

***I am who I am: Sharing photos on social media by older consumers and its influence on subjective well-being.***

*I have reached an age when, if someone tells me to wear socks, I don't have to*  
Albert Einstein

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**ABSTRACT**

We are faced with an ageing population whose longer lives need to be lived well. Extant marketing scholarship has largely neglected older consumers' behavior in relation to the social media realm and its influence on well-being. This two-stage qualitative study investigates subjective well-being, exploring whether and how sharing photos on social media increases the dimensions of self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. The findings indicate that photo-sharing is a powerful behavior in augmenting older consumers' well-being as it enables individual self-reflection, self-representation and transforms the individual experience into a collective one. Contributions include; that photo-sharing acts as a bridge in creating, reinforcing but also breaking bonds among older consumers, also a tension exists between the desire for autonomy and the need for relationships with others, and finally that the digital self exists as a component of subjective well-being in older consumers.

**Keywords: Subjective well-being, photo-sharing, social media, older consumers, digital self**

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## INTRODUCTION

The aging of the population is a worldwide phenomenon, mainly due to a longer life expectancy and declining fertility rates. The demographic projections reveal that the EU is ‘turning increasingly grey’, Europe is the continent with the highest old age dependency ratio and will remain so up to 2070 (World Health Organization, 2018). Golant (2017) refers to such a disrupting pace of aging as an Agequake. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest older people are relatively affluent and appear willing to spend, displaying an increasing purchasing power (Lambert-Pandraud, 2005). This demographic trend is, therefore, of great interest to marketers in terms of older consumers’ market size and economic power, as older consumers also control household assets to a greater extent than younger ones (Yoon and Cole, 2008).

Thus, in Europe and elsewhere there is commercial, societal and political interest in establishing what is meant to live a good life rather than purely a long one. To improve understanding and develop social policy and consumer products that address the aging population there now exists an interest in well-being and what it means to live well. One way to increase well-being is to improve connections between older adults and their social network (Drennan et al., 2008), and this can be supported through the use of digital technology including social media platforms. In addition, digital technologies facilitate the creation of a digital self, extending the notion of self (Belk, 2013). The displaying of a digital self and the sharing of it with others underlie social connections in social media, in an increasingly visual driven existence. Previous research suggests that older people prefer image-based media to text (Bell et al., 2013) and photographs provide a foundation for conversations with other people, be they remote family or local friends, or carers etc. (Baecker et al., 2014). Furthermore, image-based platforms have the potential to increase subjective well-being due to the enhanced intimacy and the feeling of connectedness they offer (Kim, 2013; Pittman and Reich, 2016).

Malik, Dhir, and Nieminen (2015) found that consumers share photos to gratify needs of affection, attention seeking, disclosure, habit, information sharing, and social influence. It is unclear, however, what role photos play in enhancing or mitigating subjective well-being. Is photo-sharing a means to compensate for a lack of offline relationships? At the core of photo-sharing platforms there is a mission to fulfil needs of social interaction. However, the nature of the social interactions through photo-sharing and their impact on subjective well-being have not been investigated and therefore

scholarship in this area is warranted. By drawing on theories from psychology and marketing, the paper offers an explanation of photo-sharing experiences of older consumers in relation to their well-being. The present study views subjective well-being as a potential affective outcome of the sharing photo experience in social media and builds on research regarding the digital self and subjective well-being.

The purpose of the study is, therefore, to explore whether and how photo-sharing on social media influences subjective well-being in older consumers.

Our work contributes to the development of psychology theory of older consumers' behavior, a growing area of research endeavor over the past decade in the academic psychology and marketing literature (see for example; Amatulli, Guido, and Natarajan, 2015; Sudbury and Simcock, 2009; Guido, Amatulli, and Peluso, 2014; Lim and Kim, 2011). However, excepting journals which focus on the elderly there has been scant research attention paid to older consumers' behavior in relation to the social media realm and its influence on well-being.

The present study does this in the following three ways:

- 1) By focusing specifically on photo-sharing, this study builds on Pittman and Reich (2016), extends Berezan, Krishen, Agarwal and Kachroo, (2018) thus contributing to the understanding of the under-theorized field of research of the "visual mode". This study posits that photo-sharing on social media augments older consumers' well-being through its ability to capture and convey everyday experiences connecting the individual with other people.
- 2) As people age in a digital environment, the meaning and actualization of well-being shift. The study sheds light on Ryff's (1989) dimensions of subjective well-being (self-acceptance, positive personal relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, personal growth) showing how such dimensions are enacted through social media photo-sharing.
- 3) The present study develops Belk's (2013) notion of a digital self, exploring how the specific photo-sharing activity contributes to older people's construction of the self in the era of social media.

The paper is structured as follows. First, the study offers a conceptual framework that combines the definition of the digital self, and subjective well-being. Our conceptual framework formulates an interaction between a set of constructs to explain the likelihood older consumers experience higher levels of well-being thanks to actively sharing photos on social media. Then, through a qualitative two-stage approach, the study explores the psychological dimensions that lead to a digital self

and the influence on subjective well-being. Subsequently, the study discusses the findings and creates a conceptualization of the influence of photo-sharing on subjective well-being before offering conclusions and implications for marketing theory.

## **CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND**

### **Social media and older consumers.**

Among adult Internet users aged over 65, 56% now use at least one social media platform. (Duggan et al., 2015). With the increasing emphasis on the visual within social media, and its undeniable omnipresence in individuals' everyday lives, marketing has recently started to pay closer attention to the, to date, under-theorized 'visual mode' of discourse and meaning construction. Pittman and Reich (2016) indicate that the more image-based social media platforms one uses, the happier, more satisfied with life, he or she is likely to perceive being. The authors posit that our brains implicitly trust visual modalities such as images and video more than text because those modalities cue the "realism heuristic." This heuristic immediately determines that a photograph of something is inherently more real than text written about the same thing. Photographs shared via social media platforms (e.g. Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp) can act as vehicles for sharing life experiences and interests. Wilson (2018) reports that photographs of family and friends hold a high importance with older adults and can impact on the attachment towards a device.

More specifically, photographs can act as tangible artefacts and continue a feeling of connectedness between an older person and those pictured (Coelho and Duarte, 2016) even when those people are not present. Technology platforms containing features which enable image sharing, such as photographs and video material, offer an incentive for interaction and co-creation between older people (Coelho and Duarte, 2016). Changes in media technologies have facilitated changes in how everyday and family life are captured, remembered and communicated (Vivienne and Burgess, 2013) and yet despite these changes photography itself remains an influential sociotechnical system that is important to human activity (van House, 2011). Photographs in frames have evolved into digital images shared on social media. Photograph albums have now evolved into content sharing platforms of images with linked comments, likes etc. The once private photograph albums have become shared with potentially wider audiences (Couldry, 2012). Whilst some authors have implied

that it is the younger generation whose photograph sharing behavior has changed to become a vehicle for peer to peer interactions and bonding (van Dijck, 2008; 2013) we now see this in older adults as well. A recent study by Conci, Pianesi and Zancanaro (2018) found that the hedonic motivations of enjoyment and self-realization as well as utilitarian reasons were influential in older people's use of mobile phones.

### **Construction and extension of self.**

Our construction of self and how we present our 'self' to the wider world, the essence of who we are and how we are different from others (Goffman, 1959), becomes more fluid within the context of the digital environment, as the communication tools that can illustrate 'who we are' are now more numerous and more immediate and can reach greater audiences (Mangold and Fauldes, 2009). One such tool, digital photography can both document and narrate the life as lived but also be curated to create a deliberate set of digital traces through which one illustrate the self as the creator wishes to be seen by others (Belk, 2013). The careful construction, editing and deleting of material and the conscious choice of where and with whom to share enables a fragmented presentation of self and self-identity. The digital photographic self may become a bricolage of images (Deuze, 2006) with different contents, contexts and differing audiences which are shared in a dispersed manner, thus making a self-identity that the creator may be happy with. The construction and extension of self-identity can also be facilitated by other people (Pan et al., 2017; Turkle, 2011), who co-construct the digital image and its communication through the adding of comments, other images, tags, editing the original image etc. as they think relevant (Raab et al., 2016).

This further layering, which builds an aggregated self may be more collective than individual (Belk, 2013). Indeed, the sharing of this type of material on social media may be a way of seeking affirmation regarding this construction of self. Contrary to the curated and co-constructed digital self, self-identity can be a more 'raw exposure' through digital photographs. The digital self can also be self-revelatory, a depiction of self-reflection that, through the objects shared, the images of pets, places visited, and activities undertaken a life emerges that does reveal the life as lived and can act as a documentary or confessional memoir (Vivienne and Burgess, 2013). Here self-identity is portrayed in its rawness (or as near as accurate as the creator allows), to be shared in a relatively open way. Affirmation from others may not be the focus here as the older creator may be more accepting of themselves and their life (Berezan et al., 2018). In this scenario it is likely that there is

greater cohesion between the digital/online identity and the offline identity. Self-disclosure on social media through photographs, whether expressing self acceptance of a raw identity and acting as memory cues, or a carefully curated and managed identity are both, in essence, aspects of self-identity and self-determination (Berezan et al., 2018). Older consumers as well as the young are embracing Facebook and WhatsApp amongst other platforms to distribute and carve out their identities (van Dijck, 2013). How one constructs and shares one's self through photographs on social media can be an indication of subjective well-being.

### **Anatomy of subjective well-being**

Psychological subjective well-being has received increasing attention from the psychology scientific community (e.g. Lavasani et al., 2011). Transformative service research also advocates the use of subjective well-being as a powerful measure able to capture important issues in marketing and service research (Anderson et al., 2013). While subjective well-being has in the past been investigated in relation to innovation (Dolan and Metcalfe, 2012), technological access and affluence (Graham and Nikolova, 2013; Kavetsos and Koutroumpis, 2011), the social media marketing research stream, except from a few studies (Berezan et al., 2018) has still rarely included this perspective.

The field of subjective well-being comprises the analysis of how people evaluate their lives – both at the moment and over longer periods of time. These evaluations include people's emotional reactions to events, their moods and the judgements they form about their life satisfaction, fulfilment and domains such as marriage and work. Thus, subjective well-being concerns the study of what people might call happiness or satisfaction. General reviews of subjective well-being can be found in Argyle (2001), Diener (1984) and Diener et al., (1999). No single definition exists for the term happiness, and every individual has their own perspective of what makes them happy. When asked to describe what makes them happy, people respond with vastly different answers. Researchers use subjective well-being to recognize the fact that happiness is subjective and therefore individuals evaluate their own life based on their own standards (Deci and Ryan, 2008).

One of the pioneers linking subjective well-being to life happiness was Diener (1994) who explored life satisfaction at an emotional and cognitive level, and further indicated that conceptualizations of subjective well-being consist of three "hallmarks": (1) it is subjective, residing in the individual

experience; (2) it utilizes positive rather than negative measures; and (3) it is a global assessment of one life domain. As people age and traverse through different life stages, their definition of happiness and well-being shifts (Mogilner, Kamvar and Aaker, 2011). Differences in the meaning of happiness stem from several types of arousal; whereas happiness for younger people can result from high states of arousal such as excitement, older people can achieve happiness from low states of arousal such as peacefulness (Berezan et al., 2018). One universalistic measure derived from humanistic theories of psychology. As Table 1 displays, Ryff (1989) relied on humanism in asserting that there are six universal dimensions – *self-acceptance, relationships, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth* and found that the degree to which people reported fulfilling these needs correlated with their reported life satisfaction.

**(Insert Table 1 about here)**

To elaborate, stable well-being is when individuals have the psychological, social and physical resources they need to meet a particular psychological, social and/or physical challenge. When individuals have more challenges than resources, their well-being declines and vice-versa (Dodge et al., 2012). From a cross-generational perspective the debate regarding the relation between well-being and the use of communication technologies in older people is still undecided. On one hand, the Internet can increase feelings of being alone (Karavidas, Lim and Katsikas, 2005; Sum et al., 2008) and Wilson (2018) suggests that the more emotionally attached older consumers are to their digital device (i.d. smart phone), the lower their feeling of belonging. Indeed, according to Kim, LaRose, and Peng (2009) some online communication exacerbates loneliness, isolating individuals offline and decreasing well-being. On the other hand, Cattani, Kime and Bagnall (2011) posit that telephone befriending schemes have helped older people gain confidence and a sense of belonging. Within the digital context, previous literature supported the idea that older adults participating in social networking activities felt less alone (Ballantyne et al., 2010), and digital communication has the potential to boost perceived social interaction and self-esteem decreasing loneliness (Shaw and Gant, 2004).

Following the discussion above about the specific nature of photographs, we argue that sharing photographs reflects and contributes to the building of a digital self and we further suggest that this

process has an influence on subjective well-being in older consumers. Our conceptual framework is shown in Figure 1.

**(See appendix for: Figure 1)**

## **RESEARCH QUESTION**

Our research question is, what is the influence of photo-sharing through social media on older consumers' subjective well-being?.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Our field research takes place in Italy and the Great Britain (GB). both of which share similar ageing projections (Europeia, 2018). In GB by 2016 48% of internet users between 65-74 years old had a social media account and 41% of those over 75 years old (OFCOM, 2017 report). Facebook's fastest area of growth in GB is those aged over 65 years with more than 300,000 joining the platform in 2018, and WhatsApp new registered users showing a similar age profile (The Guardian, 2018). Similarly, 50% of the Italian population uses Facebook, of which 14% are over 65 and use Facebook at least once a week. Italian older consumers (over 55), in particular, are heavy smartphone users (76%) and are noticeable for their use of social networks (76% has at least one account), which reflects a close relationship with social media technology (CENSIS, 2017).

This study adopts a two-stage qualitative approach within the interpretive paradigm in which participants are seen as active meaning creators, not just research objects (Gephart, 2004). This methodology favors data collection methods that gather rich data directly from those people experiencing the phenomenon (Shah and Corley, 2006).

### **Research procedure**

The research comprised a 2-stage study; focus groups were carried out first followed by in-depth interviews. Specifically, we conducted:

1. 4 Focus groups (2 in Italy and 2 in Great Britain)
2. 16 In-depth interviews (8 in Italy and 8 in Great Britain)



Focus groups were chosen over other forms of data collection, such as informal observation, or follow-up surveys, as they tend to “get in tune” with consumers or, more accurately, with consumers’ realities (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2014). Furthermore, focus groups have been considered an appropriate method for generating data because the research topic is something participants feel natural talking about with other people (Macnaghten and Myers, 2004). The initial data generated from the focus groups provided the general themes that were further explored in-depth through individual interviews.

## **Data collection**

### *First stage: Focus groups*

The study followed the general recommendation of between 6 and 12 participants in each group (Macnaghten and Myers, 2004). The groups were composed of participants who shared the following characteristics: over 60, and active in sharing photographs online/via social media. The focus groups took place in the Province of Torino (Italy), and Oxford (GB) in 2018. Table 2 displays the profiles of the focus groups’ participants. Two authors moderated the focus groups; one based in Italy and the other in Great Britain and data were transcribed verbatim. Data collection ended when information saturation occurred.

**(See appendix for: Table 2)**

### *Second stage: In-depth face-to-face interviews*

Interviewees were recruited via purposeful sampling and snowball techniques, using the same criteria as Stage 1. In-depth face-to-face interviews ranged from 40 to 75 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. Table 3 provides the profiles of focus group participants. Three authors carried out face-to-face interviews administering a semi-structured guide derived from the themes arising from the focus groups. Typical questions included; can you remember when you started sharing photos? What were you hoping to get out from it? With whom do you share photos with? (Family, friends, acquaintances, public) What kind of photos do you share? Has sharing photos helped you to build new relationships, or strengthen existing ones or both? (on or offline, or both?) How does sharing photos make you feel connected with others? Have you learnt or developed new skills? Do you ask

permission from others before sharing the photos? How do you feel when you share a photo on social media? Does sharing help to communicate your identity?

**(See appendix for: Table 3)**

### **Analysis**

Our focus was on phenomenographic conceptions, in terms of older consumers' experience of sharing photographs through social media. The study adopted an interpretive methodology to identify themes emerging from the analysis of the data. Following Yin (2013), the analytic framework comprised three stages: (1) analysis of individual interviews and transcripts, (2) identification of common recurrent themes and (3) analysis of shared themes.

Each transcript was analyzed separately as a unit of analysis to understand both the experience of those individuals and to identify the emerging themes. The coding scheme was unrestricted, imaginative, and was not content specific (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The first author undertook initial coding. The second stage, undertaken by all investigators, involved categorical aggregation and the search for emerging patterns. The data was revisited to search for relationships between the shared themes and the different concepts that had emerged. Potential patterns and relationships within and between the shared themes and the core theme of "response-bias" were examined to determine how exactly they influenced the shared aspects of the informants "lived experience." A sample of the material generated was checked for coding coherence and accuracy by all researchers, with no significant problems identified. Table 4 provides illustrative examples of how the coding was conducted.

**(See appendix for: Table 4)**

### **FINDINGS**

An overview of the main findings is followed by results grouped under the core themes of Ryff's (1989) adapted, theory guided, dimensions of subjective well-being.

The most commonly cited social media platforms used to share photos were Facebook and WhatsApp across both countries. In Italy, Facebook was considered to offer a collective

connectedness where participants voiced their opinions, beliefs, and values, and were keen to reflect their idea of themselves and society openly on the public area of the platform, without the use of private groups. Italian participants were reluctant to self-disclose private photos to a broad public. However, the GB participants generally shared photos only to private groups within Facebook, such as shared interest groups for gardening, travelling or pets. WhatsApp was used by both groups of participants to interact and share photos with family and friendship groups, or groups with a defined common interest purpose, such as golf.

The findings indicate that sharing of photos through social media was felt to bring both emotional and practical benefits, illustrating the self-identity of the person, enhancing positive relations with others, allowing self-determination, offering the opportunity to become digitally competent, facilitating personal growth and contributing to a purpose in life, all of which are outlined below.

Photo-sharing is narrated as an experiential phenomenon wherein participants take pleasure in their everyday exchanges. The photos the participants share belong to two categories:

1. *Hedonic/emotional experiences* that refer to multisensory emotional experiences and;
2. *Utilitarian experiences* that are characterized by problem solving activities, reflecting a functional, task-related nature.

A typical example of the utilitarian experiences captured by a photo and shared online comes from Nunziata, (66, Focus Group 2, Italy), *“I had an accident; a van scraped my car on the side. I managed to run after him, pull my telephone out and take a photo of his car plate which I shared on WhatsApp with the insurance company... I managed to win and receive 2000euro of damages”*. A British participant gave an interesting example *“We were going to see people in Brussels, then there was the bombing in the underground and we were asking how safe and secure it is ... and they sent photos via WhatsApp of all the security which gave us confidence, we needed that reassurance and the pictures showed us that.”* (Edward,72, Interview, GB).

When participants refer to hedonic/emotional experiences, these were characterized by pleasant sensations, often illustrating family moments. Feelings of warmth, closeness and joy were emphasized in the experiences shared by participants, *“When my granddaughters send me photographs of them I am so proud because they are beautiful girls, I feel well because they don’t*

*forget me, they send me hearts*” (Mariuccia, 80, Focus Group 1, Italy). This type of hedonic experience was also shared by British participants, for instance, *“Instant sharing of photos with my granddaughter on a daily basis through WhatsApp to see how she is growing up – when she lives far away, I can be close to her”* (Heather, 66, Focus Group 2, GB), and *“it’s an interesting way of finding out what other people are doing, I get fun out of doing it”* (Thomas, 71, Interview, GB), and *“sharing excitement through photos, it’s like me being there”* (Hilary, 70, Interview, GB).

### **Self-acceptance**

Participants share photos that reveal their identity in a mature manner. *“I am vain and I enjoy making other people laugh, this is why I share ironic and funny photos. It’s fun... It allows me to communicate my personality”* (Gabriele, 69, Interview, Italy). The positive attitude to life and acceptance of oneself was evidenced through comments such as *“within reason I share what I like, people can think the photos are crazy, I don’t care, if it means something to me then that is fine”* (Anne, 62, Focus Group 2, GB). Comments were made illustrating that participants had reflected on their identity portrayal, *“it’s more personal, before it was more measured and now it is less formal and I think more intimate about my life”* (Teresa, 70, Interview, GB) and *“I think the sharing shows the better side of me, it’s probably how I’d like to be seen by people close to me”* (Edward, 72, Interview, GB).

The older people interviewed have generally accepted old age without displaying regret for the past, as Anna, (64, Interview, Italy) offered, *“You can’t live with regrets, life goes on, what has been is in the past”*. Despite acknowledging and accepting the evolution/passing of life and time, photos that include the presence of the participant often presented a reality clash. Participants reported feeling much younger than what the photo reflected. Given this, participants are reluctant to take photos which include themselves, they prefer ‘elsies’ rather than ‘selfies’ as photos don’t reflect their desired identity, *“I like to have control over how I want to be perceived, I wouldn’t post a photo of me looking awful, but a sort of idealized version of me, it is conscious to a certain extent, as a defense mechanism”* (Simone, 68 Interview, GB). Feelings of dismay and a sort of rejection emerge, such as the ones MariaGrazia, (75, Interview, Italy) describes, *“I keep repeating to my kids not to take photos with me in, I see myself as a monster! I don’t like myself anymore in photographs, but I enjoy looking at my family members”*. Sadness is, however, compensated by the warmth of the relationship among family, as explained by Lina, (77, Focus Group 2, Italy), *“Even if I don’t like*

*myself being in the photo, I take pleasure looking at it because my grandchildren were hugging me so tightly!*" [referring to a photo of herself and her two grandchildren].

### **Positive relations with others**

Sharing photos is a means to strengthen existing bonds, create new bonds with other people or even break existing bonds. The bonds already in existence through familial or very close friendship ties were found to be re-enforced and strengthened through the sharing of every day events, such as dog walking. Bonds were also enhanced through the immediacy afforded by the sharing of photos on social media which participants thought brought people even closer together as illustrated by Simone's interview comment "*I don't think the relationships would be so strong if we didn't have communicating through photos online*" (Simone, 68, Interview, GB) and Edward's view "*'because we don't see them [grandchildren] often it is nice to see what is happening in their lives as they are doing it*" (Edward, 72, Interview, GB). Family connectedness was emphasized heavily in the results from both Britain and Italy, as seen in the following excerpt "*I look at them on my telephone and it's like having them close... I look at them and I laugh on my own. When I feel melancholic I find the photos and I look at them, it feels like reliving those moments together* [looking at a family photo]" (Mariuccia, 80, Focus Group 1, Italy).

Creating new bonds was also facilitated through photo sharing. New bonds between people were established in either off line or online environments but were felt to be enhanced and intensified through sharing photographs on social media. For example, "*I joined the Spinners, Weavers and Dyers group and I think that if we didn't share images between meetings, like knitting, recipes etc ... I think I have got to know those people and they me much quicker and that's good when you are old. Years ago when it was just a formal relationship you would not have had the immediacy of sharing images*" (Teresa, 70, Interview, GB). This additional closeness was felt to be accelerated through sharing images rather than other forms of communication exchange such as telephone calls. The acceleration of the relationship development was also noted as being important as one became older.

However there were occasions when existing bonds were broken as a result of sharing photographs. For example, one British participant reported that when she felt the other party had used a photograph inappropriately and was angry over her loss of control over her photographic image

within a group, so she left the WhatsApp group as a result. Breaking established bonds was also expressed in the following quote “*After having read what his political view was on Facebook I really didn’t want to know him [an old friend] any more, especially when he posted a photo of starving children not able to enter the Italian borders*” (Pino, 71, Focus Group 2, Italy).

### **Autonomy**

The desire for self-determination underpinned the photographs shared on social media. Participants reported a sense of freedom from the judgement of others when sharing photographs. While recognizing positive feedback (e.g. likes, shares, followers..) from others, they don’t depend on it for a sense of self, “*I try not to be influenced by the rest of the world. What I do, who I am, and the photos I share are there [Facebook] because I like it that way. If I have feedback from others even better, but I don’t depend on it*” (Franco, 63, Interview, Italy). This sentiment was repeated by others “*Do I post photos which are going to get lots of likes or do I share stuff which is saying this is me, this is who I am, it depends but usually the latter*” (Nicholas, 70, Focus group 1, GB). An interesting reflection was presented by a focus group participant “*how people take a photo says something about those people, not just that they are sharing photos, it tells you something about them beyond what you see*” (Paul, 70, Focus Group 2, GB). Photo-sharing was also a means to immortalize the outcome of one’s creation and individual effort (e.g. crochet, cakes) showing that social applause was nevertheless welcome. “*It gave me a lot of pleasure when I got a comment [on a photo which showed her tired in the gym]... it made me feel not bad for a 78 year old*” (Anna, 78, Interview, GB).

### **Environmental mastery**

Participants reported competence on easy to use platforms such as WhatsApp. Generally, when participants have a family it’s the younger members (children or grandchildren in particular) who introduce them to new technologies. Adoption of the technology was accepted with a sense of unease and an initial resistance due to a change in their routine: “*I started by crying all my tears..., then, when I learnt, the feeling was very positive*” (Mariuccia, 80, Focus Group 1, Italy). Getting support either formally or more usually informally was perceived as important to help overcome barriers with technology, especially during the early stages of use. However, family relationships could create tensions in the teacher/pupil dynamic “*I still feel intimidated by my sons, they can be incredibly intolerant if you don’t pick something up instantaneously*” (Colin, 74, Interview, GB).

Yet when participants developed an expertise in managing social media the perception was an uplift in their quality of life *“It makes life easier”* (Gianni, 66, Focus Group 1, Italy), *“as it [SM] is relatively inexpensive I think it is a great leveller in society, it gives you opportunities to take up and try new stuff, it makes life more interesting”* (Susan, 65, Focus Group 2, GB). Competence and awareness produced certain usage behaviors such as not wanting to share publicly intimate photos. This led to an impermeable division between private and public spheres, *“I am very careful not to publish photos of people who are not aware of being in a certain photo and ones which are very personal”* (Alessio, 61, Interview, Italy).

### **Purpose in life**

On one level participants feel they have a responsibility to society to which they can contribute, as put forward by Anna, (64, Interview, Italy), *“I consider myself first of all a world citizen, through photographs I want to send messages, I believe each of us should feel protagonists of the world we live in”*. This sentiment was echoed by Deidre (66, Interview, GB), *“for me it is about engaging in the community, it’s not just a social thing, it’s helping to connect with and look after vulnerable people”*. In addition, there was acknowledgement of the value of sharing photographs for a wider audience [if posted on a public space], *“sharing difficult stuff through photos was helpful, beyond myself, to other people who I didn’t know, I felt helpful to them”* (Sue, 67, Focus Group 1, GB).

On another level, being part of a larger self was enacted through photo-sharing. Nature and spirituality were a recurrent theme. Nature evoked a deep sense of respect, almost spiritual. Awareness and acknowledgement of the importance of nature on one’s wellbeing was clearly expressed in the photos participants shared. Photos of sunsets or of the sea were also shared as metaphors of states of mind such as peace and quietness, *“I share photos of nature that represent my emotions or my mood”* (Maria, 77, Focus Group 2, Italy). British participants also emphasized nature and the role of nature in the photo sharing *“I post pictures of my garden, of nature, and I get a lot of responses to that..... it is the ability of nature to help well-being, to open your eyes to something bigger”* (Deidre, 66, Interview, GB). Participants emphasized the world around them partially providing purpose in life rather than the focus being on themselves as individuals.

## Personal growth

Social media, specifically photo-sharing can be a challenge for the majority of the old people interviewed. The sense of achievement that participants felt when adopting social media improved their confidence, and the idea was conveyed that they were able to control not only the digital environment but potentially an array of opportunities offered by the digital environment. *“I have become a better photographer over the past 6 years as a result, not just from taking my own but from looking at other people’s too”* (Heather, 66, Focus Group 2, GB).

For many photo-sharing was a creative outlet and a focused way to learn new digital and non-digital skills, as expressed by Franco, (69, Interview, Italy), *“I think that sharing photos on social media has really helped in stimulating my mind, my creative side”*. Participants recognized enhancing their creative observations though photo taking and sharing *“I look at things differently now, and try to make the photographs as interesting as possible, I also think I appreciate photographs someone else has taken more too”* (Hilary, 70, Interview, GB). *“The creativity aspect is an important reason why I share, the colors, composition, not just the content of the photos”* (Anne, 62, Focus Group 2, GB).

Participants report on actively contributing to communities, co-creating value through resource sharing and developing new competences such as the following experience highlights: *“I started using WhatsApp because of a knitwear group I have been attending. All the other ladies take photographs and exchange patterns. We learn new things, we share experiences and when we have problems, we help each other. Take this intertwined shawl for example [referring to a picture of a shawl with a blue dragon]. In this case different people offered different skills and experiences to achieve our final goal. A lady offered linguistic skills translating the instructions from German, others had more technical abilities. Photographs help a lot because they show you what to do”* (Elvira, 71, Focus Group 1, Italy).

Personal development was also evidenced, unexpectedly, through the use of photo sharing on social media to manage very difficult personal circumstances. *“I think by sharing photographs [of the terminal illness of her husband] it made it easier for us all”* (Anna, 78, Interview, GB). *“When people liked what I had shared it was their way of saying we’re with you, we understand what is happening to your family [terminal cancer] – and I found that very helpful, I surprised myself by*



*doing it*” (Sue, 67, Focus Group 1, GB). In these cases, photo sharing was utilised for sombre reasons and yet by doing this, the participants felt they themselves had benefitted and had changed as people in some way as a result.

### **A caveat about relationships**

There were some comments made about the loss of face-to-face relationships or the diminishing of those relationships owing to social media activity in general. *“With WhatsApp I have lost a direct communication with my family and friends. Yes, one sends nice quotes, one wishes good morning and goodnight, niche photos of ourselves but there is a loss in communication, it’s a fake closeness”* (Rita, 71, Focus Group 2, Italy). Sharing photographs for some has become companionship but, while connecting the participants to the world outside, a full sense of personal relationship may not be achieved: *“People are around me, not with me”* (Rita, 71, Focus Group 2, Italy). However, sharing photographs was accepted as a ‘way in’ to something else *“a shared photo can make the bridge to open a conversation or be a reason to call someone”* (Hilary, Interview, GB). In essence, a valuable summation was provided by a British focus group participant *“sharing photos is like having virtual company”* (Paul, 70, Focus Group 2, GB). Sharing of photographs was seen as a substitute for interactions with people no longer available on a face-to-face basis, *“Facebook sharing has given me the opportunity to find old friends and when they send me photographs it’s a way to still be friends”* (Anna, 64, Interview, Italy). By simply being a phatic manner of communication in terms of *“Hi I am still your friend”*, sharing appears to be a way not to lose touch with people.

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

### **The power of photos**

The taking of photographs and sharing of them is an individual act which becomes collective by involving others as subjects or recipients. Without such social aspects, the photo-taking itself lacks meaning. Photographs act now as digital cues for interactions and communication among people. Photo-sharing by older people serves both utilitarian functions in helping to solve the everyday challenges of broken household goods or recording of car accidents. It also provides an opportunity to share hedonic experiences (Conci et al., 2018) which, through enhancing feelings

of happiness (Diener, 1994), contribute to subjective well-being. Indeed, Jahoda's early work in 1956 recognized the importance of positivity generally as an attribute to one's mental health.

Substantial attachment was afforded by participants to photographs of people and of nature, both in the taking of the photographs and of the sharing of photographs, Whilst the immediacy facilitated by digital technologies means that people can and do share the everyday events through photos (Murray, 2008), what some might term the 'superficial' in life, it is the everyday events which shape and give meaning and purpose in life (Berezan et al., 2018) and contribute to a sense of well-being. The ability to seize the day 'carpe diem' and share elements of the day in real or almost real time also added to well-being through a sense of personal growth and environmental mastery (Ryff, 1989).

### **Relationships and bonding with others**

The ability of a photograph to act as a bridge in creating, reinforcing and even breaking bonds between consumers should not be underestimated. The bonding (and bond breaking) with other people as interactional activity is a substantial element of subjective well-being. Pursuant to this, Ryff's second criterion of her adapted dimensions of psychological well-being (1989) made explicit the requirement of positive relations with others as a core to psychological well-being.

Photo-sharing facilitates bonding with close family, friends, close groups, and a broader public. Interacting thanks to photos improves and or confirms personal relationships. Being a part of an entity that enables connections to different sources of well-being and being involved in interactive relationships can enhance the meaningfulness of life (Isola et al., 2017). More broadly, photo-sharing facilitates an increase of a sense of belonging to a society, which is important in mitigating the feeling of being left out, of feeling isolated from others. Feeling that one belongs within a society, a shared interest group, a family or a set of friends leads to a higher perception of self-worth.

### **Photo-sharing as complementary to face-to-face relationships**

Whilst there was substantial support for the value of sharing photos on social media as connective tissue for relationships and as a contributor to subjective well-being, there was also recognition of a potential loss to face to face interactions. The changed physical geographies of networks, including the fragmentation and dispersal of families, and friends to all continents of the world has also

encouraged the use of social media as a relationship re-enforcement platform through which photos can continue to complement and consolidate existing relationships in the form of virtual communities (Cova, Kozinets and Shanker, 2007). Virtual communities based on a shared interest be it family or a leisure interest can enhance a sense of belonging for an individual (Dennis et al., 2016). Photo-sharing across space and time can act as a conversation starter or as a phatic signal between two or more people as a way to keep in touch, and demonstrate reciprocal empathy and belonging which may add to all parties' sense of well-being (Ryff, 1989).

### **Digital Self**

How we present ourselves to those we know and those we don't through the photos we share is both a revelation about ourselves and also a curation of how we might wish to be seen (Belk, 2013; Vivienne and Burgess, 2013). Many older consumers demonstrated a level of self-acceptance through what they shared (Berezan et al., 2018), others were more conscious and deliberate about how they portrayed their 'selves' through shared photos. Affirmation was sought and acknowledged as being personally valuable in raising self-esteem and thus confidence in relation to others (Malik, et al., 2015) and this contributed to well-being. Other older participants exhibited disinhibition and autonomy about the creation of their self-identity through photo sharing and these people were not concerned that others may be co-creating their identity (Pan et al., 2017) and through these acts enrobing and augmenting the self to become an extended self. The recording of objects, people and events through photos creates an autobiographical memory which is then shared with others to denote the self. Beyond self-representation, photo-sharing promotes closeness with others (Ryff, 1989), and conjures up emotion which is an important aspect in maintaining and developing subjective well-being. Beyond the everyday experiences of life, the photo taking and sharing also reflected the emotions of older consumers which helped to communicate moods, different levels of happiness, and aspects of their life satisfaction.

**(See appendix for: Table 5)**

In sum, subjective well-being in older consumers is positively influenced by photo-sharing through social media. The power of photos as a bridge between sender and receiver, the past and the present, the here and the somewhere else, enhances relations with others and adds to a purpose in life as well

as enabling personal growth. Simultaneously, the digital self is co-created and co-curated through photo sharing with chosen individuals and virtual communities which help sustain relationships. The digital self may be part of accepting one's self and it may provide a platform for autonomy in later life once the digital environment has been mastered. Thus, self-acceptance is demonstrated through the type of content shared, and by virtue of sharing everyday images positive relations with chosen others occur. The ability to recognize but not rely on others' approbation on social media suggests autonomy.

Our proposed framework in Figure 2 visualizes the theoretical contribution of this study. Photo-sharing, within the social media environment, enables the transformation of older consumers' individual experiences (i.e. utilitarian and hedonic) into collective ones. By acting as a connective tissue between 'the self' and 'others', photo-sharing positively influences the dimensions of; self-acceptance, positive relationship with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth, thereby enhancing subjective well-being as a whole.

**(See appendix for: Figure 2)**

This paper contributes to the insight regarding older consumers within the marketing and psychology literature in the following ways. 1) This study indicates that there is a positive power of photographs shared on social media (Pittman and Reich, 2016) to augment older consumers' lives through their ability to connect with other people irrespective of locality or personal situation. A photograph's ability to act as a bridge in creating, reinforcing and even breaking bonds amongst consumers should not be overlooked. This refutes earlier studies such as Kim et al. (2013) and Karavidas et al. (2005) which suggested that online communication decreased well-being. However, these studies were conducted prior to the wider adoption of smartphones, tablets and the greater use of social media platforms. 2) Within subjective well-being and the use of social media we found a tension between the desire for autonomy and the need for relationships with others. Both individuation and interaction with people are important for older consumers, but this strain has not been noted in previous studies (Ryff, 1989; Berezan et al., 2018). 3) We also suggest that the digital self of older consumers is an embryonic yet emerging state, which as these users become

more masterful and competent in the social media technology environment and greater use is made of it for interactional relationships, the value of the digital self (Belk, 2013) as a component of subjective well-being will be further recognized.

The present study has certain limitations that can be addressed in future research. First, the participants in this study were independent living, educated older people, leading an active life and therefore not fully reflective of the wider older population. An interesting avenue for investigation would be the inclusion of older consumers who were residents in care homes and or those who had significantly reduced physical mobility to understand their use of photo-sharing as a tool for interaction and well-being. Far older consumers could also be the focus of a future study, as the number of people over 85 increases it would be valuable to include those ‘grandeeds’ to comprehend their adoption of phot-sharing and its impact on psychological states.

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**Table 1: Ryff (1989) theory guided dimensions of well-being.**

<p><b>1. Self-Acceptance</b></p> <p>Positive attitude about the Self. Acknowledgement and acceptance of good and bad qualities of the Self. Feeling positive about life. An example statement for this criterion is "I like most aspects of my personality".</p>	<p><b>2. Positive Relations with Others</b></p> <p>Engagement in meaningful relationships with others that include reciprocal empathy, intimacy, and affection. An example statement for this criterion is "People would describe me as a giving person, willing to share my time with others".</p>	<p><b>3. Autonomy</b></p> <p>Independence and self-determination of personal behavior, resistance of social pressures. Regulates behavior from within. An example statement for this criterion is "I have confidence in my opinions, even if they are contrary to the general consensus".</p>
<p><b>4. Environmental Mastery</b></p> <p>Sense of mastery in managing environmental factors and activities, including managing everyday affairs and creating situations to benefit personal needs. An example statement for this criterion is "In general, I feel I am in charge of the situation in which I live".</p>	<p><b>5. Purpose in Life</b></p> <p>Strong goal orientation and conviction that life holds meaning. An example statement for this criterion is "Some people wander aimlessly through life, but I am not one of them".</p>	<p><b>6. Personal Growth</b></p> <p>Continued development, open to new experiences, recognition of improvement in behavior and self over time. An example statement for this criterion is "I think it is important to have new experiences that challenge how you think about yourself and the world".</p>

**Table 2: Participant profiles of the Focus Groups**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Former profession</b>	<b>Current Profession</b>	<b>Nationality</b>
Lina	Female	77	Teacher	Pensioner	IR
Aleardo	Male	70	Journalist	Pensioner	IT
Carla	Female	66	Employee	Pensioner	IT
Edmondo	Male	84	Doctor	Pensioner	IT
Elvira	Female	71	Employee	Pensioner	IT
Gabriella	Female	73	Teacher	Pensioner	IT
Gianni	Male	66	IT Technician	Pensioner	IT
Idillia	Female	70		Tailor	IT
Isabella	Female	64		Employee	IT
Maria	Female	77		Freelance	IT
Maria Domenica	Female	72	Worker	Pensioner	IT
Marina	Female	76	Shop owner	Pensioner	IT
Mariuccia	Female	80	Worker	Pensioner	IT
Nunziata	Female	66	Employee	Pensioner	IT
Pino	Male	71	Manager	Pensioner	IT
Rita	Female	71	Employee	Pensioner	IT
Anne	Female	62	Teacher	Pensioner	Uk
Emma	Female	62	Nurse	Pensioner	UK
Esme	Female	88	Journalist	Pensioner	UK
Heather	female	66	Secretary	Pensioner	UK
Jenny	Female	67	Accountant	Pensioner	UK
Mark	Male	67	IT consultant	Pensioner	UK
May	Female	89	Homemaker	Pensioner	UK
Michael	Male	68	Dentist	Pensioner	Uk
Nicholas	Male	70	Teacher	Pensioner	UK
Paul	Male	65	Civil servant	Pensioner	UK
Paul	Male	70	Artist	Pensioner	UK
Penelope	Female	88	Homemaker	Pensioner	UK
Philip	Male	74	Academic	Pensioner	UK
Rebecca	Female	73	Librarian	Pensioner	Uk
Sue	Female	67	Secretary	Pensioner	UK
Susan	Female	65	Nurse	Pensioner	UK

**Table 3: Participants in the in-depth interviews**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Former Profession</b>	<b>Current Profession</b>	<b>Nationality</b>
Alessio	Male	61		Freelance	IT
Anna	Female	64		Restaurant owner	IT
Demos	Male	75	Banker	Pensioner	IT
Franco	Male	63		Policeman	IT
Gabriele	Male	69	Entrepreneur	Pensioner	IT
Maria Grazia	Female	75	Nurse	Pensioner	IT
Mirella	Female	74	National Train Service employee	Pensioner	IT
Teresa	Female	64	Banker	Pensioner	IT
Anna	Female	78	Office manager	Pensioner	UK
Deidre	Female	66	Charity worker	Pensioner	UK
Edward	Male	72	Civil servant	Pensioner	UK
Hilary	Female	70	School support worker	Pensioner	UK
Simon	Male	66	Optician	Pensioner	UK
Simone	Female	68	Teacher	Pensioner	UK
Teresa and Colin	Female and male	70 and 74	Teacher and IT	Pensioner	UK
Thomas	Male	71	Retail manager	Pensioner	UK

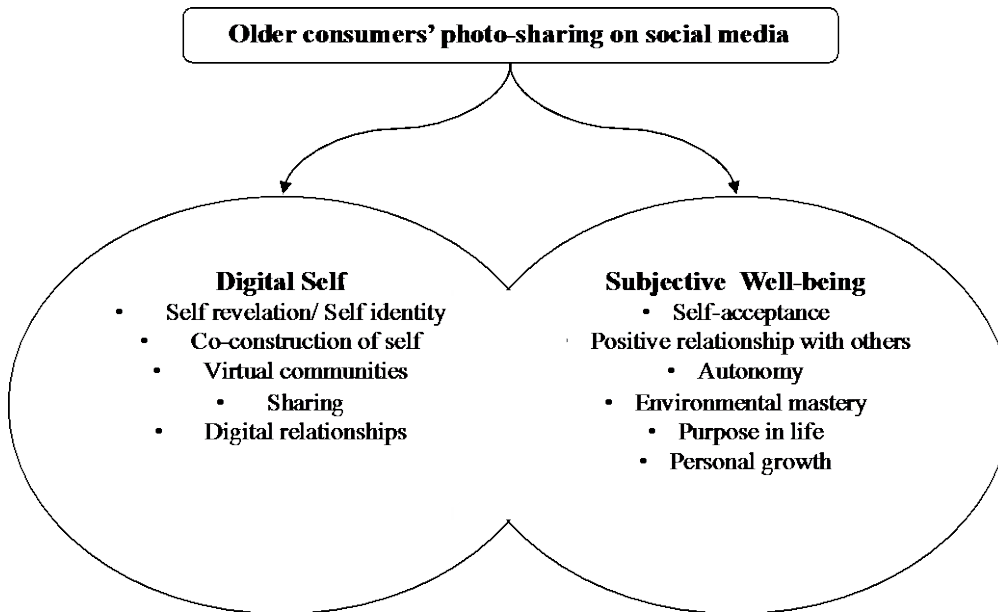
**Table 4: Illustrative coding examples**

<b>Digital self concepts (Belk, 2013)</b>	<b>Well-being dimensions (Ryff, 1989)</b>	<b>Illustrative coding examples</b>
Self-revelation; confessional content, physical self-reflection	Self-acceptance	“ <i>[Sharing photos] helps me communicate my personality</i> ” (Franco, 63, Interview, Italy)
Facilitator of intimacy with others, imagined community as a result of sharing, aggregate sense of self	Positive relations with others	“ <i>It’s a way of keeping in touch, it’s replaced the pen letters absolutely, communicating with people I don’t see</i> ’. (Deidre, 66, Interview, GB)
Presenting oneself to the world as individual wishes through construction of self with fewer imposed norms, disinhibition	Autonomy	“ <i>If I publish I publish, and if people like it good! Otherwise it doesn’t matter. I don’t get offended and I don’t expect a return</i> ” (Gabriele, 69, Interview, Italy)
Individuals with self-control but potential loss of control over others’ usage and sharing of content	Environmental mastery	“ <i>I ask people before I post a photo and send them an example, I don’t ask when I take the photo</i> ’ (Edward, 72, Interview, GB)
Objects as captured (pets, things, places, people) and shared in dispersed manner with interested others or just others give sense of direction and intention to those that capture and share.	Purpose in life	“ <i>Sunsets and nature in general represent for me re-birth. It’s what really gives me joy and happiness... The miracle of nature that seems to die and then it regenerates</i> ” (Gabriella, 73, Focus Group 2, Italy)
Digital self-development and digital as means for personal growth	Personal growth	‘ <i>I’ve learnt a bit about gypsy culture</i> ’ (Simon, 68, Interview, GB)

**Table 5. The enactment of Ryff's dimensions of well-being (1989) through photo-sharing on social media.**

<b>Dimensions of well-being (Ryff, 1989)</b>	<b>Enactment of those dimensions through photo-sharing on social media</b>
1. Self acceptance	The type of content shared of and about oneself, few selfies, focused subject matter both of the past and the present
2. Positive relations with others	The sharing of everyday life activities, photographs as immediate facilitators of relationships
3. Autonomy	Recognition but not reliance on 'likes' and comments, reflection on life enabled by photo sharing
4. Environmental mastery	Taking advantage of surroundings and technology for specific and desired personal communication outcomes
5. Purpose in life	Sharing photos with interested others heightens interest in own activities and direction
6. Personal growth	Learning new technical skills (use of platforms) and creative skills (taking photographs and also the activities photographed/shared), cognitive skills (thinking about all), as part of continued development

**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework – Building on Belk (2013) and Ryff (1989)**



**Figure 2: A proposed conceptualization of the influence of photo-sharing on subjective well-being**

