Navigating, Selecting, and Engaging: A Multi-Method Study of Social Media Information Use Practices among Older Adults

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Abstract

Older adults—individuals aged 60 and above—are increasingly integrating social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram into their everyday information repertoires. Yet, little is known about how they actually *interact* with information encountered on these platforms. To address this gap, the present study examines which navigation, selection, and engagement practices are prevalent among older adults when using social media for information. We employed a within-method triangulated qualitative design that combined stimulus-based observations with self-confrontation and semi-structured interviews. Specifically, we recruited $n = 41$ German social media users aged 60 and above, who were observed interacting with a personalized social media feed and subsequently reflected on their behavior.

Our findings reveal a diverse range of information practices: while some mirror those observed among younger adults—such as information snacking—others differ notably, including a general tendency toward passivity. We discuss how these practices are shaped by older adults' media socialization, thus offering broader implications for research at the intersection of digital technology and aging. Our study enriches the conceptual vocabulary for describing (older) adults' social media practices and highlights a methodological approach well-suited to studying usage behavior in personalized media environments.

Keywords: information use, news use, observation, older adults, self-confrontation interviews, social media

Navigating, Selecting, and Engaging: A Multi-Method Study of Social Media Information Use Practices among Older Adults

Older adults are increasingly incorporating social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram into their everyday information repertoires (Kakulla, 2024; Tippelt, 2025). In response, researchers have begun investigating this demographic's social media use (e.g., Yachin & Nimrod, 2021; Zhao et al., 2023). While existing studies offer valuable insights into adoption and general usage motives, more fine-grained insights into older adults' *interaction* with social media remain anecdotal or secondary. Consequently, we know relatively little about what older adults actually do on these platforms—that is, their information use *practices*.

This gap in understanding is problematic given that social media—defined as disentrained, persistent channels of masspersonal communication (Carr & Hayes, 2015)—constitute unique environments where information use is more personalized and dynamic than in traditional media environments. Affordances such as algorithmic curation or the social embeddedness of information (Kümpel, 2022) enable a range of interactions with a single piece of information. These information usage practices, in turn, shape how older adults process the information they encounter (e.g., Wieland & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2020). Hence, a binary lens of use versus non-use is insufficient.

To achieve a more profound understanding of older adults' usage practices, one cannot simply infer from findings from younger populations, which have been the focus of the vast majority of existing research. Following Bolin and Skogerbø (2013), it can be argued that individuals belong to media generations shaped by shared media experiences and socialization which influence how individuals perceive and interact with media—including those they only begin to use later in life (Gumpert & Cathcart, 1985). Consequently, it can be assumed that older

adults, as members of the "mass media generation" (Hepp et al., 2017) socialized with linear media such as radio, newspapers, and television, approach social media differently than "digital natives" (ibid.) who grew up with these information environments (see also Mitzner et al., 2010).

At the same time, we acknowledge that older adults are a heterogeneous group (Jaul & Barron, 2021) with varying relationships to digital technologies (Coelho, 2024; Selwyn et al., 2003). For instance, "young-olds" under the age of 70—who may still be working or have only recently retired—often possess more advanced digital literacy and, consequently, exhibit more diverse internet behaviors than those aged 70 and above (Hunsaker & Hargittai, 2018).

To uncover such nuances and achieve a fine-grained understanding of older adults' social media practices, we depart from an audience-centered research framework that focuses on *how* they experience social media and what they *do* with the information encountered there (Costera Meijer, 2016; Swart et al., 2022). Specifically, we explore three key dimensions of information use practices and pose the following research question: *What navigation, selection, and engagement practices are prevalent among older adults when using social media for information?* In answering this question, we pay particular attention to the role of post-related cues such as the source or the topic of the post.

Employing an innovative, within-method triangulated qualitative design combining stimulus-based observations with self-confrontation and semi-structured interviews, we exposed 41 older German social media users (aged 60 to 89) to an individually personalized social media feed, observed their behavior, and jointly reflected on their practices. Our findings reveal that older adults exhibit diverse navigation, selection, and engagement practices—some mirroring younger users, others differing substantially. We discuss how these practices are shaped by

media socialization, while also enriching the conceptual vocabulary for investigating older adults' social media interactions.

Older Adults' Information Use Practices on Social Media

As social media become more central in the lives of older adults, research into their usage has expanded. However, existing studies mainly focus on general usage motives, thereby implying a binary understanding of 'use' versus 'non-use' (Anter et al., 2025a). This reduction is problematic, as it prevents a holistic understanding of older adults' actual internet practices and obscures insights into how age and aging are co-constructed in relation to technology (Wanka & Gallistl, 2018). Thus, we aim to provide a systematic assessment of older adults' information use *practices*. In what follows, we define practices and introduce the key dimensions examined in this study, which together offer a comprehensive understanding of older adults' platform behavior.

Practices of Social Media Information Use

Social media are unique information environments that differ from traditional media. Characteristics such as personalization and the non-linear, granular nature of information use shape how users access, engage with, and interpret content (Kümpel, 2022). In these personalized and dynamic environments, users interact with information in varied ways—from quickly scanning a feed at a bus stop to carefully reading a post at home. We understand *practices* as routinized activities of information use that result from an individual configuration of usage contexts and intentionality (Kümpel, 2020; Van Damme et al., 2015). Contexts may differ temporally (e.g., time of day), spatially (e.g., at home or on the go), and socially (e.g., alone or in public). Intentionality ranges from active information seeking to passive, incidental exposure. Practices also vary by content—users may engage differently with news than with

posts related to their hobbies (Couldry, 2011). Crucially, such practices are shaped by media technologies and embedded in perceptions of platform and post characteristics (Kümpel, 2019b; Raetzsch & Lünenborg, 2020).

While information practices are diverse—for instance, also including curating feeds by following or blocking accounts (e.g., Merten, 2021)—we focus on three core dimensions conceptualized at a high level of abstraction to maintain analytical openness: feed *navigation*, content *selection*, and *engagement* (i.e., active interaction with content). These directly observable dimensions represent key stages of information use and offer a holistic view of older adults' practices.

Navigation Practices

Navigation practices refer to users' browsing behavior within the social media feed that precedes selecting or engaging with specific posts. These practices vary in rhythm—such as linear scrolling versus jumping back and forth—and in dwell time, ranging from brief encounters to extended reading sessions.

Among younger adults, navigation is often fast-paced and unintentional, driven by general interest without deep engagement (e.g., Bergström & Belfrage, 2018). In contrast, initial research suggests that older adults tend to navigate more calmly and deliberately. They often use social media to stay updated on family and friends (e.g., Caliandro et al., 2021) and may engage in *monitoring* (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2015)—following specific people or visiting profiles to stay updated. Given that they are generally less mobile (Ferrand et al., 2014), older users may access social media more often from home, contributing to "lengthier reading sessions" (Groot Kormelink, 2019, p. 61) marked by slow, linear scrolling. At the same time, a study on older internet users shows that they prefer online media for quick information seeking,

while relying on traditional media such as newspapers or books when they want to explore topics more deeply (Quan-Haase et al., 2016).

Selection Practices

Selection practices refer to how users choose individual pieces of content while browsing social media (Groot Kormelink, 2019; Kümpel, 2019b). We define selection narrowly, excluding profile-level decisions (e.g., following or blocking) and focusing on the selection of individual posts.

Studies on younger users have identified various selection modes. One is *scanning*—superficial skimming, often under time constraints or limited interest (e.g., Lin et al., 2023). This is encouraged by the granularity of social media, where short, apparently digestible posts dominate (Kümpel, 2022). At the other end is *reading*, marked by sustained attention and effortful processing (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2015; Lin et al., 2023). On platforms like Facebook, which allow for hyperlinking, *clicking* on external links may complement either mode (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2015). Research on older adults' internet use indicates that they are highly selective when choosing specific pages and services (e.g., Berkowsky et al., 2017), suggesting that they may only occasionally transition from scanning to deliberate reading or clicking on posts.

Selection practices are also shaped by post characteristics. Expectably, topic relevance is central, with (older) users preferring content they find interesting or useful (e.g., Yachin & Nimrod, 2021; Zhao et al., 2023). Regarding the source, younger users often prefer trusted media brands in news contexts (e.g., Oeldorf-Hirsch & DeVoss, 2020). Since older adults' social media use is often socially motivated (e.g., Quan-Haase et al., 2017; Yachin & Nimrod, 2021), they might attribute more attention to posts from friends and family. Likewise, they might be

particularly receptive to content personally recommended by their social contacts, while research suggests they pay less attention to aggregated metrics such as the number of likes than younger adults (Peterson et al., 2025).

Finally, formal features such as visual and textual cues can affect selection. Research on younger adults shows that visually rich posts that include links or images are more likely to be selected (Vraga et al., 2016). For older adults in particular, health impairments may result in a preference for directly accessible (audio-)visual cues over small, potentially more cognitively demanding textual elements (Berkowsky & Czaja, 2018).

Engagement Practices

Engagement practices refer to visible interactions with content, such as liking, commenting, or sharing posts (Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018). Research distinguishes between active use, marked by regular engagement, and passive use, where users scroll through feeds without visibly engaging (Godard & Holtzman, 2023). These modes often coexist: depending on the topic or its personal relevance, users may be active in one context and passive in another.

Earlier studies on older adults' internet use show that they are often passive users, for instance, rarely commenting on content (Schehl et al., 2019). Likewise, many prefer a more reserved approach on social media, as these platforms are often perceived as unsafe or inappropriate for self-disclosure (e.g., Caliandro et al., 2021; Quan-Haase et al., 2017). However, some older adults actively share personal updates, for example, about their travels or hobbies, or comment on others' posts (Coelho, 2024; e.g., Zhao et al., 2023). Such engagement is often socially motivated, used to express appreciation and foster connection (e.g., Karaoglu et al., 2021).

This already indicates that engagement is also shaped by post-related cues. Not only might older adults be more likely to engage with posts from sources they know personally, but the topic might also be relevant. For instance, a study on older adults' Facebook use shows that although they are mostly passive, they do comment on or share posts that they find personally interesting (Yachin & Nimrod, 2021).

As shown, existing studies provide initial insights into older adults' information use on social media. However, a more integrated and in-depth perspective is lacking. To address this gap, we ask the following research question:

RQ: What navigation, selection, and engagement practices are prevalent among older adults when using social media for information?

We pay particular attention to the role of post-related cues—such as the source of the information, the person who shared it, and post characteristics like topic or popularity metrics—as prior research suggests these factors shape user behavior.

Method: Personalized Stimulus-based Qualitative Observations with Self-Confrontation Interviews

This study follows an audience-centered approach that emphasizes everyday practices, perceptions, and experiences over normative expectations of media behavior (Swart et al., 2022).[1] Given the complex and contextual nature of *practices*, standardized surveys or conventional interviews that rely on retrospective, self-reported data would not have been sufficient. We therefore implemented a triangulated qualitative design, aimed at generating deeper insights into older adults' information use practices on social media. It combined

[1] This manuscript is part of a broader research project examining older adults' information and news use on social media and messenger apps. The overall aim of the project is to develop a comprehensive understanding of how older adults perceive, experience, and use these services.

qualitative observations—using a personalized social media feed as a stimulus—with self-confrontation (Kümpel, 2019c; Schmid et al., 2023) and semi-structured interviews (for a detailed overview, see the supplementary material). While the semi-structured interviews primarily examined older adults' perceptions and information use needs on social media and messenger apps—which are elaborated in the broader context of our research project—they also prompted discussions about participants' practices on platforms such as Facebook or Instagram.

Design

Self-confrontation interviews originate in psychotherapy and action-oriented research (e.g., Bailey & Sowder, 1970) and encourage participants to reflect on their own behavior in response to recorded or observed activities (Lim, 2002). In our study, we used a personalized social media feed, created with the Mock Social Media Website Tool (Jagayat et al., 2021), tailored to participants' expressed interests based on a prior screening survey (see below). The feed contained 30 posts in various formats (e.g., links, photos, videos), simulating a hybrid of Facebook and Instagram (see the supplementary material for an example). Participants were asked to scroll through the feed and interact with it as they normally would. Researchers observed and documented their behavior in the feed (e.g., scrolling, clicking, commenting), using a structured observation protocol with predefined categories and open-ended note fields. These observations served as entry points for immediate self-confrontation interviews, prompting participants to reflect on their moment-to-moment reactions and decision-making processes. The self-confrontation element was embedded within a broader semi-structured interview, which also included questions on general patterns of social media information use and engagement.

Informed consent and scheduling information were obtained through the screening survey. Interviews were conducted between June and December 2024, either in person or via

Zoom, using the screen-sharing feature for observations, and lasted 45–75 minutes. Participants received €50 in compensation for completing both components.

To reduce potential reactivity, all interviews were *audio*-recorded and transcribed. Posts that participants interacted with or discussed were included in the transcripts and supplemented by the corresponding notes from the observation protocols.

Instruments

While the semi-structured interviews yielded broader insights, this section focuses on the instruments most relevant to capturing participants' information use practices: the screening survey, the personalized feed, and the structured observation protocol.

The self-administered online screening survey served to identify eligible participants and personalize the feed. Participants rated the relevance of four types of information needs (group-, topic-, problem-related, and undirected) and indicated how frequently they encountered corresponding content (e.g., family updates, gardening, local news).

These responses formed the basis for creating individualized feeds using the Mock Social Media Website Tool (Jagayat et al., 2021). A continuously updated post database included both real and researcher-generated posts across *formats* (text-image, text-image-link, text-video), *sources* (media, companies, institutions, placeholders "friend" and "acquaintance"), and all four *information types*. News posts were updated weekly to ensure topicality. A script randomly selected 30 posts per participant, weighted by their screening survey responses.

Participants' general and post-specific usage practices were documented using a structured observation protocol with six theoretically derived categories, reflecting previously identified usage dimensions (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2015; Groot Kormelink, 2019; Kümpel, 2019b): *selection* (clicking on or reading posts), *dwell time* (overall and on individual

posts), *rhythm* (scrolling dynamic), *(non-)verbal reactions* (noticeable reactions to individual posts or the feed), *active engagement* (e.g., liking or sharing posts), and *passive engagement* (i.e., reading comments).

Following the feed exposure, the interview resumed using a flexible guideline consisting of three sets of follow-up questions, which were adapted based on the observations: (1) *general impressions* of the feed, (2) reflections on specific *practices* (not) shown during the feed interaction (e.g., "I noticed that you…", "Could you explain what prompted that?"), (3) evaluation of *post characteristics and cues* previously identified as influential (e.g., role of engagement metrics in their selection decisions).

Participants

We recruited individuals aged 60 and above who reported using at least one social media platform at least once a month. Recruitment took place via senior-focused newsletters, educational and cultural organizations, community bulletin boards, and personal networks. To capture the full diversity of older adulthood, we intentionally recruited both 'young-olds' (aged 60 to 70) and 'old-olds' (aged 71 and above) (Jaul & Barron, 2021; López et al., 2020).

The final sample included 41 participants, split between 'young-olds' (aged 60–70, n = 20) and 'old-olds' (aged 71 and above, n = 21), and with a near-balanced gender distribution (23 women, 18 men). While we aimed for a mix of frequent and infrequent users, only 10 participants identified as low-frequency users—likely due to lower identification with the study topic. Nevertheless, the sample reflects considerable variation in age, gender, and platform experience.

Data Analysis

Because practices became apparent only through the combination of observations, interview data, and post references, we used *paraphrasing* as a form of data condensation (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019). Specifically, we described participants' actions related to selection, engagement, and navigation, and their interactions with specific cues as apparent from the transcripts and observation protocols. These paraphrases were then synthesized into generalized descriptions, supported by illustrative examples from individual cases.

To analyze interviews and paraphrases, we applied qualitative content analysis, combining deductive and inductive category development (Mayring, 2014). The resulting codebook captured both participants' *practices* (i.e., selection, engagement, navigation) and relevant *post characteristics and cues* (e.g., topic, visualization, engagement cues). The codebook was developed iteratively, starting with close readings of a small subset of contrasting interviews. The codebook was then tested, refined, and applied to the full dataset. Finally, the coded material was compared across individual (e.g., age, usage frequency) and contextual factors (e.g., preferred platform) to synthesize patterns. The first author conducted all paraphrasing and coding. Throughout data analysis, the authors engaged in regular exchanges and consensus-building discussions to ensure analytic validity.

To promote transparency and reproducibility, we preregistered our analysis strategy after data collection but before inspecting the data, using the *Qualitative Preregistration Form* (Haven et al., 2020). It was frozen on December 20, 2024, and is available via OSF registries: https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/6VA83. All study materials, instruments, and an overview of participants' demographics and platform use are available in the project's OSF repository: https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/CSWQD.

Results

To structure our analysis, we draw on the overarching practices introduced above and present the specific navigation, selection, and engagement practices of older adults as identified through the (self-confrontation) interviews and structured observations.

Navigation Practices

Navigation practices refer to users' browsing behavior in the social media feed before selecting or engaging with specific posts. Most participants scrolled through the feed in a linear and fast manner (e.g., P6, P8, P15). They also spent little time on individual posts, rapidly scanning text and images and deciding whether to continue reading. As became evident during the subsequent interviews, this behavior was not driven by disinterest, but by participants' self-perception as "very quick viewers, quick to grasp the gist" (P9; see also P2, P33, P40). Thus, in line with findings on younger adults, 'information snacking'—analogous to the concept of news snacking (Molyneux, 2018)—appears to be a common practice among older users.

However, a few participants also showed a practice we describe here as 'hesitating:' They frequently scrolled back and forth (e.g., P10, P23, P26) and often also lingered longer on each post. These participants often considered social media a valuable information source and therefore felt it was important to understand the general topic and fully comprehend the content before deciding whether to select the post (e.g., P10, P11, P39). Moreover, they tended to be among older or less frequent users, suggesting they lacked established navigation routines and were more easily distracted or unsettled by certain posts or features.

Selection Practices

Selection practices refer to how users choose individual pieces of content while browsing social media. In our study, this included both (skim) reading a post within the feed and clicking

on external links, indicating deeper involvement with the respective post (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2015).

We observed a broad spectrum of selection practices, depending on participants' perceptions of social media and the information needs they address on these platforms. Some participants fulfill a broad range of information needs on social media and are open to incidentally encountering new topics. Consequently, they clicked on and read many diverse posts (e.g., P10, P13, P30). Others selected nothing, quickly scrolled through the 30 posts, and ended exposure after a few minutes—often because the feed didn't match their highly specific information needs, as became apparent during the interviews (e.g., P19, P30). For example, one participant uses social media solely to collect and share photographs of 19th-century Berlin (P30).

Many participants fell between these extremes (e.g., P5, P6, P33), choosing only posts on specific topics (e.g., news, travel) while ignoring other content categories (e.g., posts with social information). This targeted selection stems from perceiving social media as an appropriate environment for certain information needs, while deeming the platforms ill-suited for others.

Interestingly, some participants limited their selection to reading the post without clicking links. These participants often said they perceive social media as a source of entertainment rather than serious information and expressed skepticism about the credibility of content (e.g., P5, P16, P29). As one participant put it: "If I want reliable information about politics or something like that, I need to turn to other media—not this muddy Facebook stuff" (P39). Others view social media as a tool for quick news updates, finding the captions sufficient and preferring brief overviews (e.g., P3, P17), another expression of news snacking (Molyneux, 2018).

Among post-related cues, the *topic* was clearly the strongest driver of selection. During the interviews, it became clear that nearly all participants based their decision to engage with a post primarily on whether they found the topic interesting (e.g., P6, P9, P28). Some also referenced criteria aligned with journalistic news values, such as geographical proximity or personal relevance (e.g., P13, P23, P41). Many also emphasized novelty, even skipping posts on interesting topics if they assumed no new information (e.g., P25, P36, P37).

Visual and textual elements are secondary, as participants use them mainly to infer the topic. We observed three tendencies. Some participants shifted flexibly between text and visuals, focusing on whichever drew their attention first—a striking image or a compelling lead sentence (e.g., P3, P8, P24). Others said that they prioritize text, quickly "pulling out the keywords" (P1), and partly viewed images with suspicion, seeing them as potentially manipulative (e.g., P10, P25, P33). Both behaviors are driven by an instrumental view of information use, as they prioritize cues that subjectively enable the most efficient decision-making. Only a few—mainly Instagram users—explained that visuals are their main focus when deciding what to select (P2, P7). This suggests that platform characteristics also shape selection practices.

The *source* of a post plays a more nuanced role. Some participants deliberately ignored it, preferring to rely on their own judgment of a topic rather than the identity of the source (e.g., P16, P31, P32). A common rationale for this behavior was the desire for autonomy: "For me, the information matters more than who posted it" (P17).

Next to autonomy, source credibility is a decisive factor for older adults when considering posts' sources. Most participants, therefore, *do* utilize source-based heuristics for specific accounts, which mainly fall into two categories. First, many prefer original or shared posts from friends and family, driven by both personal interest and a sense of trust, as one

participant explained: “I try to read selectively—definitely not from every random guy who thinks he has something to post” (P1, see also P10, P20, P24). Others said that they avoid (certain) contacts’ (shared) posts altogether, being annoyed by or skeptical toward their content (e.g., P2, P9, P15). Second, many participants employ heuristics when dealing with *media accounts*, considering it particularly important to rely on trusted outlets for societally relevant information. During the feed exposure, this manifested as a preference for legacy-quality outlets and skepticism toward tabloids (e.g., P8, P13, P33), while some were critical of “mainstream media” (P4, P5, P12). Similarly, participants skipped posts on other topics if they distrusted the source (e.g., P2, P20, P29). As one participant said about a history blog’s post that she had ignored during the exposure: “I don’t need to know what that blogger has made up about world history” (P29).

The role of *engagement cues* is more clear-cut. In line with existing research (e.g., Haim et al., 2018), our participants—across age groups and usage frequencies—pay little attention to aggregated metrics such as likes, shares, or count of comments. The interviews revealed that they find these indicators either uninformative or difficult to interpret (e.g., P19, P22, P37). Again, participants also expressed a strong need for autonomy, viewing engagement cues as intrusive: “I do not care whether there is a crowd behind it or not. I stick to my own judgment” (P14, see also P20, P25).

Engagement Practices

“If more people used Facebook the way I do, Facebook would starve” (P17). This quote encapsulates the *engagement practices*—referring to visible interactions with content, such as liking, commenting, or sharing posts—observed among most participants. Across age groups, usage frequencies, and platforms, the majority engaged rarely, if at all, during the feed exposure

(e.g., P5, P6, P18). A central reason is privacy concerns, as the interviews emphasized: participants fear that engagement might expose their opinions (potentially misunderstood) to an uncontrollable audience. As one participant put it, "you do not even know who you are actually reaching" (P23). Others are concerned about judgment within their social circles, worrying that friends or family might take issue with them liking or commenting on an inappropriate or controversial post (e.g., P15, P19, P38).

Some participants also feel that engagement is unnecessary or unproductive. They believe their opinions or input would not add value—"I think there is already enough written on social media" (P28; see also P6, P15, P32). Others mentioned that engagement simply would not occur to them: "we come from a different time" (P22; see also P38, P30, P20).

Nevertheless, engagement is not entirely absent and is also shaped by post-specific cues. The *topic* plays a major role: some—younger and more literate—participants like posts to "train" the algorithm to reflect their interests (P13, P29), or when content genuinely resonates and contains "something that really excites me" (e.g., P7, see also P17, P28, P37). A few, more frequent users who view social media as an important information source, also comment on posts, particularly "when I feel I have something to say" (P24). This includes correcting information or contributing personal experience (e.g., P12, P35, P37).

The posts' *source* also matters. Participants explained during the interviews that they are more likely to engage with content posted or shared by people they know, as this reduces privacy concerns and fosters greater trust in the content (e.g., P4, P26, P39). Especially participants who use social media for updates about their social environment also see engagement as an interpersonal gesture—expressing care or attention to friends and family. However, they sometimes perceive engagement as an obligation. One participant explained: "If I look at her [a

friend] post, I always feel I have to give it a like—otherwise she gets upset" (P24; see also P9, P10, P11).

Passive engagement, such as reading comment sections, is also important for some participants, particularly for posts on polarizing (political) topics. Some participants who use social media as a news source reported regularly reading comments to explore a range of opinions (e.g., P2, P35, P12). As one explained: "I want to see if others share my opinion. I am also interested in different views. It is like a conversation" (P41). In contrast, participants who perceive social media as hostile or overly contentious avoid comment sections altogether. "I do not read the discussion—it is just irritating" (P22; see also P13, P31, P33). These patterns reinforce the influence of information needs and platform characteristics on engagement practices—a point we now return to in the concluding discussion.

Discussion

In light of the growing use of social media and messenger apps among older adults (Kakulla, 2024; Tippelt, 2025), this study aimed to better understand *how* they use information on these platforms. Adopting an audience-centered perspective (Swart et al., 2022), we examined older adults' navigation, selection, and engagement practices—and how these practices are shaped by post characteristics, such as topic or source.

Similar to previous studies on older adults' broader internet use (Coelho, 2022; Quan-Haase et al., 2016), we identified a diverse set of practices. Some of them mirror those observed among younger adults: For instance, many participants scrolled quickly through the personalized feed, rarely clicking links or engaging deeply with posts. This behavior was often a deliberate strategy, known as *information snacking*—also common among younger users (e.g., Molyneux, 2018). Participants attributed this to the brevity and variety of posts, which they view more as an

overview than in-depth coverage. This underscores the interplay between practices and platform affordances: information snacking is facilitated by the granularity of content on social media—short, varied posts within a feed (Kümpel, 2022)—and further supported by personalization and incidental exposure, as users rely on curated feeds to surface relevant content without active search (Bergström & Belfrage, 2018). This influence of platform affordances on older adults' practices also underscores their adaptability to the technologies they interact with (Quan-Haase et al., 2016).

However, we also identified practices that differ from those typically observed among younger adults. While some older adults scrolled quickly and made rapid decisions, others navigated more slowly and reflectively—a practice we term *hesitating*. This behavior may indicate literacy-related challenges (for example, some participants were unsure how to access external links), but it likely also reflects platform perceptions, as these participants view social media as a genuine and valuable source of information and thus want to take the time to fully grasp individual posts.

Our findings illustrate how technology use of the *mass media generation* is shaped by ingrained media routines (LaRose, 2010), leading to what Quan-Haase (2016) calls "hybrid practices" that "seamlessly combine traditional habits with new ones emerging from ICT use" (p. 702). Information snacking, for example, can be read as an adaptation of flipping through a newspaper or channel surfing on television—habits that many older adults developed long ago. Likewise, having grown up with one-way mass media such as newspapers and television, older adults may not naturally adopt participatory practices, but instead mainly remain passive viewers on social media.

Regarding the influence of post characteristics, and in line with findings on younger adults (e.g., Karnowski et al., 2021), the *topic* of a post clearly emerged as the most decisive factor, especially for selection and engagement practices. Older adults primarily engage with content they consider personally relevant or likely to offer something useful or new. By contrast, the *source* was mainly relevant in specific contexts, such as news. Many participants selected news only from (legacy) outlets they knew and trusted to avoid misinformation. This challenges the common assumption that older adults are particularly vulnerable to online misinformation due to limited digital or media literacy (e.g., Cotter & Reisdorf, 2020). Instead, our findings support the view that older adults seek to transfer their existing knowledge and experiences into social media environments (Quan-Haase et al., 2016).

Next to news and posts from friends and family, however, the source was often disregarded, as were *engagement cues*, such as the number of likes, comments, or shares. A key reason was their strong desire for autonomy: Older adults often strive for self-directed, independent information use (Anter et al., 2025b) and tend to reject cues suggesting their decisions should be shaped by others' evaluations or a source's popularity.

In sum, these findings align with a broader pattern in older adults' digital behavior: autonomy and agency are central motives shaping their usage (Quan-Haase et al., 2016; Zhao et al., 2023), and their practices are highly instrumental and purpose-oriented (Coelho, 2024; Melenhorst et al., 2001). Differences emerged less between age groups—likely because those 'oldest-olds' who use social media are particularly motivated and interested—and more in relation to usage frequency and information needs. Older adults use these platforms purposefully to gain added value; for instance, if engagement promises no clear benefit, it is avoided. By

doing so, they also prevent experiences of frustration or helplessness and actively co-create an image of self-determined aging through their interactions with social media (Gallistl et al., 2021).

Next to these empirical insights, our study expands the conceptual vocabulary for analyzing older adults' social media use. Binary distinctions between use and non-use often oversimplify their online behavior (Costera Meijer, 2016; Wanka & Gallistl, 2018). In contrast, the practices identified in this study—such as information snacking, hesitating, or passivity—offer a more nuanced understanding of how older adults engage with information and news online. Moreover, they help create a shared understanding among researchers and participants of what "using information" actually entails (Costera Meijer, 2016; Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2015).

Importantly, these practices are not tied to any specific platform. Although our mock feed resembled a hybrid between Facebook and Instagram, behaviors such as fast-paced navigation or limited engagement appear across platforms, regardless of feed structures or interaction features. In fact, participants who primarily used Twitter/X or TikTok reported and exhibited comparable behaviors during both the interviews and observations. This analytical flexibility also makes the practices valuable for addressing the "moving target" problem of platform research (Valkenburg et al., 2016), that is, the dynamic and ever-changing nature of social media.

Consequently, the practices identified here provide a robust starting point for future research, such as large-scale quantitative studies to assess their prevalence and effects. Not only do our findings serve as a foundation for developing platform-adaptable research instruments, but they also provide a basis for initial propositions regarding variations across user groups and platforms.

While reactivity was evident in a few cases (e.g., some participants treated the feed exposure as an 'exercise,' engaging more actively to signal cooperation), the multi-method approach proved highly valuable. It enabled direct observation of how older adults navigate social media feeds and interact with posts. The self-confrontation interviews added depth by prompting participants to explain and reflect on their behavior, resulting in "thick data" (Latzko-Toth et al., 2017) that captured not only *what* they did but also *why*. As such, this approach offers a promising framework for studying user behavior in personalized media environments.

In conclusion, our study shows that older adults engage in diverse information practices on social media, often grounded in informed platform perceptions, while yet shaped simultaneously by ingrained, long-standing media habits. These findings underscore the importance of approaching older adults with openness and avoiding reductive assumptions—such as seeing them primarily as digitally illiterate—which risk reinforcing ageist stereotypes (Wanka & Gallistl, 2018). With older adults playing an ever-greater role in digital life, such inclusive research approaches are crucial to understanding the complexity of their information behaviors and preventing their needs from being overlooked.

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