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My Parents Don't  Like I Do

by Will Jent

Do you know anyone that does not use social media? I could have answered “yes” to that question a few years ago, but even my parents now use social media. In fact, I was eating dinner recently with my sister and my parents, who are 49 and 63, and while my sister and I were eating, our parents were scrolling through social media – quite a role reversal. This observation, while seemingly trivial, speaks to the broad range of the social media audience. Compared to its early days, social media has captured this diverse audience, and the language use on such sites followed this trend. Data from the *Pew Research Center* displays an increase in the percentage of people 30 and up who use social media since early 2012, while usage rates by ages less than 30 have been stagnant (“*Social Media Fact Sheet*”). Such statistics highlight the recent surge in social media use across older generations.

Along with a diverse audience comes disagreements among users. It is no secret that, sometimes, people on the internet jump to conclusions about the people they interact with online. These assumptions often occur across generations, with older and younger people being unwilling to hear out the other person and stereotyping each other. As Claire Hardaker explains, “[online] communication entails a potential for miscommunication” (Hardaker 499). Such miscommunication can result from age gaps and the differences in language use that those gaps cause.

The difference in the language used by separate age groups on social media depends on if and how such distinctions exist in real life. Most everyone has experienced contrasts in language use with older people, especially family members. Sunghye Cho and fellow authors studied these

contrasts by listening to audio samples from two different generations (303). They found that grammar and parts of speech tend to be separating factors. For example, “older individuals produced significantly more pronouns, verbs, and so-called interjections... compared to young speakers” (305). The contrast in word choice between the two groups exemplifies the overall difference in speech among separate ages. If age groups speak differently in real life, it is logical to assume that they do so online as well. In real life, people use contrasting speech to passively learn more about a person and their identity because people have learned what characteristics go with certain types of speech. We have all heard a person speak and have been able to approximate their age without seeing them. As we draw associations from online speech to characteristics of social media users, we can establish identity markers using this language.

Both Facebook and Instagram, owned by Meta, offer ample examples of distinct age groups and language use. They are also commonly associated with older people and younger people, respectively. Thus, the two platforms serve as a good point of reference for how different ages use social media. While most people may simply assume that older individuals prefer Facebook and younger individuals prefer Instagram, significant data also exists to support this assumption. According to a survey carried out by the *Pew Research Center*, only about 13-30% of people over the age of 50 use Instagram. On the other hand, 71% of those 18-29 use the platform (Auxier and Anderson). The difference changes when looking at Facebook, with 50-73% of over 50 using it, while 70% of those 18-29 do (Auxier and Anderson). These numbers show that older and younger individuals do, in fact, use Instagram and Facebook at different rates, with the former group showing a preference for Facebook. The difference in usage allows for analysis of language use on the two platforms as they relate to age.

With the rise in social media use, which has led to a large and diverse social media audience, it is important for people to be open-minded and understand others they encounter online. Furthermore, the language employed by different age groups on Facebook and Instagram and by the platforms themselves helps to reveal the online identity of the users. With this association between identity and language, people can better understand those online and interpret their goals and intents.

A person's reasons for using social media can hint at their identity. People use social media for a variety of motives. I use social media to socialize with people I know, while my mother tends to use it to gather information. For example, in late 2021, I posted a collage of pictures of myself and my friends with a caption that discussed the importance of those friends in my experience in school (Jent). The content of the caption highlights my use of social media as a means of socialization.

On the other hand, my mother frequently sends me Tweets (via iMessage) from journalists' profiles, such as one she sent last year that revealed the name of a new movie (@DiscussingFilm). While this example is from Twitter, it remains relevant as it displays the idea that different age groups may use social media differently. In this case, the older generation gathers information, and the younger one socializes.

Some have explored this trend in scientific studies as well, such as the one carried out by Pavica Sheldon, Mary Grace Antony, and Lynn Johnson Ware. The study sought to discover the reasons that older generations use Facebook and Instagram through a series of questionnaires (Sheldon et al. 1). They found that, in general, older individuals utilize Facebook to pass the time rather than to socialize (Sheldon et al. 5). Socializing would mean experiencing others' language

use, which could influence a user’s own language. Thus, less time socializing online could indicate that older generations' language use online is stable relative to younger generations.

Not only does this finding align with my mother’s use of social media, but it also aligns with advertisements released by Facebook. One video advertisement released in 2018 emphasizes the importance of friendship on the platform (“Facebook Here Together (UK)”). The advertisement gives examples of posts and users on the platform that convey the message of friendship, and almost all of them are younger people. The advertisement also shows messages on the platform that use informal language such as “here for u” (“Facebook Here Together (UK)”). Informal language, such as replacing “you” with “u,” is typically associated with younger individuals. Thus, such language, along with the lack of older individuals in the advertisement, highlights the fact that Facebook is aware that older individuals tend not to use social media for socialization, which affirms the findings of the study.

The Pickens High School pages on both Instagram and Facebook serve as further evidence of the use of social media by different generations. The school recently posted on both pages, with both posts containing similar information. The post on Instagram, fig. 1, contains a



Fig. 1. Pickens High School [@pickenshighschoolga]. Pictures of Pickens High School’s 2022 valedictorian and salutatorian. *Instagram*.

picture of this year's valedictorian and salutatorian (Pickens High School Instagram). This post congratulates the two students and uses emojis at the end of the post (Pickens High School Instagram). Most people generally associate emojis with younger people, so it is clear that the person who posted this caption was trying to reach a younger population. The informal use of emojis also promotes socialization, something that, as previously discussed, is not often sought out by older people on these sites. The Facebook post, fig. 2, on the other hand, contains the same message but decides to leave out emojis

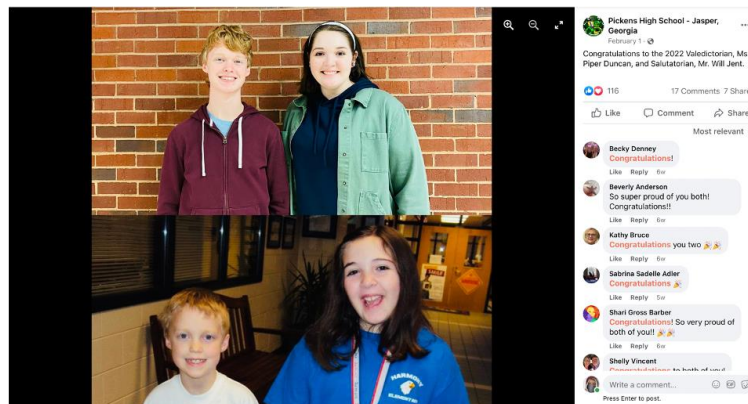


Fig. 2. Pickens High School [PickensHighSchool]. Pictures of Pickens High School's 2022 valedictorian and salutatorian. *Facebook*.

(Pickens High School Facebook). The school posted this image on the platform with a greater number of older people, and the absence of emojis gives a more informational tone, which falls more in line with the informational usage displayed by older people. The use and nonuse of emojis on the posts highlight adults' awareness of the different ways that age groups employ social media as well as the language those groups express online. The posts themselves offer further insight into the online identities of age groups by reinforcing the differences in social media use among these groups.

An inherent problem when discussing any topic dealing with the internet is that anyone can remain anonymous, which complicates an analysis of users' supposed ages. Hardaker

highlights platforms' ineffective attempts to regulate the amount of "personal information" required to use a given platform, stating that people simply keep such information hidden (496). Facelessness, then, seemingly creates a problem for anyone who wants to study age and social media usage because anyone could pretend to be of any age. However, if someone does manage to accurately portray a different age, then that portrayal is just as viable for study as any other person on social media. For example, if an older person uses slang in an attempt to fit in with a younger generation, such usage only further highlights the identity of young people created by that slang. Thus, the inability to know for certain who is behind a profile picture is not necessary to study social media habits and language use.

Not all older individuals only use social media without socializing. Another reason older people use social media is for family relations. Documentation of this reasoning lies in the study done by H. Andrew Schwartz and his co-authors, who, after sampling thousands of texts posted on Facebook, determined the most common subjects discussed by different generations on social media (10). Schwartz et al. identified words denoting relatives to be the most common among people aged 30-65. Some common terms and expressions they identified include "daughter," "my son," and "my kids" (Schwartz et al. 10). These words convey the personal life of the speaker personal and would likely not be used for anything other than socialization. Such diction implies that older individuals tend to discuss family more than most other things on Facebook.

One parallel idea to the idea that family is the most common subject among older individuals is the use of first-person pronouns across generations. Schwartz et al. also explored this usage and found that while the use of "I" on social media diminishes as people grow older, the opposite happens for the word "we" (Schwartz et al. 9). There are a couple of reasons for this

trend. As previously discussed, people become more concerned with family the older they become, which would explain the greater use of “we” because a familial group has formed.

Another reason for this greater use of “we” is because people must work together within their careers. One profile picture of Michael Oubre, the band director at Pickens High School, highlights this idea. Michael Oubre used this profile picture during the first Covid 19 lockdown, and the picture states the importance of teachers (Oubre). The post starts with the sentence “We are educators” (Oubre). This post uses the word “we” while referring to profession, which serves as an example of how a career can increase the usage of the word. A person’s relation to their family and to their peers strengthens as they grow older because their life stabilizes. People settle down, which gives them time to focus more on the groups to which they belong, and, over time, their group identity solidifies as a result. This example helps to further build the online identity of older people.

The usage of “I,” on the other hand, resides mostly among the younger population. A post by Luis Gonzalez, a freshman at the University of West Georgia, exemplifies this trend. The post contains pictures of him with his friends and family at his high school graduation, and the first sentence of the caption reads, “I still can’t believe I graduated” (Gonzalez). In one sentence, Gonzalez uses “I” twice. This makes sense when looking at the life of a young person. Younger people have many milestones left to pass, such as high school graduation, and each one requires the person to focus on themselves. Additionally, a younger person’s group identity changes more rapidly than an older person’s. High school graduation also provides an example of this because graduation severs one’s ties with the people they know. The lack of group stability as well as this self-centered viewpoint among younger people likely drives the greater usage of “I.”

Younger people also post about slightly different subjects online compared to older people, as another study by the *Pew Research Center* displays (Anderson and Jiang). One's personal achievements and relatives were the two most common subjects among young people (Anderson and Jiang). Yet, many young social media users likely create these posts out of obligation, such as the one posted by Luis Gonzales. Of the 11 posts on his Instagram Page, only the post about his graduation displayed members of his family (Gonzalez). Even then, the caption does not mention family members (Gonzalez). Graduating high school is a momentous occasion that involves many family members. Therefore, the fact that the contents of the post contain family members is not surprising, and the lack of such references in other posts indicates that some younger people post about family out of formality.

Differences in social media usage and language use can often cause misunderstandings and conflict between age groups online. For example, in a Facebook post by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (Ocasio-Cortez), Alexander Dunaway commented on the ongoing discussion (Dunaway). Another commenter, Beau Thurman, responded to Dunaway by saying, "your profile says gamer hippie. When you get off your mom's dole and carry your own weight, join us at the adult table" (Thurman). Thurman is particularly hostile with his comment, and while part of this hostility may come from the discussion itself, it is clear that a large portion also comes from Thurman's interpretation of Dunaway's identity. Dunaway portrays his identity through his profile, which implies that he wants people to know his interests. In other words, he uses his profile to socialize. As an older person who, as previously discussed, does not often use social media to socialize, Thurman likely misunderstood what Dunaway's profile meant.

Beau Thurman's Facebook profile provides further evidence of misunderstanding because the profile contains no information about Thurman, aside from a few pictures

(@beau.thurman.7). Thurman assumed that because Dunaway shared part of his identity online, Dunaway is immature and incapable of contributing to the discussion. Thurman may not understand why younger people want to share their interests online, and he guessed that the profile meant something rather than just being a method of socialization. Thus, this conflict could have been avoided if Thurman had understood the ways that younger people use social media and how language conveys this usage.

All in all, social media is a widespread outlet used across multiple generations that each use it in their own way. The reasons each age group may use the platform can be found in both their own social media posts and in the advertisements of social media sites. Being aware of each age group's particular reason for their use of social media allows for a deeper understanding of the online identity of each group. A deeper understanding of the online identity of other generations will help prevent conflict between users that results from misunderstanding. My sister and I often joke about our parents' frequent social media use. We assume they are trying to keep up with our youth, and, as any other young person would, we find that strange. Perhaps with my newfound understanding, my sister and I can grasp the real online identities of our parents and, ultimately, bring us closer together.

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