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Conceptual Framework on Social Media Addiction Culture among Baby Boomers

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper examines the rising culture of social media addiction among Baby Boomers and its relationship with increasing vulnerability to online scams. While younger generations have typically been the focus of digital addiction research, recent trends reveal a significant uptick in social media usage among older adults, especially on platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok and Instagram. Anchored in the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), this paper proposes a conceptual framework that explains how perceived usefulness and ease of use influence Boomers' adoption and continued engagement with social media. These drivers, while enabling digital inclusion, can also contribute to compulsive behaviour, particularly when intertwined with sociopsychological factors such as loneliness, low digital literacy, and high trust in online networks. As addiction deepens, so does susceptibility to scams, notably love scams, investment fraud, and phishing attacks issues increasingly prevalent in Malaysia. This paper employs a qualitative, theory-informed approach supported by artificial intelligence (AI) tools to strengthen rigor and transparency. A systematic search using Lit maps a scientific AI mapping tool was conducted to identify influential studies and thematic clusters. The final dataset comprised 19 articles published between 2020 and 2025. These studies were further analysed through qualitative content analysis, where manual coding supported by generative AI tools classified the literature into four themes: Baby Boomer context, social media addiction, sociopsychological factors, and effects of addiction. Insights from this human-AI synthesis informed the development of the extended TAM framework presented in this paper. Overall, the study highlights how social media culture among Malaysian Boomers has evolved beyond casual use into behaviour shaped by emotional needs and technological convenience. By integrating TAM with sociopsychological factors, this paper offers a nuanced lens for future empirical research and policy interventions aimed at strengthening digital safety for older adults.

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1. Introduction

In the digital age, social media has become an integral part of daily life, influencing the way individuals communicate, consume information, and engage with the world. Kaur and Sahdef, as quoted by Muhamad Faisal Ashaari *et al.*, [4] explained that it has become a necessity for all segments of society, especially during the COVID-19 era when everyone was forced to stay at home and use social media to connect with one another. Due to this, many discussions surrounding social media have focused on the younger generation. However, baby boomers are also not excluded when it comes to adaption to technology, especially when there is an increase in exhibiting patterns of compulsive social media usage.

The rise of this phenomenon challenges conventional stereotypes that associate digital dependency primarily with millennials and Gen Z. Baby Boomers are currently experiencing a different situation where more people are getting older than ever before. Their life expectancy is also extending dramatically [13]. Retirement age also extended from 55 years old to 60 years old (“Guide to Retirement Age in Malaysia” 2022). This is evidence that more elderly remain in the workforce at old age. The rise of digital operations in many organizations must also force this group to be digitally literate. However, the training in digital literacy is only applicable to related work tasks which contribute to the organization’s performance. This does not cover their literacy in handling daily life digital activities such as social media, information gathering, online financial practices and other digital-related activities.

Wide exposure to digital with sound literacy could risk baby boomers into potential digital crime, especially related to money. According to the Malay Mail [16], a total of 1,916 elderly people aged 61 years old and above became victim to online scams in 2024 with total losses of more than RM250 million. Some popular scams are related to calls, especially from government agencies, online love scams and cryptocurrency investment (“Lonely, Elderly among Those Vulnerable to Scams,” n.d.). The rise of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok etc., has encouraged baby boomers to continuously engage digitally, maintaining connections with family and friends, occupying leisure time, and sharing content to connect with the virtual community.

Social media are multifaceted, driven by both emotional needs and the necessity to stay connected in a rapidly digitizing world. This research seeks to examine the underlying factors contributing to social media addiction among baby boomers, the behavioural patterns associated with excessive use, and the potential social and psychological repercussions. By exploring this emerging digital culture, the study aims to provide valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities posed by social media in the lives of older adults.

1.1 Literature Review

1.1.1 Baby Boomer in Malaysia

The Baby Boomer generation, typically defined as individuals born between 1946 and 1964 [26], are the post-war generation. They watched the first man walk on the moon, lived through the assassination of JFK, experience the era of the Vietnam War and championed civil and women’s rights causes [19]. The baby boomers in Malaysia played a significant role in shaping Malaysia’s socio-economic landscape. As they transition into retirement, their behaviours, preferences, and challenges have become a focal point for researchers across various disciplines. Mustafa *et al.*, [19] also discuss that Malaysian Baby Boomers have unique formative experiences shaped by historical events, economic transitions, and cultural shifts. They had transition from traditional to digital practices and their experiences to digital literacy only occur later in their life. In Malaysia, the baby

boomers are increasing rapidly by 11% in 2024 compared to 5.5% 1970 with projection of 17.3% in 2040 [5]. Accordingly, Malaysia now is transitioning to an aged society with population aged 60-year-old and above. The demand of services especially healthcare, education and ICT is increasing with much information are now delivered via digital platform which is now more relevant to baby boomers to rely on it [14].

1.1.2 Social media addiction of Boomer

Many of the developers who designed the feeds of the most popular social networks have not hidden that they designed them to be addictive, that is, to keep users connected as long as possible (“Internet and Social Media Addiction: How Algorithms Fuel Harmful Habits” 2024). As boomers are only exposed to digital world later in their life, they are vulnerable to the social media platform algorithm that uses personalized strategy keeping the users stays connected. According to a study done by Sheldon *et al.*, [24], baby Boomers tend to use social media for diversion and entertainment. The study also said that these older users still prefer face-to-face interaction with friends and family above all other formats [24]. According to Blake [6], a survey was done to measure the connection between baby boomers and digital devices shows 40% of total 2000 respondents felt anxious or uncomfortable when they don’t have access to the device. The report continues mentioning 50% of total respondents checked their phone within an hour of waking up every day [6]. The key factor that influences social media addiction amongst baby boomers similar to the younger generation are related to the psychological vulnerabilities which include depression and anxiety [27]. Baby boomers who are experiencing loneliness or fear of missing out (FOMO) use the social media as coping mechanisms which them leads them to long-term dependence and associated to social media addiction [17].

1.1.3 Sociopsychological factors for addiction

A multitude of factors compels this cohort of Baby Boomers to engage with social media compulsively. The rationale has compelled them to seek alternatives for maintaining connections with the external environment. Consequently, social media serves as the preferred medium for occupying their leisure time. For Baby Boomers, Facebook and WhatsApp platforms mitigate boredom through direct interaction [33]. Furthermore, it enables them to sustain communication with family members and long-standing friends, particularly during pandemic circumstances or when physical mobility is restricted [18]. Simultaneously, emotional factors and self-esteem significantly influence psychological perspectives. This is evident when this group disseminates content on social media, anticipating engagement from the virtual community or adherence to prevailing trends. Particularly crucial when their health is compromised by the death of a life partner, thereby rendering social media the favoured platform for seeking a substitute partner [12]. Thus, this sociopsychological factor is significant as it has the capacity to alter the behaviour of Baby Boomers regarding excessive social media usage. In addition to these factors, other developments such as changes in modern social structures also contribute to the excessive use of social media among Baby Boomers [10]. The decline in face-to-face social interaction due to urbanization, retirement, and physical mobility constraints has resulted in social media becoming a primary channel for maintaining social connections and a sense of belonging [22]. Based on this perspective, the need for emotional validation and psychological support drives active engagement on digital platforms, where positive responses such as comments and reactions serve as emotional rewards [31]. Thus, when combined with life crises such as loneliness or health problems, social media serves as an emotional coping mechanism, therefore increasing the risk of addiction [32].

1.1.4 Effect from addiction

The addiction to social media among Baby Boomers can result in numerous adverse psychological, social, and physical health consequences. According to Skhirtladze [25] one of the most notable consequences is the disruption of mental health. This may result in chronic fatigue, diminished energy levels, and a decreased overall quality of life [11]. A recent study also confirmed that prolonged use can disrupt sleep patterns, cause chronic fatigue and reduce the quality of daily functioning [9]. Furthermore, social media addiction adversely impacts cognitive functions, including attention and problem-solving capabilities. Continuous exposure to diverse information on social media can lead to brain overstimulation, hindering critical thinking and decision-making abilities [8, 21,23]. Social media overstimulation can cause cognitive overload, hindering the brain's ability to process extensive information, which results in diminished attention and compromised decision-making capabilities social media addiction among Baby Boomers adversely impacts personal well-being and has ramifications for the larger social framework, particularly concerning healthcare and familial relationships. When examined socially, the preference for virtual interactions over face-to-face communication has the potential to weaken family relationships and real emotional support [7]. In the long term, this crisis can increase dependence on the health system and formal social support. Therefore, social media addiction needs to be understood as a comprehensive issue that has implications not only for the individual, but also for the family and society [29].

2. Methodology

This conceptual paper adopts a qualitative, theory-informed methodology supported by AI-assisted literature analysis and systematic content analysis. The approach strengthens the development of the extended TAM framework by ensuring comprehensive coverage, analytical rigour, and transparency. A comprehensive literature search was first conducted using Litmaps, an AI-based scientific mapping tool, to visualise citation relationships, identify influential works, and detect thematic clusters. Keywords such as “Baby Boomers,” “social media addiction,” “Technology Acceptance Model,” and “online scams” guided the search. The final pool of literature spanned 2020–2025, comprising 30 core articles, with the highest concentration published in 2025. This distribution reflects the increasing scholarly attention toward aging populations and digital risk in recent years.

Next, the articles were subjected to qualitative content analysis. Manual coding, supported by generative AI tools, was conducted to classify the literature into four major thematic categories aligned with the study’s conceptual structure. The first theme, Baby Boomer Context, consisted of three articles focusing on generational characteristics and digital transition. The second theme, Social Media Addiction, included two articles examining patterns of compulsive platform use. The third theme, Sociopsychological Factors, drew from three articles highlighting loneliness, trust, emotional needs, and social connection. The final theme, Effects of Addiction, comprised five articles addressing psychological, cognitive, and social consequences of prolonged social media use.

Insights from both AI-assisted synthesis and content analysis informed the development of the extended TAM framework, illustrating how technology acceptance progresses toward compulsive use and increased scam vulnerability. This combined human–AI approach enhances the methodological robustness and theoretical contribution of the study.

2.1 Extension of TAM and Framework Development

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), introduced by Davis (1989), is a robust theoretical framework used to understand users' acceptance and usage of technology. It posits that two primary factors Perceived Usefulness (PU) and Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU) determine an individual's attitude towards a technology, which then influences behavioral intention and actual use. PU refers to the belief that a technology will enhance performance, while PEOU reflects how effortless the technology is perceived to be.

In the context of Baby Boomers in Malaysia, TAM serves as a suitable model to explain their social media adoption. This group increasingly sees social media as useful for maintaining family ties, accessing news, and engaging in community discourse (PU). At the same time, platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook offer relatively intuitive interfaces, making them easy to navigate even with limited prior exposure (PEOU).

However, traditional TAM does not account for prolonged or excessive usage that leads to addiction. Therefore, this paper extends TAM by incorporating sociopsychological factors such as loneliness, emotional dependency, and low digital literacy factors that are highly relevant for Malaysian Boomers (Figure 1). These mediating variables explain how initial acceptance of social media can evolve into compulsive engagement, increasing susceptibility to digital harms such as scams. This extension of TAM offers a more comprehensive framework to examine not just the adoption but the unintended negative consequences of technology use among older adults.

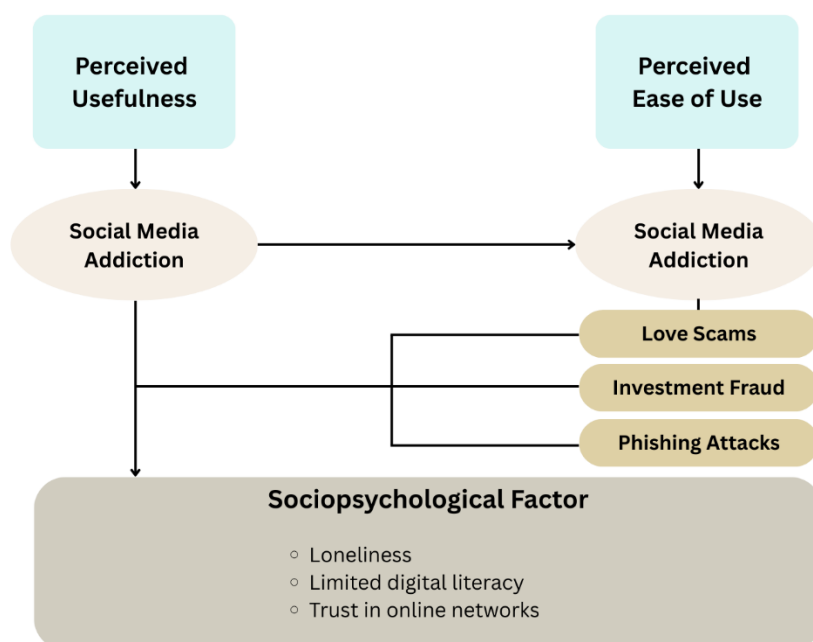


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework on social media addiction culture among baby boomers

3. Implications and Recommendations

The findings and proposed framework of this conceptual study present several important implications across academic, practical, and policy domains. As Baby Boomers in Malaysia increasingly adopt social media, understanding the broader impact of their digital behavior becomes crucial for managing both opportunities and risks in an aging yet connected society.

This study broadens the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) by integrating sociopsychological factors such as loneliness, trust, emotional needs, and digital literacy. These additions provide a more complete lens through which to understand digital engagement among older adults, particularly how acceptance can evolve into dependency or addiction.

The conceptual framework offers clear pathways for empirical investigation. Future researchers can operationalize the extended TAM constructs and test their relationships through surveys, focus groups, or mixed-methods designs involving Baby Boomers in Malaysia and similar contexts.

By linking social media addiction to susceptibility to online scams, the paper contributes to emerging literature on the technology risk nexus among vulnerable populations. It calls for interdisciplinary inquiry involving communication studies, gerontology, cybersecurity, and social psychology.

This framework emphasizes cultural context particularly Malaysian norms around family, respect for authority, collectivism, and digital trust. As such, the study can guide comparative international research on aging populations and digital risk in Asia and beyond.

To address the growing issue of social media addiction and online scam vulnerability among Baby Boomers, it is essential to develop digital literacy programs that are age-appropriate, culturally relevant, and practically oriented. These programs should move beyond basic technical free workshop to include scam awareness, safe online behaviour, and content verification skills. Additional to that, these workshops need to be delivered in multiple languages Bahasa Malaysia, Tamil, Mandarin, and English to cater for all races in Malaysia. Furthermore, these initiatives should be embedded in familiar community settings such as senior citizen clubs, religious institutions, and local council centers. These media education able to enhance baby boomers in techno-savvy and improved the well-being and quality of life [15].

As highlighted by Naha [20], public awareness campaigns using relatable case studies and clear messaging through television, radio, and social media can play a significant role in normalizing conversations around digital risks while encouraging reporting of scams without stigma.

Venkitaraman [30] emphasize the important role of digital platforms and policymakers safeguarding vulnerable baby boomers. Therefore, social media companies should be encouraged or regulated to implement safety features such as scam detection prompts, digital well-being notifications, and simplified privacy settings tailored for older users. On top that, Government bodies such as the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) and CyberSecurity Malaysia can support this through policy guidelines and inter-agency coordination. Collectively, these efforts aim to ensure that Baby Boomers are not only included in Malaysia's digital transformation but also protected from its unintended harms.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, social addiction among baby boomers reflects a complex interplay between generational identity, technological adaptation, and evolving social needs in Malaysia. While this cohort did not grow up with digital platforms, many have embraced them later in life as tools for connection, entertainment, and information. The reliance on social media and online communities often stems from a desire to maintain relevance, reduce isolation, and engage with broader networks, yet it can also lead to patterns of overuse that mirror addictive behaviors. Unlike younger generations, baby boomers may experience heightened vulnerability due to retirement, reduced physical mobility, or limited face-to-face interactions, making digital spaces a primary source of social fulfillment. Addressing this issue requires balanced strategies that encourage healthy digital engagement while promoting offline activities, intergenerational dialogue, and community

participation. Ultimately, understanding baby boomer social addiction highlights the importance of fostering meaningful connections without dependence on virtual platforms.

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