Intergenerational contacts online: An exploratory study of cross-generational Facebook “friendships”

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A B S T R A C T

Since the older generations discover social networking sites (SNSs) as a useful communication and information tool, SNSs can become a new platform for interactions between members of different generations. This paper summarizes the contradictory status of research about the importance of computer-mediated communication for intergenerational relations and shows, with findings of an online survey (N=987), how Facebook is used for intergenerational communication. This exploratory study reveals some quite different perceptions about the effects of SNS on intergenerational relationship quality that should be a starting point for further studies about intergenerational contacts in SNS.

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1. Introduction

The Internet has already lost its image as “youth media” and is seen more and more as an integral part of everyday life even from the older generations. The advertising industry summarizes the growing number of older Internet users under the catchphrase “silver surfers.” Not for nothing, it is an often cited fact that 50-year-olds or older constitute the largest group of “new” Internet users (cf. Van Eimeren & Frees, 2012, p. 362). In 2012, already 77% of the 50- to 59-year-old Germans are online (2011: 69%), 63% are 60- to 69-year-olds (2011: 54%), and every fifth are 70-year-olds or older (2011: 18%). These statistics indicate quite clearly that Internet use is important independently from age and that the computer competency of older people is rising similarly as the computer equipment in the households is growing (cf. Egger & Van Eimeren, 2008). Internet is not only used as an information source but more and more as a communication channel and platform for building and maintaining social relationships. Especially, social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook highlight the social component of Internet usage. These networks are primarily designed to offer users a platform where they can stay in contact with friends, family members, and other acquaintances at least via Internet connection (Barker, 2009; Donath & Boyd, 2004; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2006; Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Ridings & Gefen, 2004). The users of Facebook are rapidly growing. In the summer of 2013, Facebook has more than 1.1 billion users worldwide, indicative of a strong need for computer-mediated communication and maintaining contacts in the modern network society where sometimes big geographic distances can separate even strongly linked people. Facebook started as a social network site for university students, and therefore, it was not surprising that the early users of the network were young and well-educated people. But this user structure has changed rapidly over the last few years. Today Facebook is used by nearly all age groups, and the group of 50+ people represents the user group with the highest growing rates. User statistics indicate that approximately 15–16% of Facebook users in Germany and Austria are older than 45 years (Hutter, 2012). The question that appears in a generational social-scientific perspective is “In what way such virtual social networks that are already used will be used in the future for intergenerational interactions?”

According to the statistical user numbers, a potential for intergenerational contacts in SNSs can be assumed (Franz, 2010, p. 405; Van Eimeren & Frees, 2011). But so far, it is still uncertain if the technological opportunities for computer-mediated intergenerational contacts are already used from younger and older Facebook users. Until now, majorities of studies about SNS still focus on the younger or middle-aged users. A huge number of these studies analyze very special user groups, such as university students (cf. Aquisti & Gross, 2006; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2006). During those times when the number of users older than 50 years is growing, the focus on younger user groups seems to be considered too narrowly. A particular research gap can be seen in a combined analysis of SNS usage...
of younger and older people. Therefore, this paper should offer a first insight in the usage and experiences of different age groups with computer-mediated intergenerational contacts in an SNS. To answer this question, younger and older Facebook users are asked in an online survey about their communication habits and how they use the SNS to maintain interactions with family members of different generations. Before the findings are presented, some theoretical considerations about intergenerational contacts in a society that experiences some very profound changing processes should be done. In addition, a short overview of already done research on the significance of computer-mediated communication for intergenerational contacts should be given.

2. Changing society: changing intergenerational communication?

Intergenerational relationships are a quite traditional and intensely studied sociological research field. Nevertheless, in the research literature, a division into two main focuses can be observed. On the one hand, several studies that focus exclusively on generations in the family context exist. On the other hand, there are studies that address a much more abstract level of intergenerational contacts, namely, a general analysis of relationships between the young and the old in a society. This study aimed to combine these two main research directions by observing individual relations to people from various age groups but do not constrain these contacts on family members, but all various forms of intergenerational contacts inside and outside family relations should be observed. The contacts from parents and children and the other way around are asked as well as relationships of older and younger person in work, leisure, or educational context and in the neighborhood. Thereby, Höpflingers (1999, p. 15) critic the frequently separated analysis of familial generation contacts, and historical–social generation problems should be kept in mind by the conception of this study.

This extension of the focus over the pure inner familial relationships should not raise the question of the significance of family as the “root” of intergenerational relations (Trommsdorff, 1993, p. 266). An analysis of generations always has to consider social transformations that influence and change family models. In the last centuries, a continuous process of change in family structures (Lange, 1994) could be observed, which reaches from the demographic change on a general level and postponed times of the birth of the first child to changed types of relationships such as the “patchwork family” that do not have much in common with traditional parent–child constellations. Even increased needs of mobility in the professional context that can cause increased geographic distance between family members (cf. Davis, Vetere, Francis, Gibbs, & Howard, 2008, p. 193), which is called “multilocl multigenerational family” (Bertram, 1993; Lauterbach, 1998), have to be discussed. The latter is the case especially for families with high educational and socioeconomic status (Fors & Lennartsson, 2008; Lauterbach, 1995, p. 127), and it has to be expected that this factor will become even more important with increasing globalization tendencies. Indeed, studies show that the distances between parents and their grown-up children are quite low in Europe. Nearly 50% of all parents in middle European countries (Germany, France, Austria, and Switzerland) have at least one child that lives 25 km away (Hank, 2008, p. 5). Nevertheless, it has to be highlighted that even a comparatively low distance causes less everyday and random encounters between the generations than living together in one shared place. All these changes can cause decreasing direct contacts and exchange of experiences between the generations even in the family context. (cf. McCarthy & Thomas, 2004).

But it appears important to bring to mind that geographic distance can never be equated with emotional distance between the generations. Rather, a new “intimacy over distance” (Rosenmayer & Köckeis, 1965) can be observed. Nevertheless, frequent contacts between the generations are provably important for the social togetherness by removing negative age images with intergenerational contacts (cf. Kaplan, Wagner, & Larson, 2001) and increasing the mutual understanding between the generations (Hernandez & Gonzalez, 2008, p. 293) and the pro-social behavior of the younger generations in general (Lambert, Dellmann-Jenkins, & Fruit, 1990).

3. Internet and generations

At least since the millennium, the potentials of Internet and the interconnection of households via computer networks for the everyday lives of older people are discovered (cf. Kanayama, 2003). Under the term “smart homes,” new living concepts for elderly are developed that use computer and Internet technologies to create smart houses and apartments where even elderly with some health issues can live an autonomous life in their own homes because the network techniques connect them 24 h a day with important relatives and institutions that can take care of them if something happens (Bowes & McColgin, 2005; Stefanov, Bien, & Bang, 2004). Besides these advantages of interconnected homes in health and security issues, the Internet also offers the elderly a new multimedia communication channel. Especially for older people who are not so mobile anymore because of health issues, computer-mediated communication represents an important channel to interact with family and other relatives who live outside the own home (cf. Bonfadelli, 2009, p. 163). These new interaction forms can help reducing loneliness in old age, which in consequence can reduce physical and psychological well-being (cf. Foley, Alfonso, Brown, & Fisher, 2003; Hernandez & Gonzalez, 2008; Thompson & Heller, 1990). The opportunity to maintain contacts with family members is one of the main motivators for elderly to start using new communication technologies such as computer, smartphones, and the Internet (cf. Harley, Kurniawan, Fitzpatrick, & Vetere, 2009; Hutchinson et al., 2003). Even younger generations report a high significance of computer-mediated communication for the contact maintenance with older family members (McMillan & Morrison, 2006). A study of Quadrero et al. (2005) about the significance of e-mails, telephone, and face-to-face communication reveals that the geographic distance between family members has a high influence in which communication channels are used. Those who have to overcome longer distances tend to use much more e-mails (Quadrero et al., 2005, p. 205) and other computer-mediated communication channels (Şenyürek & Detzner, 2009) than those who live quite close to their children, grandchildren, and other relatives. Computer-mediated communication facilitates relationship maintenance (even large) distances (Deterding, 2009, p. 129; Lange, 2009).

But even independently from the distance, many studies can prove the positive outcomes of computer-mediated communication as a supplement to more traditional communication forms (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; McMillan & Morrison, 2006; Stern & Messer, 2009). Other studies highlight more possible negative consequences of Internet usage in the family context. They see a threat for the cohesion of generations because of the Internet because the time for family activities would decline (Mesch, 2006; Turow & Nir, 2000) or that the changed usage competencies could blur the lines between traditional intergenerational role models of parents and children (Lenhart, Raine, & Lewis, 2001; Mesch, 2003; Turow & Nir, 2000). These contradictory findings can also be found in studies about SNS usage. Although it is shown that the usage of SNS can help college students or soldiers maintain contacts with their families (Madge, Meek, Wellens, & Hooley, 2009; Schachman, 2010).
other studies find negative relationships between SNS usage and family cohesion (Walker, Krehbiel, & Knowler, 2009).

Besides these interaction opportunities with family members, computer-mediated communication can also foster intergenerational contacts outside the pure family context. Harley and Fitzpatrick (2009) demonstrated a case study of the 79-year-old video blogger, Peter, who publishes his videos under the pseudonym “Geriatric1927” on YouTube. Harley and Fitzpatrick discussed the potentials of social media for intergenerational contacts that go beyond the closest family cores. The blogger publishes regularly on his YouTube channel videos in which he talks about his life story. These videos are mainly watched by young YouTube users who comment quite positively on the videos. His narration of his own life story in an online portal corresponds to the narrations that usually happen between parents and children or grandparents and grandchildren in the close family context. Because of the Internet, the communication circle of these narrations between the generations is significantly broadened (cf. Harley & Fitzpatrick, 2009, p. 12). All of these mentioned results are the first indicator that the Internet is used for intergenerational communication inside and outside the family.

4. Study

To answer the questions about the forms and potentials of computer-mediated intergenerational contact in SNSs, users of Facebook were asked in an online survey about their individual usage habits of the network and their personal experiences of intergenerational contacts in the online environment. The findings were focused on Facebook because it recently represents the most used SNSs worldwide, with more than 1.1 billion users in the summer of 2013. The high number of users is important to make sure that a sufficient quantity of members from all age group are present in the network so that intergenerational contacts can happen frequently and sometimes even unintentionally. The already mentioned online survey took place in January 2012 in the form of a teaching research project together with students of the University of Vienna. They helped to distribute the survey link according to quota criteria that include age, sex, and Internet usage via e-mail, SNSs, and online forums. The study addresses especially the usage habits of Austrian (80%) and German (12%) Internet users. In total, 987 people finished the questionnaire. Most participants are quite high educated; 45% of all interviewed persons are younger than 25 years, 36% are 25–45 years, and 20% are older than 45 years. The youngest participant is 12 years old, and the oldest is 73 years old. In the youngest group are several students who either have already left the home of their parents and have gone to another city to do their study or still live with their families. These differences allow an analysis of the influences of geographic distance between young and older generations in the family context. Similar differences can be observed for the group of 45-year-olds and older. Some of them still live together with their children; others already experience the “empty nest” period. In addition, the oldest survey group is quite heterogeneous in their computer experiences and their work situation. Some of the 45-year-olds and older are still working, and most of them used a computer and Internet for years even in their professional lives. Another part, the oldest participants of the survey are already retired, and some of them never got in contact with a computer and Internet during their occupational time. These differences can give interesting insights in the significance of general experiences of computer-mediated communication and the actual usage of these communication channels for intergenerational contacts. Nevertheless, it has to be highlighted that this study does not claim to be representative for all Facebook users from all age groups. But this is the problem of the majority of online surveys because of the following facts: First, the entire population of all Facebook users cannot be measured accurately because of the constantly changing number of users. So it is nearly impossible to define a clear sampling frame (Couper, 2000). Second, participation in such online surveys requires the user’s willingness and a specific interest in the topic of study. So it has to be assumed that highly involved people are more likely to participate in the study. But as Matsuo, McIntyre, Tomazic, and Katz (2004, p. 3998) point out, this problem of self-selection is no more problematic in online surveys than in mail or telephone surveys, where the contacted individuals are free to decide whether they would like to participate or not. And Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, and John (2004) even mention the high motivation of those people who participate in Internet surveys as one advantage of the method compared with traditional offline surveys. Thus, we can assume that the presented studies do not claim representativeness; nevertheless, they can provide insight into the possible potentials of SNS on intergenerational contacts. The findings of such exploratory studies can be used as a groundwork for more representative surveys.

4.1. Research questions

This pilot study will be based on the following two research questions:

1. Which parallels and differences in the usage of SNSs could be observed between younger and older Facebook users?
2. Which experiences have younger and older Facebook users with regard to maintaining relationship with other generations on SNSs?

The first question will be used to get an impression of the SNS usage behavior of the analyzed population. The second question should help get an impression of how different generations experience their intergenerational contacts on SNS. According to the “intergenerational stake” hypothesis, young and older people even experience the frequency of intergenerational contacts differently. Therefore, this study should give a first insight into the question of whether the “intergenerational stake” hypothesis can be found in computer-mediated intergenerational interaction too.

4.2. Results

4.2.1. Facebook usage

The basic requirement for the participation in the survey was a Facebook account, and most of the participants report a quite intense usage of SNSs: 43% use several times a day, 27% at least once a day, 19% several times a week, and 12% once a week or even less. Clear age differences can be observed: although most of the youngest group (25 years and younger) use Facebook several times a day (54%), only 17% of the 45-year-olds and older and 44% of the middle age group do so. Therefore, it has to be kept in mind that older people use SNSs less frequently than the younger ones who experience the network as an integral part of their daily life. The different usage frequency does not mean problems for intergenerational contacts because SNSs do not demand simultaneous usage of the communication partner but allows asynchronous interactions.

4.2.2. Usage experiences

To measure the potential of intergenerational contacts on SNSs, the individual usage experiences appear interesting because they can give an impression of how young and older people use the network and how they measure the functions of the network. All survey participants were asked to evaluate statements about possible usage experiences on a four-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree). Compared with
a chi-square test, the answers of young and older Facebook users reveal some interesting differences between the generations. Young users agree or even strongly agree to a much higher rate with statements that mention a facilitation of communication thanks to Facebook (<25 years = 89.9% agreement, >45 years = 71.5% agreement, p < 0.01), that see the network as opportunity to pass time (<25 years = 67.9%, >45 years = 35.1%, p < 0.01) or to transmit, and get information (<25 years = 37.2%, >45 years = 27.1%, p < 0.05) and or that express the possibility to maintain and foster relationships in the network (<25 years = 85.1%, >45 years = 71.3%, p < 0.001). On the contrary, the 45-year-olds and older agree to higher rates than the younger group, with the statements such as “Thanks to Facebook, my contacts to younger family members have improved” (>45 years = 26.5%, >25 years “contact to older family members have improved” = 5.4%) and “I found new contacts in Facebook.” (>45 years = 39.1%, <25 years = 30.5%, p < 0.05). Additionally, according to the agreement rates, older people experience the network much more as a channel for communication and information exchange with younger relatives than the young users do it in the other direction (Table 1).

4.2.3. Significance of different communication channels

Intergenerational interactions can happen through various communication channels. The only thing that is necessary for intergenerational contacts is the mutual usage of a channel from all interacting generations. Therefore, all participants were asked to rate the significance of different communication channels so that for all three age groups, a general ranking of communication channels compared between the age groups can be made. It appears that traditional forms of communication, such as face-to-face interactions and telephone calls, still have the highest significance in all age groups. Interestingly, the 45-year-olds and older rate the telephone as more important than face-to-face contacts. There are various explanations for this. One could be that with the growing age of the parents’ (and consequently the children’s) generation, the possibility increases that significant people (children/grandchildren respectively parents) live in geographic distances. As it is known, parents, or the older generation in general, tend to invest more in intergenerational contacts than the younger ones (Bengtson & Kuypers, 1971; Giarrusso, Stallings, & Bengtson, 1995). This could explain why older people rate contact through telephone as slightly more important than face-to-face contact. Younger people spend a lot of time with people who live close to them, and therefore, face-to-face contact is very important for them. Besides the more traditional communication channels, the 25-year-olds and younger prefer communication via SMS over telephone calls. But even for the oldest group, computer-mediated communication is quite important, as can be observed in the case of e-mail that they rated as the third important communication channel. Interestingly, for the youngest group, Facebook is more important than e-mails. For the middle and the older Facebook users, SNSs are the fifth important channel. Other findings of these ratings include the difference in the significance of letters, which are much more important for the older generations, whereas (video) chats are more important for the younger group.

Besides these sometimes quite obvious differences in the ranking, it can be said that more traditional communication channels such as face-to-face communication and telephone are still important for all generations. In addition, even some more “modern” channels, such as SMS, e-mail, and to some parts Facebook, become important for everyday interactions. This goes along with the findings of Rabby and Walther (2003), who found out that people often report a preference for “rich media” (face-to-face, telephone), but in their everyday practice, they show high frequency of usage of more opportunistic media (email, SNS) because they sometimes find these media easier or cheaper to use. And Wellman, Boase, Horrigan, and Rainie (2006) stated that the Internet and SNS do not replace traditional communication channels but supplement them. The more people communicate with others through traditional communication channels, the more they communicate through computer-mediated channels too. Wellman et al. (2006) called this “media multiplexity.” Through all these communication channels, intergenerational interactions can happen because all age groups use them quite frequently (Table 2).

4.2.4. Age structure of Facebook friends

Besides some similarities in the usage of communication channels, the question about the number of Facebook “friends” from other age groups forms an indicator for the possibility to have intergenerational contacts on SNSs. Therefore, the participants were asked to estimate the proportion of their Facebook friends of different age groups. Some data about the proportion of younger and older people in the friend lists of the participants of the three age groups should give a first exploratory impression of the mixture of age groups inside individual Facebook networks. This age distribution in the individual Facebook friend lists reveals three interesting facts. First, it shows that only one-quarter (27%) of the youngest group does not have any Facebook friend older than 45 years. Nearly three-quarter of the young ones have at least one person in their individual friend list who is older than 45 years. It indicates that most of the interviewed young users have the opportunity to get in touch with people older than 45 years quite easily because they have already added it to their Facebook network. Most of the older friends of the 25-year-olds and younger are not only family members but also friends of parents or grandparents (13%) or people from work (10%) who are added as “friends” in Facebook. In some cases, the older contacts are known because of shared hobbies and interests (9%), educational context (8%), being from the same neighborhood (5%), or (grand)parents of same-aged friends (5%). Second, it shows the variety of age structure of older users. It is not the case that older Facebook users just have young “friends” because there are not enough older users in Facebook. On the contrary, in

<table>
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<th>Table 1</th>
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<tr>
<td>Usage experiences of different age groups.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percentage of agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook facilitated the communication with other people, e.g., through chat, message box, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I receive recent and compact information about my personal interests.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook is a distraction from my daily tasks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Since I used Facebook, I see my friends less often than before.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thanks to Facebook, I stay up to date about what happens in my friends’ lives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thanks to Facebook, I stay up to date about what happens in my relatives’ lives.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Facebook improved the relationship to my older family members.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Facebook improved the relationship to my younger family members.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thanks to Facebook, I made new interesting contacts.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Facebook helps to refresh contacts with old friends.</td>
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<td>Facebook is appropriate to maintain existing relationships.</td>
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most of the friend lists of Facebook members older than 45 years, the youngest group represents only quite a small proportion. Much more important for the older users are their middle-aged friends (25–45 years) and same-aged friends. Therefore, the age structure in the friend lists of older users is much more diverse than those of the younger ones. Third, although this survey was not necessarily conducted with young and older Facebook users who have a personal relationship with each other, the comparison of the estimated proportion of young versus older friends in the friend lists reveals a different perception of existing intergenerational contacts. Although only 12% of the 45-year-olds and older report that they do not have any Facebook “friend” younger than 25 years, 27% of the 25-year-olds and younger said they do not have any 45-year-old person or older in their friend list. Undoubtedly, these differences could only be a special phenomenon in the interviewed population, but nevertheless, it can be assumed that it stands for something more. The younger ones estimate the number of contacts to the older generation much lower than the older ones do it the other way around. Similar variance could be observed in the study of Roux, Gobel, Clémence, and Höpflinger (1996, p. 32) for offline contacts. Roux et al. also found that 66% of the older participants said that they discuss with younger generations regularly, but only 48% of the young ones said they have frequent discussions with older generations. Roux et al. (1996, p. 32) tried to explicate this discrepancy with an overestimation of contacts by the older people because they tend to wish an intensification of contacts. Lerner, Somers, Reid, and Tierney (1989) had also found similar differences in the United States. They explained such variance in the perception of contacts with a kind of discontent with the situation. As a consequence of this discontent, an overestimation of contacts happened, which can be interpreted as a form of coping strategy. According to the “intergenerational stake” (Bengtson & Kuyper, 1971; Giarrusso et al., 1995) hypothesis, older generations tend to invest more in relationships with younger persons than the young ones do the other way (Harwood & Lin, 2000, p. 42). Therefore, the older generations experience the relationships more intense. Roux et al. (1996, p. 32) add another explanation that addresses the option of different understandings of the term “regularly.” The subjective time experience could vary between younger and older people. Further studies will have to focus on such differences in contact experiences between young and older people to get a better insight in the reasons for an over- or underestimation of intergenerational contacts. The findings of this survey should show a kind of status quo of the intergenerational Facebook “friendships” in many individual SNS profiles (Table 3).

4.2.5. Gender differences in intergenerational contacts on Facebook

A comparison of men and women reveals interesting differences in the number of intergenerational contacts on Facebook. Women older than 45 years tend to be significantly more socially connected than men because women from this age group have more contacts to the 25-year-olds and younger and even to the same-aged Facebook users. Explications of this more intense network of women can be manifold. On the one hand, it could be assumed that the fact that women are more likely to invest more time than men in maintaining social relationships also appears in the online environment (cf. Boneva, Kraut, & Frohlich, 2001). Women are more likely to stay in close contact with children or grandchildren than men. They take care of the interpersonal communication and exchange, which is important for social cohesion of families. Even in SNSs such as Facebook, the different significance of interpersonal contact to the younger generation for men and woman could be observed (Barker, 2009; Gross, Juvenon, & Gable, 2002; Jonier, Gavin, & Duffield, 2005; Rainie, 2003).

4.2.6. Attitudes toward older SNS users

The number of Facebook users older than 45 years is steadily growing. But how do the younger generations experience this change of age structure on a primarily for students designed network? In general, most of the younger survey participants estimate the growing number of older users on Facebook quite neutral or even slightly positive. The own experience of older Facebook friends appears to be one main factor that influence this estimation. Young users that report to have at least one Facebook friend older than 45 years rate the growing number of older Facebook users significantly more positive (29%) than those who do not have any older person on SNSs (13%, p < 0.001, \( \chi^2 = 32,049 \)). A similar picture appears for the middle-aged group: 38% of the 25- to 45-year-olds with older Facebook friends estimate the growing number of older users positively, but only 15% (p = 0.001, \( \chi^2 = 19,500 \)) of those are without older SNS friends. These findings go along with studies from the offline context that show that individuals who have frequent contacts with older people in their everyday life have a more positive image of aging and more positive attitudes toward the older generations than individuals who

### Table 2

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>&lt;25 years</th>
<th>25–45 years</th>
<th>&gt;45 years</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMS (96%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone (95%)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Facebook (73%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>E-mail (64%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>VOIP (45%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Video)/chat outside Facebook (31%)</td>
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<td>Letter (30%)</td>
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<td>Fax (4%)</td>
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### Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Friends younger than 25 years</th>
<th>&lt;25 years</th>
<th>25–45 years</th>
<th>&gt;45 years</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–25%</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>64.7</td>
<td>68.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26–50%</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>12.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51–75%</td>
<td>38.4</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75–100%</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<th>Friends older than 45 years</th>
<th>&lt;25 years</th>
<th>25–45 years</th>
<th>&gt;45 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0%</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–25%</td>
<td>72.2</td>
<td>79.6</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26–50%</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51–75%</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75–100%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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do not have much contacts to older people (cf. Roux et al., 1996, p. 30f). These numbers are interesting in the light of current media reports that say that young people are leaving Facebook because of the growing number of older users. This study cannot confirm these assumptions. It has to be asked whether the conclusions that Facebook becomes unappealing to the youth because their parents also start using it really express the main reason for turning away.

Young users tend to have longer usage experiences with Facebook than older users. Maybe this also forms a reason why younger users start to get interested in something new. The SNS world is changing and becoming much more diverse. Maybe other more specialized networks can satisfy the special needs of young and experienced users more than a very general SNS like Facebook can (Table 4).

Similar effects could be observed for the question if the young ones would recommend older people to join Facebook. A total of 56% of the 25-year-olds and younger with older Facebook “friends” would recommend to sign up in the network, whereas only 37% ($p < 0.001, \chi^2 = 38,721$) of the young ones without older persons in their friend lists would do so. The answers indicate that the younger generations evaluate SNSs such as Facebook as useful not only for their own generation but also for older people. That is an important fact because in several cases, the young ones are motivators for older people to join an SNS.

### 4.2.7. Can Facebook change intergenerational relationships?

To sum up, it can be said that all age groups appreciate the simple way of communication and contact maintenance through SNS such as Facebook. But what effects can the SNS usage have on the frequency of intergenerational contacts? To get a better impression of individual usage experiences of intergenerational relationships on SNS all participants were asked if their contacts to older and younger people have changed since they are using Facebook. The answers from the young and middle-aged users are quite neutral: 85% of the 25-year-olds and younger and 83% of the 25- to 45-year-olds report no amplification of contacts to older family members or relatives. The experiences from the oldest group are slightly different because at least one-third (35%) of the 45-year-olds and older experience an intensification of contacts with younger family members since they are using Facebook.

But even in the direct communication, in the form of a chat interaction, different estimations appear between the 25-year-olds and younger and the 45-year-olds and older. Although one-quarter (26%) of the oldest group report to chat with younger family members on Facebook “regularly,” only 10% of the 25- to 45-year-olds and 6% of the 25-year-olds and younger say this. Even in this point, the already mentioned different perceptions of the generations can be observed. The 45-year-olds and older subjectively experience the communication with younger people more frequently. This goes along with the findings about different perceptions of changes in the contact quality between young and older Facebook users. The same tendency appears for the question in what form Facebook helped to get a better insight in the daily lives of younger and older family members. Two-fifth (40%) of the 45-year-olds and older agree with the statement that they experience a feeling of moving closer to the younger generation because they get lots of information about activities, feelings, and interests of the young ones on Facebook. The younger users do not report such a feeling of moving closer to the older generation. Only 22% of the 25- to 45-year-olds and 19% of the 25-year-olds and younger express a feeling of a closer insight in the daily lives of older family members.

But what are the reasons for such different experiences? How can the older people have more intense contacts to younger users if the younger users do not report such intensification? Is the phenomenon just an effect of the certain survey sample, or do other reasons cause the different perception? To answer these questions, a survey that would ask the related older and younger users about their usage habits and their contact experiences would be necessary. These differences in the individual usage experiences should be observed in further studies because it has to be asked whether there are differences that are really based on differences in usage behavior or whether young and older people experience their online communication subjectively differently. The young and older participants in this study are not necessarily connected with each other. But nevertheless, some assumption can be made about possible explications of the different estimation of SNS usage and contact frequency. First, it can be supposed that the term “contact” is understood differently between the generations. For the older users, the possibility to watch photos or read postings of younger relatives or friends can already mean some form of contact, whereas the younger users have a much more interactive definition of “contact” in the sense of a reciprocal communication. These different connotations of the term “contact” can cause divergent estimations of the amount and quality of contacts on Facebook. Second, the certain usage behavior can be a reason for such different estimations. Younger SNS users are more likely to post contents in Facebook than older ones who prefer reading contents from others but do not publish much by themselves. This can cause different perceptions of older and younger users. Besides this, younger users are much more visible with their active usage behavior than older users. They reveal much more personal information about their daily lives so that others have the opportunity to get a quite close look in their daily lives. In addition, younger users have several same-aged friends who are mainly active posters in the network too. Therefore, the young users see much more contents from same-aged friends on their wall than from older ones. Moreover, older user post less personal information about their daily lives so that it is harder for the young ones to get a closer look in the daily lives of older people just because of their posting in SNS. On the contrary, the average older user has less friends, and most of these friends are not very active posters; therefore, the number of messages on the wall is smaller and the postings of the young active users get much more attention than it is the case with postings from older users on the walls of younger ones.

### 5. Discussion and limitations

This study tries to give the first insight in the experiences of young and older “onliners” and their usage of SNSs for
intergenerational contacts. The results reveal differences in the perception of the effects of SNS usage on relationship quality. Only a small group of the 25-year-olds and younger experience an intensification of contacts to older relatives or friends, whereas the 45-year-olds and older report an improvement of intergenerational relationships more frequently. The reasons for these differences in perception cannot be clarified totally with the data of this online survey because the interviewed younger and older SNS users do not have to be connected with each other. Thus, these divergent evaluations of effects could be a simple effect of differences in the interviewed people. For further studies, it would be necessary to conduct interviews with young and older SNS users who share a personal relationship with each other. Only by doing this, the answers of the two groups can be compared to prove if different perceptions of intergenerational interactions really exist. Another limitation of the study can be seen in the non-representative sample. The survey participants were recruited according to some quota criteria, but nevertheless, it can be assumed that especially those people who finished the questionnaire that use computer-mediated communication quite frequently have some affinity for intergenerational relations in general. As in other online surveys (cf. Aquisti & Gross, 2006; Baym & Ledbetter, 2009), it is quite impossible to determine the entire population of Facebook users because this number changes daily. Therefore, the findings in this chapter should be seen as a kind of status quo analysis of a part of Facebook users in German-speaking countries and should not be interpreted as representative for all Facebook or even SNS users in general. The results neither say anything about (especially older) people who do not use the Internet (frequently), nor does it say anything about the frequency of and attitudes about intergenerational contacts. A long-term observation of changing usage habits of different generations would be also interesting to analyze the effects of changing usage habits on the potential of SNS and other online platforms as meeting point of generations. Another problem that has to be addressed in further studies is ambiguity because of the self-report data about Internet and SNS usage. A lot of studies trying to measure Internet usage behavior use self-report data (Pew Internet Studies, 2002a, 2002b; Stafford, Kline, & Dimnick, 1999; Wright, 2004). But this practice has to be seen critically because it appears that reported use and actual use of a medium may differ (Johnson, Haigh, Becker, Craig, & Wigley, 2008, 387). Therefore, further studies should aim to find alternative ways of data collection. A triangulation of methods that combines self-report data with observation or content data would be an interesting solution in the future. To sum up, this study should be seen as a kind of pilot study that reveals some interesting differences in the usage of SNS among younger and older users groups. In addition, a first idea about different usage experiences with intergenerational contacts on SNS between young and older people is shown. It indicates that a broad research view on SNS is necessary, not only analyzing the usage behavior of young people, but also extending this view to the interplay of young and older user groups on various online platforms.

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