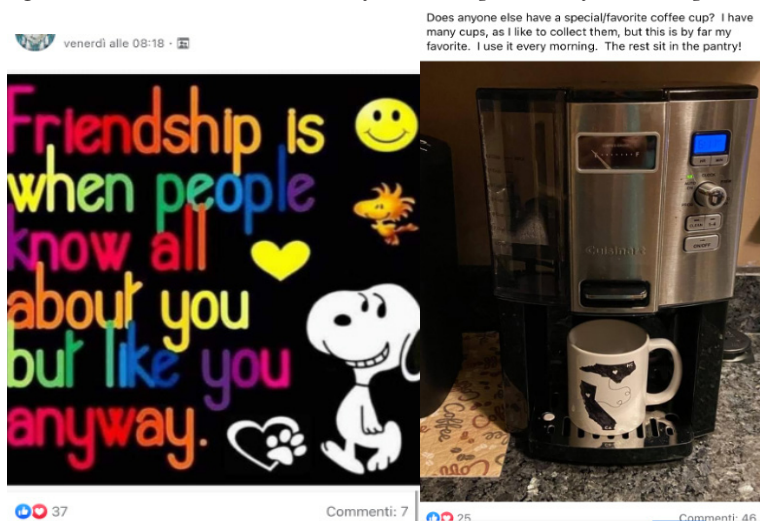
The Facebook groups improved *environmental mastery* and *personal growth*, in this sense serving the role of information provider for elderly users. Some users interact in Facebook communities to counteract their decreased social interactions and mainly perceive functional support (e.g., information, instructions). This group aims to increase their knowledge and digital self-development, as well as take advantage of surroundings and technology for specific and desired personal communication outcomes. These users found a positive environment in Facebook groups, where they can openly express themselves and show “active participation” and willingness to “develop one’s potential to grow and expand as a person” (Ryff, 1989b, pp. 44). In addition, seniors demonstrated proficiency in user-friendly platforms such as Facebook and the functions of Facebook groups.

“I was so proud of myself, when after several attempts I learned how to write in cursive.” #male, post 56

They ask for tips to improve their physical well-being (e.g., sleeping, eating) (see Plate 1 in Figure 1), or they state an opinion looking for some kind of appreciation or discussion (see Plate 2 in Figure 2).

“A good song is not based on how many people like it, but on how many memories you get. That’s the true beauty about music.” #female, post 7

Fig. 1: Plates 1 and 2: Illustrations of Facebook posts as information providers



Source: Authors' elaboration

4.2 Social facilitator

The second role of Facebook groups is to affect purpose in life and autonomy. Some users interact in social networks to compensate for their lack of relationships and to contribute to “feelings of meaningfulness and integration about the various parts of one’s life” (Ryff, 1989b, pp. 44). They

mainly perform hedonic activities (e.g., having fun, joking, sharing fun videos and posts; see Plate 3 in Figure 2) or express enthusiasm resulting from the type of content shared of and about oneself, involving selfies or focused subject matter. Seniors aim for independence and autonomy (Ryff, 1989a); accordingly, to facilitate their social life, they ask for suggestions about doctors, online services, or reference points, especially when moving to other places (see Plate 4 in Figure 2).

“I’m looking for input from long distance caregivers. What are your thoughts and/or experiences with remote monitoring services? Good? Bad? Meh?” #female, post 298

The open discussions provided some instances in which participants combined thoughts and discloses their opinions about social life:

“I love the holidays and I desire companionship. I also emailed my sister and I asked if we could celebrate together.” #male, post 347.

Plates 3 and 4: Illustrations of Facebook posts as social facilitators



Source: Authors’ elaboration

4.3 Loneliness reductor

Self-acceptance and *positive relations with others* represent the dimensions that make up the role of loneliness reductor, which mitigates solitude and lack of intimacy. Many users find in Facebook a renewed social life that, due to various circumstances (e.g., living alone, social distancing), they have lost. These seniors want to build new relationships and restore connectivity that has been reduced by infrequent interactions with their existing personal networks or the incapability of peers to meet. Thus, they join social network communities to build warm and trusting interpersonal relations that involve caring, feelings, and more personal ties. In looking for these intimate relationships, this group also seeks an individual sense of self-acceptance (Ryff, 1989a). We frequently observed comments and posts of people looking to meet in person, trying to develop strong attachments and share more about themselves.

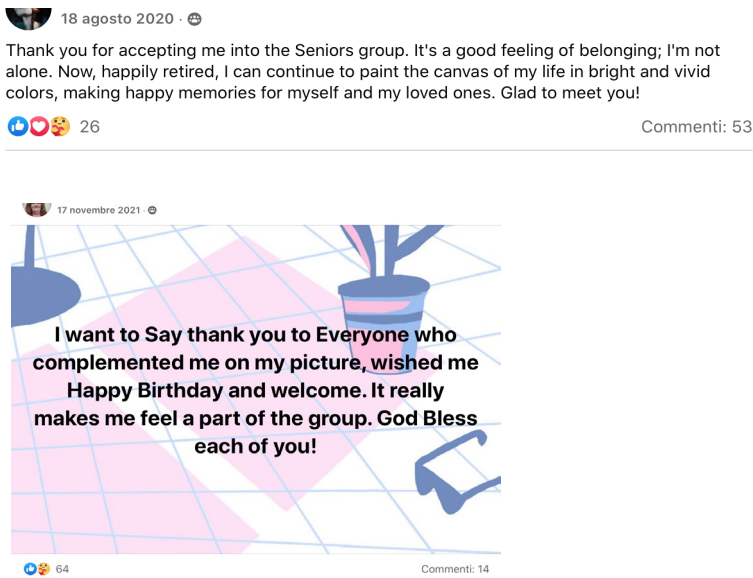
“Hello dear, I’m new, a friend of mine introduced me to this group weeks ago. Your comments are wonderful. If you don’t mind sending me a friend request so that we can be best friends and also get to know more about each other.” #male, post 411.

"I am happy to be a member of this senior group. I am a 65 year old man from Africa looking forward to meeting people and making new friends." #male, post 48.

In addition, these seniors directly display their state of mind and interests, helping them build new relationships and accept their current state (see Plate 5 in Figure 3). Especially among elderly with mobility limitations that prevent them from socialising physically, the process of talking about themselves reduces their feelings of loneliness (see Plate 6 in Figure 3).

"I have been widowed twice. I am a retired member of the medical community and I live in Florida.... I am upbeat and wish everyone here a wonderful life :)" #female, post 276.

Fig. 3: Plates 5 and 6: Illustrations of Facebook posts serving the role of loneliness redactor



Source: Authors' elaboration

5. Discussion

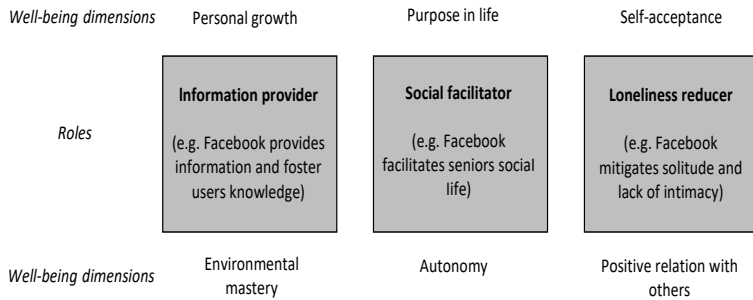
This work centres on a key priority in management research: how to foster elderly well-being through technologies (Kabadayi *et al.*, 2020; Ostrom *et al.*, 2021). It offers contributions for scholars and practitioners, as well as advice for further research.

5.1 Theoretical contributions

Extant research emphasises that, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, restoring and promoting social connections become fundamental for seniors' well-being (Hsu *et al.*, 2021). As such, the present work aims to

frame the role of SNSs (e.g., Facebook groups) in enhancing the elderly’s well-being. The proposed framework offers two main contributions. First, SNSs have the potential to enhance many facets of well-being, such as those identified by Ryff (Ryff, 1989b; Ryff and Singer, 2008). Second, the current study, building on prior studies of well-being (Ryff, 1989a, b; Ryff and Keyes, 1995; Pera *et al.*, 2020; Bianchi, 2021), loneliness (Cacioppo and Patrick, 2008), and social networks and the silver economy (Coelho and Duarte, 2016), proposes an integrative framework (Figure 4) that differentiates three roles of social network sites (e.g., Facebook groups) for enhancing the elderly’s well-being: information provider, social facilitator, and loneliness reducer.

Fig. 4: Roles of Facebook groups in enhancing well-being



Source: Authors’ elaboration

Each role contributes differently to enhancing well-being, by offering specific, socially supportive relationships. These roles can improve well-being, by providing useful information, bringing joy, and/or enhancing feelings of powerful connections (Adelman *et al.*, 1994; Adelman and Ahuvia, 1995). Seniors use SNSs primarily to create a bridge of social capital, sharing identity and developing a sense of connectedness among group members (Coelho and Duarte, 2016). Facebook groups are a useful tool to help the elderly population maintain generational ties, especially when social distancing limits face-to-face interactions. Interacting in Facebook groups allows seniors to grow personally, and the exchange of information among users in SNSs maximises their potential, fostering improved knowledge (information provider).

In addition to functioning as a place to collect and provide information, Facebook acts like a social facilitator, by helping users communicate with other humans (Sharkey and Sharkey, 2012). Participation in an online community enables the elderly maintain their own goals and a sense that life has purpose and meaning. In this light, SNSs can also enhance a user’s social well-being.

Finally, SNSs can fill the highest needs of well-being, such as loneliness and intimate relationships (Odekerken-Schröder *et al.*, 2020). In online communities, older people are not afraid to have a realistic perception of themselves, including both positive and negative qualities. Relationships with others encourage them to accept themselves, despite age-related vulnerabilities. Elderly users often find partners or close friends through

interaction in Facebook communities. Through daily, direct interaction (posts and comments), the elderly establish warm and caring relationships (Pera *et al.*, 2020). As a loneliness reductor, Facebook thus serves as a place to develop intimacy and express empathy. In this sense, contrary to stereotypical views that social networks hinder human contact, we find that Facebook groups foster social interaction for elderly users.

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5.2 Managerial implications

This study offers important insights for practitioners on the importance of observing the behaviour and actions of the elderly on social networks. Seniors express themselves among peers in specific Facebook groups, revealing interests, desires, and concerns toward products and services. Considering the key role of technology and SNSs in effective efforts to facilitate active ageing (Klimczuk, 2015), practitioners should devote more attention to the design of new modalities of engagement that support the participation of older adults (Keyes, 2014). Although technology companies have faced some problems in winning over this age group in the past, because some of them may be reluctant to use new technologies (Baisch *et al.*, 2017), recent growth in internet, smartphone, broadband, and tablet adoption among the elderly is evident (Pew Research Center, 2021). Tech firms should be aware that their technology offerings need to be affordable (such that the elderly can buy and maintain them), accessible (such that information and services about the technology are available), and usable (such that this group perceives ease of use, and using the technology does not lead to feelings of stress and confusion) (Iwasaki, 2013). From this perspective, Facebook complies with these requirements; many older people feel comfortable using this platform. Its ease and accessibility have resulted in widespread diffusion among the elderly. Managers should focus on exploiting more accessible interfaces (Conte *et al.*, 2022), like Facebook, for older age groups.

Our study provides evidence that professionals, managers, and marketing specialists can adopt digital advertising to target elderly consumer segments, in contrast with a common and stereotyped view of older adults preferring newspapers and television. In these platforms, companies can carry out social listening to understand ageing and elderly needs, which represent an increasingly attractive business segment (Falk *et al.*, 2007; Grougiou and Pettigrew, 2011; Kuppelwieser and Klaus, 2020; Caridà *et al.*, 2022). Elderly encounters, especially in assisted living and nursing homes, have become a subject of increasing analysis (Bermudez-Gonzalez *et al.*, 2016). Both scholars and practitioners are uncovering the importance of digital places and encounters for elderly (Bar-Tur, 2021), and not only third places (e.g., diners, coffee shops, taverns), to enhance their health and longevity (Rosenbaum, 2006), by satisfying their consumption and health needs, as well as their needs for companionship and emotional support. Thus, the rapid introduction and development of smart technologies has uncovered the promising relation of digital encounters with elderly service provision and well-being (Essén 2009; Caić *et al.*, 2018; Kabadayi *et al.*, 2020). To address and develop this critical and

demanding segment, it is incumbent on firms not to wait for political and economic reforms, but to design innovative solutions especially tailored to the ageing population (Warner *et al.*, 2020). Managers should keep in mind the importance of matching the features of SNSs and other digital communication technologies with the specific needs and challenges of the elderly (Caridà *et al.*, 2016). Doing so is a first step toward encouraging and helping the elderly use these technologies to their advantage. Ultimately, health care professionals and general physicians (Kenet and Lavi, 2014) can enhance the usage of Facebook groups, which can improve patient care even if their well-being decreases due to psychological sufferings (Boccoli *et al.*, 2022).

5.3 Limitations and further research

This paper has some limitations that could serve to guide further research into the links of the “silver economy,” SNSs, and well-being. Because we adopted a netnographic study approach, we do not consider the social and cultural characteristics of Facebook users. Ethnographic studies and in-depth interviews might enrich the understanding of the nuances of seniors’ behaviours and desires in SNSs. Quantitative research through surveys and databases could validate our findings. Scholars can expand theoretical and empirical knowledge in Facebook communities to address clusters of seniors (e.g., 50+, 65+, 75+) or cultural and national differences. Alternatively, quantitative research might focus on developing more detailed measurement scales for each of the six dimensions or three roles. In summary, the exponential growth and changes among seniors in today’s society provides a promising field of study.

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Appendix 1: Well-being illustrative coding examples

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	Well-Being Dimensions	Illustrative Coding Examples
Loneliness reductor	Self-acceptance	<p>I am glad I'm not the only one who now does the holidays alone. I just haven't figured out what makes me happy to make the day special yet but working on it! 🥰</p> <p>I have also, but I emailed my sister and asked if we could celebrate together... I love the holidays and desire companionship... I don't think she will like the parade tho...too much action for her.</p> <p><i>"How do you stay positive and get momentum when it's so hard to find like minded people? So many people around me don't want change."</i></p>
	Positive relations with others	<p>I've been seeing articles about seniors losing weight with recipes. Well, the recipes look awful! 🤢. So we decide we are not willing to give up everything we enjoy in our old age. How do y'all deal with this?</p>
Social facilitator	Autonomy	<p>What did you eat today? In 1963 I had my very first kiss on Myrtle. I made BSF and a chocolate sauce for lunch and then made the sauce for dinner. I was too exhausted to make my usual comfort.</p> 
	Purpose in life	<p>As you get older, you've got to stay positive. For example, the other day I fell down the stairs. Instead of getting upset, I just thought, "Wow, that's the fastest I've moved in years!"</p> <p>Every Fall I look forward to standing in my housecoat with a cup of coffee smiling and wave at the neighbors scraping the ice off their windshield and snow off their cars on their way to work.</p>
Information provider	Personal growth	<p>Were any left-handers forced to write with their right hand? In 1963, my kindergarten teacher would slap my left hand and put the crayon in my right hand. It made me mostly ambidextrous, but to this day I say right when I mean left and vice-versa.</p> <p><i>There is so much that can be done for us, focusing on nutrition and diet, stress management, sleep quality and quantity, social interactions, exercise, meditation, creativity and learning. Collectively, these can all play a role in the health and wellness of our brains. So please don't think your choices today are not relevant because I can assure you that they really are!"</i></p> <p>I was taught that its better to be ten minutes early than one minute late, anyone else think the same as me</p>
	Environmental mastery	<p><i>"Remember these days when we didn't have to wear seat belts as kids. It was a different world then"</i></p> <p>Did your mom ever tell you good night, sleep tight, don't let the bed bugs bite</p> <p>I can't be the only one who remembers when we had an orange, apple & nuts in our christmas stockings? I miss the old days...</p> <p>People may not reward or thank you for the good things you've done, but when God is your reason for serving, you will receive greater blessings in return. Good morning!</p>

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