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Older Adults' Mediated Communication: Current Perspectives among Communication Scholars

Margot J. van der Goot

Across the globe, the ageing of the population is one of the greatest societal and economic challenges of the 21st century (e.g., European Commission, 2015; United Nations, 2015; World Health Organization, 2014). The demographic changes strongly impact social welfare and health care systems. Consequently, huge investments are made to keep older adults active, healthy, and independent for longer, often using ICT (information- and communication technology) -based solutions. Effective (mediated) communication with older adults about new policies and ICT-based solutions is a key factor in turning these expenditures into secure investments and in actually impacting older adults' well-being. Therefore, knowledge about older adults' mediated communication should be available, disseminated, and implemented.

This chapter gives a brief summary of this knowledge, by providing an overview of the perspectives communication scholars currently employ when studying older adults' mediated communication. Mediated communication is defined as technologically mediated interaction, which can be one-to-many communication (for example television broadcasts and Internet-based interventions), many-to-many communication (for instance online social networks), and one-to-one communication (such as interactions between physicians and patients through Internet-based interventions) (Jensen & Helles, 2011). This chapter summarizes current notions about generational and lifespan impact on mediated communication, as well as recent empirical findings on (1) older adults' media use, and (2) older adults' responses to content and form features in mediated communication.

For researchers, the chapter demonstrates where research regarding older adults' mediated communication now stands, provides references to recent work of communication scholars, and intends to be an encouragement for further collaborative research in this field. For societal stakeholders involved in active, healthy, and pleasant ageing, for instance by providing ICT-solutions, the overview casts a glance at the issues they need to consider when choosing the "right" media and the "right" message design for the older target group.

Method

"Communication across the lifespan" was the theme of the annual conference of the International Communication Association (ICA) in Puerto Rico, 2015. The plenary session, the theme sessions, and regular sessions of programmed papers related to the conference theme provided a unique opportunity to understand where the communication science discipline currently stands regarding research on older adults' mediated communication. This chapter is a summary and interpretation using the relevant presentations, conference papers, and recent journal articles of the presenters, without being a complete and detailed account of all related specific studies presented at the conference.

Perspectives on Older Adults' Mediated Communication

The perspectives on older adults' mediated communication are presented in three sections that focus on, first, notions about generational and lifespan impact on mediated communication, second, empirical findings on older adults' media use, and, third, findings on older adults' responses to content and form features in mediated communication.

Generational and Lifespan Impact

Generational impact. Work on (media) generations (e.g., Aroldi & Colombo, 2013; Bolin, 2014; Hepp, Berg, & Roitsch, 2015; Siibak, Vittadini, & Nimrod, 2014; Van der Goot, Rozendaal, Ketelaar, & Smit, 2015) starts with the basic assumption that generations grow up in distinctive societal, political, and economic circumstances and that their experiences

during the so-called formative years leave long-lasting impressions on values and attitudes and continue to influence behaviour across the lifespan (e.g., Mannheim, 1952). The encounters with media and technologies during the formative years supposedly shape a generation's objective and subjective media experiences later in life (e.g., Aroldi & Colombo, 2013; Bolin, 2014; Hepp et al., 2015; Van der Goot, Rozendaal et al., 2015). Communication scholars express their discomfort with unsophisticated accounts of generational differences and simplistic use of the term "media generations" (e.g., Burgess, 2015; Friedland, 2015; Gray, 2015; Hart-Brinson, 2015; Lim, 2015; Naab & Schwarzenegger, 2015; Papacharissi, 2015; Valkenburg, 2015; Yang, 2015). Therefore, recent publications (e.g., Aroldi & Colombo, 2013; Bolin, 2014) specify what the concept "media generations" entails, avoiding overgeneralizations and accounting for complexity and plurality. Future research will need to constantly revisit definitions of media generations, also paying attention to intergenerational bridges.

Cognitive and/or physical ageing. For decades, cognitive psychologists and neuroscientists have documented age-related changes in working memory, long-term memory, and processing speed (e.g., Mather, 2010; Nielsen & Mather, 2011; Yoon, 1997), and communication researchers predict and study how these "deficits" have consequences for older adults' ability to process mediated communication messages. Although communication researchers want to avoid a deficit perspective on ageing (e.g., Van der Goot, Beentjes, & Van Selm, 2015), it is relevant to take into account that cognitive processing changes as people grow older, having consequences for older adults' media use and its effects.

Development in emotional and social goal setting. Regarding age-related changes in emotional and social goal setting and emotion regulation, the socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1992) is exceptionally widely-cited. The socioemotional selectivity theory predicts that as people age, they perceive their time as increasingly limited, and,

subsequently, they attach greater importance to goals aimed at deriving emotional meaning from life, at the expense of knowledge-related goals that increase future preparedness (e.g., Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999). Communication studies test how these developmental changes in goal setting influence selections of and responses to mediated communication.

Life events. Here, the notion is that as people grow older, they experience life events such as retirement, the loss of a partner, and children leaving home, which subsequently impact the amount and the functions of their media use, as well as their responses to messages (e.g., Mares & Woodard, 2006; Müller, Niemand, & Röser, 2015; Van der Goot, Beentjes, & Van Selm, 2012).

Older Adults' Media Use

Digital divide. Already for decades, empirical research reveals age differences in media use (e.g., Harwood, 2007; Mares & Woodard, 2006; Van der Goot & Beentjes, 2015; Voorveld & Van der Goot, 2013). Regarding age differences in ICT use, communication researchers identify a “digital (age) divide” with three levels (e.g., Nimrod, 2015). The first level refers to Internet connectivity and adoption and the distinction between users and non-users (e.g., Colombo, Aroldi, & Carlo, 2015; Friemel, 2014; Nimrod, 2015). Despite the rapid increase in the percentage of older people using the Internet, they still use the Internet to a lesser extent than younger adults do, and traditional mass media use is still the most dominant media practice among the older audience (e.g., Nimrod, 2015).

The second level of the digital divide refers to digital literacy, namely skills, abilities, and motivations required for ICT use (e.g., Colombo et al., 2015; Friemel, 2014; Nimrod, 2015; Tsai, Shillair, Cotton, Winstead, & Yost, 2015; Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2015b). For several types of skills, research demonstrates that older people have poorer literacy than younger people (e.g., Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2015b). Also, research on e-health indicates

that older cancer patients – compared to younger ones – use the Internet less often to be informed about treatment options and to find emotional support and encouragement (Rising, Bol, & Kreps, 2015).

More recently, a third level of the divide was suggested, namely in the various outcomes of ICT use, supposedly arising from the second-level digital divide and other contextual factors (Nimrod, 2015). For instance, some online health information has negative consequences for ageing individuals, but not for younger people: In a survey, older men – compared to younger men – were more likely to report that online prostate cancer information and support makes them feel lonely, depressed, anxious, stressed, and scared (Rising et al., 2015). Another survey found that older Internet users – compared to younger ones – are more susceptible to the negative effects of communication load (Reinecke et al., 2015).

The digital divide, and generational and lifespan impact. For the digital age divide, communication scholars lean toward generational explanations. The circumstances in which a generation grows up influence their later media behavior, therefore the current generation of younger people will continue their use of ICT technologies when they grow older. Consequently, the age divide is to a certain degree a temporary phenomenon that will probably disappear with time (e.g., Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2014; Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2015a). However, on the other hand, we can anticipate that the divide is not only a cohort issue (e.g. Friemel, 2014), but that it may persist as a result of lifespan development (particularly cognitive and/or physical ageing, development in emotional and social goal setting, and life events).

Heterogeneity. In addition to the age divide, the heterogeneity in ICT use within the older population is clearly visible (e.g. Nimrod, 2013). A digital divide also occurs among the older audience (e.g., Nimrod, 2015; Van Deursen & Helsper, 2015), the so-called “grey

divide” (e.g., Friemel, 2014). The contribution of ICT to the promotion of active engagement and well-being in later life occurs for only a small subsegment of the older population.

Typically, this subgroup has a relatively high level of education, income, traditional literacy, and offline social interactions (e.g., Colombo et al., 2015; Friemel, 2014; Nimrod, 2015; Van Deursen & Helsper, 2015).

The age divide and the grey divide are unfortunate, because they increase already existing inequalities, and because the Internet and well-developed ICT-based solutions can have clear benefits for ageing individuals (e.g., Nimrod, 2013; Thimm, 2015). For instance, an analysis of the online forum “Dating over 45” indicates how online dating tools may assist this group in overcoming some of the barriers encountered in the offline dating realm (Blackwell, 2015). Also, well-designed online health information tools can improve self-efficacy and clinical outcomes in older adults (Bolle et al., 2015)

Older Adults' Responses to Content and Form

Content. Regarding age differences in selections of and responses to the content of mediated communication, emotions are of particular importance (e.g., Bartsch 2012; Hofer & Allemand, 2015; Hofer, Burkhard, & Allemand, 2015; Mares & Sun 2010; Mares, Bartsch, & Bonus, 2015; Van der Goot, Beentjes, & Van Selm, 2015; Van der Goot, Van Reijmersdal, & Kleemans, 2015b). Recent empirical studies reveal for instance that older adults, more than their younger counterparts, choose television and film content to help them to regulate their emotions and to maintain well-being (Hofer & Allemand, 2015; Mares et al., 2015).

Moreover, older people like emotionally meaningful (versus knowledge-related) television commercials more than younger people do (Van der Goot et al., 2015b).

These empirical findings are in line with developmental theories on emotional and social goal setting, such as the socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1992), that predict that as people age, they perceive their time as increasingly limited, which makes

emotionally meaningful goals more pertinent for them. Future research needs to delve further into the effectiveness of specific types of emotional appeals that may be particularly attractive for an older audience, such as hope appeals (Parrott, Worthington, & Nussbaum, 2015).

In addition to emotional content, researchers investigate age differences in responses to other content features such as language complexity (e.g., Van Weert et al., 2011) and narration style (e.g., Bol, Van Weert, De Haes, Loos, & Smets, 2015). For narration style, one may expect that older adults in particular benefit from information presented in conversational (versus formal) style, because older adults tend to have better narrative recall. However, an experiment shows that older adults do not recall more health information than younger adults when conversational (versus formal) style is used (Bol et al., 2015).

Form. A form feature that is important in light of age differences is the modality of messages, that is, presenting information in written text, and/or with visual cues, and/or with audio cues (Bol et al., 2013; Bol et al., 2015; Van der Goot, Van Reijmersdal, & Kleemans, 2015a ; Van Weert et al., 2011). For instance, an experiment found that arousing audio-visual messages, that is, television commercials with many camera changes, excited fast-speaking voices, upbeat music, and sound effects, are detrimental for older adults' recall and liking of the messages (Van der Goot et al., 2015a). This finding is probably due to cognitive ageing, with older adults having increasingly limited cognitive resources to process information. However, not all empirical findings regarding modality effects support hypotheses based on cognitive ageing (e.g., Bol et al., 2015).

Heterogeneity. Also for responses to content and form characteristics, heterogeneity within the older population is highly relevant and needs to be studied. Future research should not only explore differences between older and younger age groups, but should also investigate how, within the older population, effects of messages are moderated by for

instance varying levels of media use, (health) literacy, and future time perspective.

Segmentation within the older target group, and tailoring ICT tools to individual communication needs, is the only way in which, for example, online health communication can be effective (e.g., Kreps, 2015a; 2015b).

Discussion

The aim of this chapter was to provide an overview of the perspectives communication scholars currently employ when studying older adults' mediated communication. The chapter summarized notions about generational and lifespan impact on mediated communication, as well as recent empirical findings on (1) older adults' media use, and (2) older adults' responses to content and form features in mediated communication. The overview included some specific questions to be answered in future research. The discussion section will outline three overarching challenges that participants put forth during the conference sessions that future collaborative research in this specific field should consider and address.

First, older adults differ from younger adults in their uses of and responses to mediated communication, and, at the same time, the older population is very heterogeneous. Further investigation into the generational and lifespan impact on mediated communication is needed (which is often done by comparing age groups), but the variability within the older population also requires specific attention. Identifying subsegments within the older population helps to avoid overly simplistic homogenizations and is a way to study ageing and mediated communication in a more complex and less reductionist way.

Second, it is a challenge how to capture process and change in research. Researchers are interested in generational influences and lifespan development, but the empirical studies often consist of a static cross-sectional comparison of (only a few) age groups, without really showing the dynamic processes that take place across the lifespan. Therefore, investments in

OLDER ADULTS' MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

longitudinal research are necessary, both long-term qualitative studies and quantitative cohort analyses. These studies should pay explicit attention to the distinction between cohorts, generations and life stages.

Third, cross-national and cross-cultural comparisons are required in this research domain. On the one hand, there are similarities between countries: The ageing of the population is a global issue, some (online) communication is available and used across countries, and some generational and lifespan impacts may be similar across the globe. However, on the other hand, there are clear cross-national differences in, among others, ICT use, the digital divide, historical events, media traditions, and the life situation of older adults. To clearly outline such cross-national and cross-cultural similarities and differences, international research collaborations including scholars from many countries are a requisite.

Final Reflections

The annual conference of the International Communication Association (ICA) in Puerto Rico, 2015, with its theme "Communication across the life-span," provided a unique opportunity to understand where the communication science discipline currently stands regarding research on older adults' mediated communication. The conference showcased ongoing research on media generations, the digital divide, and age differences in responses to emotional content and modality in messages. Important overarching concerns were also formulated, which can only be addressed by long-term and cross-national research collaborations. For societal stakeholders, the presented communication research provides considerations for which media and which message features to choose when the aim is to support active, healthy, and pleasant ageing. For researchers and societal stakeholders alike, the ageing of the population raises urgent challenges, and the technological advances in ICT-based solutions make this research area exciting, with new research questions surely coming up in the years to come.

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