

The Changing Use of Facebook: The Impact for Marketers

Summary: Much of the research on social media usage focuses on young adults, and more recently, older adults. This paper focuses on social media usage of middle-aged adults on Facebook. A mixed method approach is used to examine how this age group uses Facebook and engages with brands on the platform; and explores how their behaviour has changed over time. A set of strategic recommendations for brand engagement with this age group is then developed.

In 2024, Facebook (now Meta) is still a formidable organisation. In 2023, Facebook was the most commonly used social media platform among marketers worldwide as well as the most important driver for web traffic from third party websites among social media platforms globally (Dencheva, 2023).

However, there has long been a perception that Facebook is ‘out’ and ‘uncool’ (e.g. Sutter, 2012; Buchmann, 2022). This perception has been driven by a pronounced shift in user demographics. In 2013 25% of UK users were in the 15–24-year-old age group (Dixon, 2023, Aug 25) but this decreased to 19% 2018. In contrast, the use of Facebook by over 55-year-olds rose from 13% in 2013 to 24% in 2018 (Dixon, 2023, Aug 25), thus creating a perception of a platform that is left by young people and being ‘taken over’ by a much older demographic. This perception has been compounded by academic research focusing on the use of Facebook by young adults and more recently also on older (65+) adults (Lim et al 2022; Wilson et 2023).

There is, however, a lack of attention concerning middle aged adults (35-54 years). This group of Facebook users constitutes 33% (Dixon, 2023, May 22) but has not attracted much attention. They are an economic active group with disposable income (Clark, 2024), technology aware and socially connected. Even more importantly, research has shown that Facebook use among this group is more stable with less attrition than in younger age groups (Bosak and Park, 2018).

It is the aim of this paper to explore the social media usage behaviour of middle-aged UK adults, with a particular focus on Facebook. A secondary aim is to establish if individuals perceive to have changed their Facebook usage behaviour over time.

The project consists of two studies. Study 1 uses a deductive, quantitative approach based on an online survey to empirically test the importance of a range of motivational dimensions on Facebook use for middle-aged adults. Respondents are recruited through the authors’ social and professional networks, and by distributing posters with a link and a QR code to the survey in community hubs.

The motivational dimensions include Relationships (e.g. Whitney and Li-Barber, 201; Newman et al, 2021) Virtual community (e.g. Hollenbaugh, 2014; Kang and Shin, 2021); Self-expression (e.g. Carpenter, 2012); Archiving self/memories (e.g. Kang and Shin, 2021); Diversion/Entertainment (e.g. Newman et al, 2021; and Information sharing; Renumeration (e.g. Saradikis et al, 2016) and Empowerment (*ibid*).

Study 2 consists of a series of online Focus Groups to explore behavioural changes and motivations of Facebook use for middle aged adults in more detail. This study is based on an inductive, qualitative approach. The focus here will be on exploring changes of Facebook use and brand engagement on the platform over time.

The ultimate outcome of the paper is the development of strategic recommendations for brands to tap into key motivations for Facebook use by middle aged adults and thus increase brand engagement on the platform.

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