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The Use of Social Media in Enacting Emotional Care to Elderly People During the Covid-19 Pandemic: Empirical Evidence from Rwanda

Albert Irambeshya, 2023

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Abstract

The paper examines the relevance of social media use by older people in their emotional care relationships with their kin living apart from them. Older people's use of social media is still less visible in Rwanda and overlooked by researchers. The folk narrative in Rwanda considers social media usage a youth phenomenon. This paper goes beyond this consideration and shows how social media plays a significant role in care provision during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. The research uses in-depth interviews of older people and their children to highlight social media's usefulness in facilitating daily interactions. Since children could not travel to the village to visit their parents, social media allowed them to exchange with their older parents frequently calls and chats, which contained comforting words necessary for reducing the emotional stress created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Even if older people face the challenge of access to smartphones and digital literacy, using social media in enacting emotional care for older people proves to be indispensable in creating solid bonds, belongingness, and attachment to them.

Key Words: COVID-19, Digital Media, Emotional Care, Family Interactions, Older People, Rwanda.

Résumé

Cet article examine l'importance de l'utilisation des médias sociaux par les personnes âgées dans leurs relations affectives avec leurs proches vivant à l'écart. L'utilisation des médias sociaux par les personnes âgées est encore moins visible au Rwanda et négligée par les chercheurs. Le récit populaire au Rwanda considère l'utilisation des médias sociaux comme un phénomène de jeunesse. Cet article va au-delà de cette considération et montre comment les médias sociaux jouent un rôle important dans la fourniture de soins pendant des crises comme la pandémie de COVID-19. La recherche s'appuie sur des entretiens approfondis avec des personnes âgées et leurs enfants pour mettre en évidence l'utilité des médias sociaux dans la facilitation des interactions quotidiennes. Comme les enfants ne pouvaient pas se rendre au village pour rendre visite à leurs parents, les médias sociaux leur ont permis d'échanger fréquemment des appels et des discussions avec leurs parents âgés, qui contenaient des mots réconfortants nécessaires pour réduire le stress émotionnel créé par la pandémie de COVID-19. Même si les personnes âgées sont confrontées au défi de l'accès aux smartphones et de la culture numérique, l'utilisation des médias sociaux dans le cadre de la prise en charge émotionnelle des personnes âgées s'avère indispensable pour créer des liens solides, un sentiment d'appartenance et un attachement à leur égard.

Mots clés: COVID-19, Médias Numériques, Soins Emotionnels, Interactions Familiales, Personnes Agées, Rwanda.

Content

The Use of Social Media in Enacting Emotional Care to Elderly People During the Covid-19 Pandemic: Empirical Evidence from Rwanda

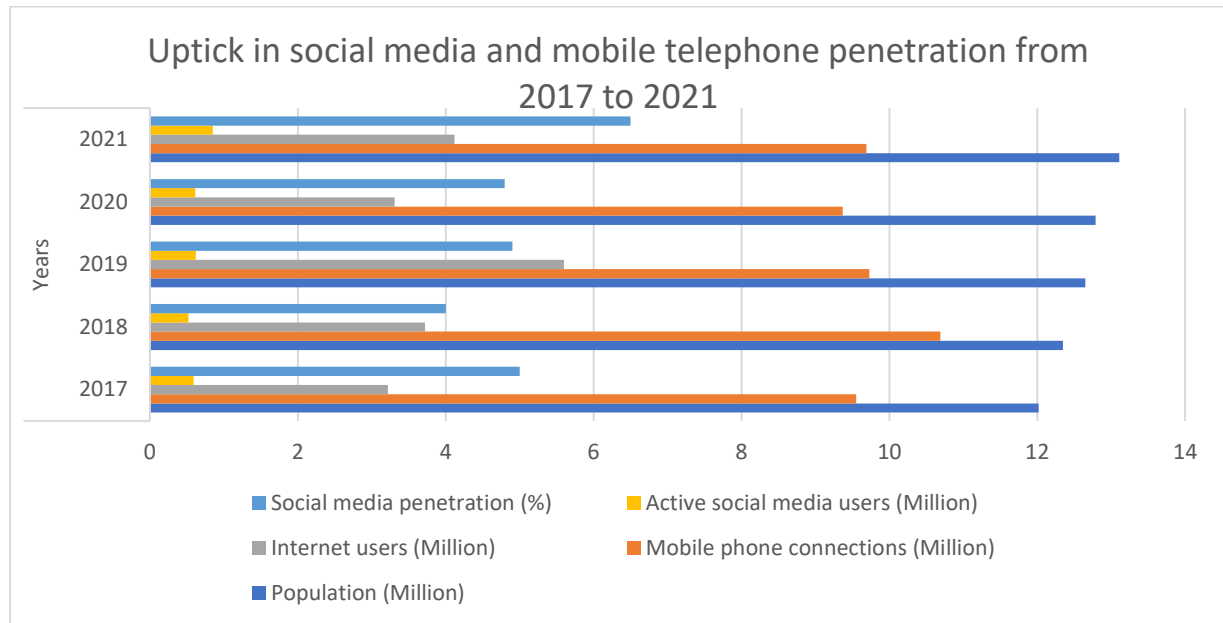**Albert Irambeshya**

1 Introduction

Emotional caring for older people and maintaining social relations are essential for successful ageing (Leist 2013:378). One of the tools that support these relationships is social media. Social media are among the means that people use to share information, and they are becoming part of daily life routine (Barrus 2010:51). Social media boost social relations that are a vital element in the life of every human being and especially in the life of elderly people. Social media facilitate interactions between individuals who are in different locations (Ginsburg et al. 2016:6). While the use of social media in Africa is considered a youth phenomenon by the popular discourse (Hagenimana 2017:3), elderly people are now embarking on the use of social media in their daily communication with distant kin and friends (Ephraim 2013:5). The use of social media is becoming more important in the daily interactions of elderly people especially because a growing number of them are living alone. In Rwanda, the use of modern technology is becoming an instrument of daily interactions. Furthermore, with the wave of technological advancements, the government of Rwanda considers their use in all sectors as indispensable for the social and economic transformation of the country (Watkins and Verma 2008:9). The use of social media aligns with this perspective and social media are thus emerging as important tools for enhancing interactions and caring practices between people from different places.

Caring relationships through social media between distant kin and friends become more meaningful in the period of crisis. Worldwide, social media use increased during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic since people were forced to stay at home, and with the restrictions of movement as a responsive measure to curb the spread of COVID-19. The outbreak of COVID-19 created a situation of uncertainty and anxiety among people since they didn't know how long it would take to get rid of it (Marzouki et al. 2021:3). This situation of crisis makes people reconfigure their form of sociability and embrace a new way of interacting among them (Moura et al. 2020:16). At this critical moment of the pandemic, social media have become essential in connecting distant people by facilitating their caring practices.

In Rwanda, since the identification of the first case of COVID-19 in March 2020, different response measures were adopted to curb the spread of the pandemic, and prominent among these measures was a total lockdown where all social and economic activities closed (Bizoza and Sibomana 2020:8). The ban on the movement made the visits between people and social gatherings impossible. Indeed, it was no longer possible to meet face to face. During that period, social media served as an effective tool to enhance daily interactions between grown-up children in the city and their parents in rural areas in Rwanda. Data on the website of Digital 2021 Rwanda indicate an increase of 39% in social media users in Rwanda between 2020 and 2021 (Global Digital Overview 2021:84). It is important to highlight that the use of social media is not a new phenomenon in Rwanda. It has existed since 1998 when the mobile telephone was first introduced. During this period, the usage of social media was a privilege of the elite urban dwellers since the mobile telephone was very expensive for modest people (Donner 2006:5). With the aim of the Rwandan government to promote the use of modern technology and information communication for the development of the country, the mobile telephone penetration has reached all regions of the country and an optical fibre infrastructure was connected throughout the country (GoR 2013:13). This has led to an increase in the number of mobile telephone users (MINICT 2017:49). Since the President of Rwanda launched the smartphone campaign in 2019, there has been an increase in social media users. This campaign that the Rwandan president initiated in partnership with telecommunication companies aimed at connecting rural households by means of smartphones (Mwai 2019:1). Furthermore, since the Rwandan government adopted e-governance in 2015, the majority of government services have been accessible through an e-service portal known as "Irembo", which means "gateway". People are adjusting to the new digitalization of services using smartphones (Twizeyimana, Larsson, and Gronlund, 2018:19). The figure below provides a picture of mobile telephone penetration and social media use in Rwanda from 2017 to 2021.

Figure 1: Mobile telephone penetration and social media use in Rwanda

Source: Global Overview Report: Digital Rwanda from 2017 to 2021 available on https://wearesocial-cn.s3.cn-north-1.amazonaws.com.cn/common/digital2021/digital-2021-global.pdf

Although the Internet and social media use appears to oscillate, we still see a gradual uptick in both access to the Internet and social media use over time. This is due to the above-mentioned ongoing governmental efforts to use modern technology of communication in service delivery and to ensure smartphones and Internet penetration throughout the country. Some of these changes are driven by COVID-19 contact restrictions measures.

The numerous social media platforms that are commonly used in Rwanda include Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Skip, Twitter, Google+, and WhatsApp. However, WhatsApp appears to be the most commonly and widely used by all categories of people in Rwanda (Ntakirutimana and Andala 2019: 6).

Despite the emergence of different social media platforms in Rwanda, their use by elderly people in their daily caring relationships is still less visible and has not yet attracted the attention of researchers. In addition, the role of social media in enacting care is under-researched. The popular discourse in Rwanda associates the use of social media platforms with the youth. This paper transcends this popular consideration and fills the gaps in research by exploring the relevance of social media in care relationships of the daily life of elderly people. Drawing on the narratives of both the old people and their children, the paper depicts the usefulness of social media in strengthening social ties and ensuring closeness between grown-up children and their elderly parents despite the geographical distance between them.

The article analyses the role of social media in enacting emotional care to elderly people, especially in the period of COVID-19 and the first consequent lockdown from 21 March 2020 to 3 May 2020. It further elaborates on the elderly people's use of social media in their caring relations and the challenges they encounter in the use of this new technology for communication. In addition, this paper discusses the content of interactions on social media that convey emotional care. It does not focus on the technological aspect of social media, it rather focuses on the relational aspect. Therefore, it explores how social media serve as an instrument that helps in channelling the provision of care to elderly people living in rural areas by their children living in the city.

The paper argues that during a period of crisis such as the COVID-19-related lockdown in Rwanda, elderly care does not die out, it is rather transformed and reconfigured to adapt to the situation of crisis using social media to facilitate channelling caring practices.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows: firstly, I present the background of social media use; secondly, I describe the methods used in data collection; thirdly, I explain the concept of social media; and lastly, I present the empirical materials on the role of social media in enacting emotional care.

2 Data Collection Methods

This paper draws on data collected during fieldwork in Rwanda from December 2020 to March 2021. It is part of my PhD research project on the social protection of elderly people in Rwanda. Interviews were conducted in Karongi[1] District. The choice of this district was motivated by the fact that it is among the Rwandan districts with a high proportion of elderly people: 5.6% of the total population against the national proportion of 4.9% (NISR 2015:34). In addition to that, during my previous visits to the District, I have observed some elderly people in need of proximate care as their children were living far from them. Older people living alone expressed concern about fewer visits from their children. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic worsened the situation by limiting social contact. Older people participants in this study were selected purposively on the criteria of having a grown-up child living in Kigali[2] city and that of having access to a smartphone. In identifying those with smartphones, neighbours played a crucial role. As in the village people know one another, it is easier for them to know those with a smartphone. After identifying older people with smartphones, there followed the step of knowing whether they used social media or not. In this process, fourteen older people confirmed the use of social media and agreed to participate in this study.

This paper does not explore all social media platforms that are used in Rwanda, it is rather limited to WhatsApp which is the most commonly used. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected elderly people and then a list of their children living in the city of Kigali

[1] Karongi is the name of one of the 30 districts that compose the Rwandan Republic. It is located in Western Province.

[2] Kigali is the capital city of Rwanda.

was established along with their telephone numbers and their locations in Kigali City. To connect with grown-up children living in the city of Kigali, and to get the completeness of the narrative of elderly people as well as to explore the ongoing caring relationships between old parents and their children, an extended case study method was used (Tavory and Timmermans 2009:247). An appointment for an interview with grown-up children in the city was made on the telephone one by one where the researcher and the interviewee agreed upon the day, time, and venue of the interview. Depending on their convenience, I met children in the city either at their homes or at their workplaces. Interviews consisted of their experience of care relationships at a distance through social media during COVID-19 lockdowns in Rwanda.

3 Understanding the Key Concepts

This part discusses the concept of care, elderly people, and social media. It further explores the relatedness between social media and elderly care. However, before discussing the relatedness between the use of social media and elderly care, it is essential to understand the meaning of the key concepts.

3.1 Conceptualising Care

An anthropological view of care indicates that care is a broad field that extends beyond the private sphere to include institutional care practice. Care emerges as a notion that transcends categorical boundaries: moving between different institutions and actors, times, and places, it connects its recipients and its providers and crosses private and institutional settings (Alber & Drotbohm, 2015:10)*.* Care is viewed as a social and cultural practice and therefore a relational phenomenon (van Eeuwijk, 2014:34). In a broad sense that allows apprehending different aspects of care, it is regarded as an activity, a service, and a social relation and emotions, which can be summarized in 'caring about' and 'caring for' (Alber & Drotbohm, 2015:2). Care may take different forms, it can be an activity, a mode of social belonging or a sense of relatedness and belonging. In order to conceptualise distinctions between activities that are labelled as care, Alber and Drotbohm (2015:1) argue that an interpretation of care should be informed by three different concepts of work, kinship, and life-course. In the same perspective, Sjaak Van der Geest provides a definition that captures the meaning of care that includes activities that are considered as care. He defines care as follows:

> "Care is an assemblage of emotional and practical performance relating to the manifestation of concern, dedication, and attachment on one hand, and carrying out activities for others who, for physical or other reasons, cannot do so" (Van der Geest 2002:8)*.*

Reflecting on the above definition, one can say that care is an activity that is carried out for different reasons whether physical or emotional. However, this definition does not exhaust the extent of emotional care. To reflect on emotional care, one should bear in mind that the concept of emotional care encompasses a variety of activities. According to Atoum and Al-Shoboul (2018:8), emotional care includes a range of behaviours like empathy, comfort, compassionate participation, caring, encouragement towards others, love that appears in caring attention,

valued feelings, and dependable bonds of friendship. Furthermore, emotional care can be presented orally or non-verbally, including listening, empathy and reassurance (Atoum and Al-Shoboul 2018:8). Therefore, in this paper, emotional care is understood in the way that takes into consideration the different behaviours that Atoum and Al-Shoboul describe. What all these studies do is to promote the positive image associated with social media in delivering emotional care. However, the fact that social media cannot replace in-person care is neglected.

3.2 Defining Elderly People

There is no unanimous definition of elderly people. Most definitions of elderly people have been made in relation to the age of eligibility for state pension benefits, which is the retirement age. Nina Glasgow and Helen Berry define the elderly with reference to the age of retirement in the USA and consider elderly people as a group of people aged 65 and above. They consider this age as the upper line of the lifespan where a person with this age is referred to as older, elderly or elder person. They categorise elderly people into three groups based on chronological age as follows: (a) young old: those in the age group between 65 and 74 years; (b) the old: in the age group between 75 and 84 years, and (c) the oldest: those aged 85 and above (Glasgow and Berry 2013:5). The chronological age is considered as a conventional reference to determine the age for which people would be able to benefit from the national pension scheme and other related benefits (Orimo et al. 2006:151).

However, Velkoff and Kowal (2007:10) do not agree with the fact of defining elderly people based on chronological age only. They criticise the chronological age which is associated with the age for a person to receive pension benefits, as not reflecting the African reality where the life expectancy is still low and the pension system coverage very narrow. Furthermore, Manful et al. (2015:221) highlight that chronological age varies from one context to another. For instance, in countries where the retirement age is fixed at 65 years, the elderly is whoever aged 65 and above; while in countries where retirement is at 60 years, any individual aged 60 and above is considered elderly.

It should be noted that defining elderly people by the age of retirement seems to exclude those who are not eligible for retirement benefits. Thus, defining elderly people based on chronological age may be misleading. According to Bond and Coleman (1990:16), elderly people are defined by taking into consideration the social and cultural context and variability in earlier life which have influenced an individual's later life. In the same perspective, Apt (1996:11) argues that in defining the elderly in the African context, one has to bear in mind that chronological age is not a good measurement of one's age. She further added that in many Sub-Saharan African countries, ageing is considered through different life stages to which social roles and responsibilities are assigned. She further added that an elderly person is considered a mature person in the phase of parenthood, a person of advanced age in the phase of grandparenthood and a completed advanced age in the phase of great grandparenthood. Similarly, Cohen and Menken (2006:13) affirm that chronological age is not known in the definition of elderly people in Sub-Saharan Africa. According to them, elderly people are defined based on their physical traits such as grey hairs, wrinkles, and frailty; based on their reproductive history, or based on the roles they play or have played in society or their family.

In this paper, elderly people should be understood by drawing on the definition provided by Cohen and Menken, since it reflects the reality of African societies and especially in Rwanda where the system of systematic registration of births did not exist in the past years. Hence, a number of elderly people do not know their exact date of birth. Thus, in this article, care for elderly people is understood as any manifestation of empathy, concern, dedication, and attachment through social media to any person defined not only by his age but also by his social status as old. Moreover, elderly participants in this study do not consider themselves as old based on their chronological age; they instead perceive themselves as old based on their physical appearance, reduced physical strength, and grandparenthood.

3.3 Defining Social Media

It is not easy to provide a definition that encompasses all the tools used as social media. In their research on the impact of social media interventions among informal caregivers, Cherak et al. (2020:2) define social media as websites and applications that allow users to create and share information or to participate in social networking. According to Coto et al. (2017:67), social media are Internet-based applications that connect people - users of those applications - in an online environment. Other researchers such as Trottier and Fuchs (2014:5), drawing on the social theory approach, define social media with reference to three forms of sociality, namely a) cognition, b) communication, and c) cooperation. Each of these forms of sociality relates to a specific meaning. For instance, cognition relates to shared knowledge, and this is the case with social media like newspapers and websites. On the other side, communication relates to social relations and interactions as is the case of emails, chats, or discussion forums. On its part, cooperation aligns with interdependent acts for communal goals including the case of social media like Wikipedia and Facebook. Trottier and Fuchs (2014:7) argue that defining social media depends not only on the theoretical stance but also on the analytical concern.

In their research on helping others use social media, Ginsburg et al. (2016:4) use the concept of social networking sites (SNS) to express social media which they define as online products that enable people to build and maintain relationships among them. This concept of SNS is also referred to by Trottier and Fuchs (2014:3) who describe it as cooperation technologies that allow people to establish new friendship relationships and to maintain the existing ones.

The relatedness between all these definitions is that social media enable connection and interactions among people. It should be noted that with the advancement in communication technology in the ever-changing world, social media have become a means of communication that helps people to exchange their social life throughout the world. Since social interactions are inherent to human beings and their well-being, social media are thus a vital element in the daily lives of individuals. According to Batty and Meaux (2013:97), the psychological and physiological well-being of an individual depends potentially on their interactions with peers throughout their life course. Therefore, social media are tools that facilitate social interactions among human beings. Trottier and Fuchs (2014:5) ascertain that when individuals establish sustained connections on social media, they produce social bonds and feelings of belonging and togetherness.

Significantly, social media help reduce the geographical distance between people and allow them to interact as if they are closer to one another when traditional face-to-face communication becomes impossible (Orben and Dunbar 2017:490). It should be pointed out that in the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face communication or social presence was challenged by the pandemic's related responsive measures adopted by governments across the globe, Hence the shift to social media to care for elderly people at a distance.

3.4 Social Media's Relatedness to Elderly Care

In order to understand the relationship between social media and elderly care, it is important to approach care as a relational practice between people and their interactions on social media (Ahlin 2018:87). In the argument of Drotbohm (2015:96), care transforms an individual subject into a relational subject, a member of society. Care is thus a matter of connecting not only individuals and groups but also societies. At this point, social media appear to be an important element of enhancing the relational aspect of the individual. Social media have a great contribution in improving the interpersonal relationships of elderly people (Zaine et al. 2019: 2). According to Haris et al. (2014:4), elderly people face a number of psychological challenges because of loss of interactions or declining communication with others. Social media appear to be a solution to this problem as they connect elderly people to their kin and their community. Social media enable people to be closer to one another and increase their social interactions. In the argument of Quinn (2018:6), social media use by elderly people goes beyond social encounters to incorporate other aspects of their everyday lives as well as their well-being. Through the use of social media, elderly people express their wish for social integration as well as the improvement of their well-being which is correlated with successful ageing. From this perspective, as explained by Cornwell et al. (2008:3), social media reduce elderly people's vulnerability to social isolation which leads to depression and poor health conditions. With social media, elderly people maintain connections with distant kin and friends. Ahlin (2018:88) sums this up by arguing that all those forms of digital connections constitute a complex practice of care. This is the kind of family care that is practised at a distance. In the ever-changing world where family members live in different locations and leave the elderly alone, social media play a significant role in elderly care.

In addition, Waycott et al. (2014:4167), in their study on captioned photographs in psychosocial age care, realised that the use of social media in communication with elderly people by care providers contributed a lot to increasing and enhancing psychological care.

4 Elderly People's Use of Social Media in Rwanda

The Government of Rwanda has aligned its socio-economic development to the usage of Information Communication Technology (ICT) in all sectors of the life of the country. From this perspective, it has invested in IT infrastructure that has created an ICT use-enabling environment (GoR 2015:25). The ICT development in Rwanda has resulted in the proliferation of social media users throughout the country.

Despite the proliferation of social media use, the popular discourse in Rwanda views elderly people as those born before the computer (BBC), and hence they are considered illiterate in using digital communication technologies, just as the same discourse regards the young

generation as "digital native", a description of those who were born during the modern communication technology era (Uwizeyimana 2018:122). However, this distinction overlooks the vision of the Rwandan government particularly through its Economic Development and Poverty Reduction Strategy (EDPRS), which envisions an economy based on Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Consequently, the Rwandan population is increasingly using modern communications technology including social media. The EDPRS highlights the commitment of the Rwandan Government to use ICT in all sectors of the life of the country as follows:

> "To promote investment in, and the growth of the information and communication technologies Industry, efforts will be made to widen access to ICT among the population [....]. To this end, the numbers of telecentres have to be substantially increased and the cost of connecting to a telecommunication network reduced" (GoR 2020:23).

This commitment has allowed the access, penetration and use of ICT in various segments of society, particularly in rural areas. Hence, for instance, up to January 2021, out of 13.11 million of the Rwandan population, 9.69 million have access to a mobile telephone. Out of these 9.69, 4.12 million are connected to the Internet and 850 thousand regularly use social media. Furthermore, 17.5% of the Rwandan population live in urban areas while 82.5% live in rural areas (Global Digital Overview 2021:1).

During my fieldwork in Rwanda, elderly people in rural areas as well as their grown-up children living in the city whom I talked to unanimously confirmed the use of WhatsApp in their daily interactions. One of the elderly people said:

> "In this village, we have not been left behind in using modern technology. I am now able to communicate daily with my children through WhatsApp. I can call them or use text message, voice message, and video message". (Old man, 72 years old, December 7, 2020, in Karongi district).

This idea was also shared with urban dwellers as one of them put it:

> "I use WhatsApp to interact with my father, I can contact him any time through a call, a text or a voice message, or a video call and we exchange news". (A man, 38 years old, February 17, 2021, in Kigali).

It is evident that communication on WhatsApp, one of the popular social media for sharing information, takes various forms. According to Dey and Parabhoi (2017:906), social networking platforms like WhatsApp offer a variety of features such as group chatting, video calling, and voice calling. It is this variety of features and their user-friendliness that attract elderly people and make them use the WhatsApp platform in their relationships with their family members.

Furthermore, the various ways of exchanging messages through WhatsApp allow the users to store the messages on their devices and keep looking at them when needed. This was confirmed by one of the elderly people interviewed:

> "The WhatsApp application is helpful. It allows one to store the exchanged communication on the device and consult it later when needed. And this option is not possible for calls other than on WhatsApp". (Old man, 68 years old, December 12, 2020, in Karongi district).

This elderly person enjoys how communication details on WhatsApp are automatically kept on the device used. Voice messages can be retrieved for other purposes. Indeed, this is not possible with a normal telephone call because a telephone conversation is not stored automatically on the telephone unless one activates the recording option.

Another motivating factor that attracts elderly people and makes them use WhatsApp is its low cost. According to the informants, WhatsApp use is less costly than other social media platforms[3]. The testimony of an elderly person goes as follows:

> "WhatsApp is not expensive. When I have Internet data worth 200Frw[4] (ca. 0.20 EURO), I can chat with my children and friends the entire day. This is impossible with other social media. This amount cannot allow you to chat the whole day" (Old woman, 66 years old, December 7, 2020, in Karongi district).

This idea of affordability is shared by many other WhatsApp users in Rwanda. It is worth mentioning that telecommunication operators in Rwanda offer a variety of Internet services to their customers, hence offering Internet users the possibility to buy Internet bundles in accordance with their financial capabilities (Kwizera et al. 2018:70).

The ease of use and the low cost of using WhatsApp makes it the most popular messaging platform in Rwanda. In my conversation with elderly people, some of them did not know whether there existed other platforms that could be used in their interpersonal communication. This is partly because they have been using only WhatsApp since they started communicating on social media.

Drawing on the above narratives, one can argue that social media use by elderly people demonstrates their adaptation to emerging technologies of communication that allow them to be closer to their kin. Certainly, the use of social media by elderly people is not without challenges, and section 6 discusses these challenges in detail.

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[3] Although, elderly people contend that WhatsApp is among the cheapest social media platforms, the big telecommunications company in Rwanda "MTN" has launched a free Facebook application for its subscribers, see https://www.balancingact-africa.com/news/telecoms-en/18964 last accessed 10.09. 2021.

[4] Frw("Franc Rwandais") is the national currency of Rwanda.

5 The Role of Social Media in Enacting Emotional Care to Elderly People During COVID-19

Elderly people need emotional support all the time. However, this need for support becomes more acute during the time of crisis like the one caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, emotional care through the co-presence of children was challenged by rural-urban migration where children had to travel regularly to meet their aged parents in rural areas. This kind of care is even more challenged by the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic because people are not able to travel to the places where their parents live. In fact, crises create a particular situation of exposure to the risk of emotional depression, which requires the other's intervention or supporting actions. From this perspective, Pejner et al. (2012:2) suggest that this emotional care should come from a family member or a person with whom the care-receiver has a relationship or trusts. In this section, I explore how social media help to enact emotional care to elderly people during a period of crisis through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic.

When the first case of COVID-19 was identified in Rwanda on 14th March 2021, the Government of Rwanda, in an effort to curb the spread of the pandemic throughout the country, adopted a total lockdown over the whole Rwandan territory (Bizoza and Sibomana 2020:8). At this moment, emotional support was more than needed by elderly people who live far away from their children. In the argument of Thelen (2015:500), the emotional aspect of care is very important for exchanging relationships among kin. It is thus through social media that emotional care was channelled to elderly people living in rural areas. It is worth mentioning that before the advent of digital communication, the popular discourse in Rwanda indicates the availability of other means of communication. These included, among others, sending a letter or a greetings card through buses plying given routes in any region, sending greetings, or dedicating a song on the radio. At present times, with the rapid digitalization in Rwanda, social media help to enact emotional care through an early good morning call or message, frequent interactions as well as comforting messages.

5.1 Early Morning Call or Message and Emotional Care
Participants in the study indicated that an early morning call or message is a sign of expressing attachment to one another. One of the participants expressed his feelings when he received a morning call as follows:

> "An early morning call from my son brings me a feeling of closeness to him, it shows me how much I am meaningful to him and how much he thinks about me". (Old man, 73 years old, December 12, 2020, in Karongi district).

Another informant concurred:

> "Every morning I receive a WhatsApp call or a text message from my daughter or my son living in the city. They ask me about how I spent the night and whether I got up in the morning peacefully. This makes me feel that I am not alone, to feel that, even if

I am not with them, they care about me". (Old woman, 66 years old, December 17, 2020, in Karongi district).

During the COVID-19 lockdown in Rwanda, receiving early morning calls became a routine practice, and not receiving any could be considered as something unusual which could be interpreted by elderly parents in the rural area as indicating that some misfortune has befallen their children in the city. One of the informants put it this way:

"I used to receive regular calls in the morning from my daughter. One day, I did not receive any and even when I sent her a text message, she did not respond. I started panicking and wondering whether something bad had happened to her. Fortunately, she called me around mid-day and told me that she had a power cut and was not able to charge her mobile telephone". (Old woman, aged 68, December 9, 2020, in Karongi district).

Drawing on the above narratives, it is evident that regular calls from children to their elderly parents constitute an emotional care practice. They express affection and attachment to them and create a feeling of closeness despite the geographical distance between them. It should be mentioned that during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic, it was not only the geographical distance that prevented face-to-face interactions between grown-up children in the city and their elderly parents in the rural areas, but also the administrative measures adopted by the government of Rwanda to curb the spread of the pandemic. In this time, proximity care to elderly people through the co-presence of their children was not possible, and hence the shift to the use of social media became necessary in order to maintain and strengthen social interactions. It was thus a good opportunity for grown-up children to express affection and attachment to their elderly people who were in rural areas.

On the part of children living in the city, the everyday contact with their parents living in rural areas through WhatsApp assured them that their parents were safe and did not have any pressing problems. One of them put it this way:

"In this period of COVID-19, I am worried about the life of my mother. You know COVID-19 is dangerous for an elderly person and that is why I have to ask her every day whether she feels well and she does not have any health-related problem". (A man, 43 years old, February 19, 2021, Kigali).

Another informant said:

"I cannot start any activity without talking to my parents and knowing about their situation. This makes me assured that they are doing well and enables me to spend the day in a good mood". (A woman, 28 years old, February 22, 2021, Kigali).

It is important to note that not only children were worried about the life of their parents during the period of COVID-19 lockdown, but also parents expressed concern about their children living

in the city. This was especially due to the popular narrative attributed to the spread of COVID-19 in urban areas. An informant indicated:

> "It was my duty to call my mother early in the morning not only to greet her, but also to inform her that I was safe, I did not have any disease. She used to think that COVID-19 was for urban dwellers, and that was the reason why she worried a lot about me. It was thus my duty to inform her about my life situation every day". (A woman, 45 years old, February 20, 2021, Kigali).

The fact that rural people think that COVID-19 is an 'urban disease' reminds me of what people whispered about this pandemic at the time I was conducting the fieldwork. For the rural population, urban dwellers were responsible for bringing the COVID-19 virus to the country because they were the ones who could afford to travel to areas where the disease was rife. For this reason, according to the rural population, the COVID-19 disease is an urban phenomenon.

In any case, the COVID-19 pandemic has created a situation of concern among the Rwandan population. Therefore, showing affection and attachment to the elderly was an ultimate necessity. From this perspective, talking to old parents helps not only grown-up children in the city to express their strong attachment to their relatives, but also to have information about their well-being and health situation. In this way, early morning is an appropriate moment to know whether nothing bad happened to their elderly parents during the night. It is important to note that in Rwandan culture, greeting someone in the morning is popularly considered as a wish of good luck for the new day. In fact, the Kinyarwanda[5] saying "Mwaramutse iraguma" literally translates as "a greeting in the morning is a wish of blessing". Early morning calls or text messages are very meaningful in the interactions between grown-up children and their old parents. They not only display an attachment to cultural values, but also express care deployed through a feeling of togetherness, which is crucial in times of crisis.

5.2 Frequency of Calls and Chats and Emotional Care

In the period of lockdown in Rwanda, the frequency of calls and chats was another means of enacting emotional care for elderly people. During my fieldwork, informants reported that their interactions increased during the period of lockdown. This is explained by the fact that under lockdown conditions, people had enough time to talk to one another or to exchange chats since they were not working. Frequent interactions helped grown-up children living in the city to keep in touch with their parents, keep them company, and hence prevent them from being lonely. An informant said:

> "I chatted frequently with my father during lockdown. I had time to do so because I had to remain at home, and this was an appropriate time to keep my father busy by

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[5] Kinyarwanda is the national and everyday language of Rwandans.

chatting with him. At that time, my father did not become lonely, I was there to interact with him". (A man, 32 years old, February 22, 2021, in Kigali).

Frequent interaction was also an opportunity to exchange stories, jokes, and events that were circulating on social media. An elderly person indicated:

"I feel comforted to chat frequently with my children and we are connected all the time as if they are here. They sometimes send jokes, and I am very happy about that." (Old man, 69 years old, December 22, 2020, in Karongi distric).

Another informant reported:

"Chatting with my daughter through WhatsApp on a regular basis during the day made me feel like I was not living alone. We kept exchanging chats and the day ended without being annoyed". (A woman, 72 years old, December 17, 2020, in Karongi district).

The informants I encountered during my stay in the field confirmed that frequent interactions allowed them to go into detail about their family lives. The exchange of interactions was not only about their family's well-being but also what was happening in their respective social contexts, especially regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. These frequent daily interactions constitute a necessary tool for enacting emotional care. Drawing on the above, one could relate to the argument by Haris et al. (2014:6) that in the interactions with elderly people emerge social intimacy and emotional well-being. Furthermore, frequent interactions helped elderly parents feel at ease and avoid panic.

An informant testified:

"When I heard that terrible disease was spreading in the country and that everyone had to remain at home, I started panicking. But when my children called me on WhatsApp frequently in a day, my panic disappeared. I felt I was with them, not alone". (A woman, 72 years old, December 17, 2020, in Karongi district).

Another informant put his story this way:

"At the time the lockdown was imposed, in the beginning, I was like overwhelmed by the situation since no neighbour came to my home. Fortunately, my son was there to talk to me, through frequent video calls. With the video calls, my anxiety evaporated, I felt like I was very close to him and I didn't feel lonely". (Old man, 73 years old, December 12, 2020, in Karongi district).

It could be deduced from the informants' narratives that frequent interactions through social media are important elements in enacting emotional care to elderly people, especially those living alone. In this context, the interaction takes various forms, like voice calls, text messages, chats or video calls. What is essential here to both the grown-up children and their parents is to maintain these interactions frequently to avoid making an old parent feel isolated. It became

apparent from the elderly people I talked to that they feared to be lonely. Most of them expressed the feeling of not being lonely when they are in constant interactions with their children. According to Killeen (1998:763), loneliness is among the factors that can cause emotional distress, anxiety, depression, and boredom for elderly people. Hence fighting it with the means of social media appears to be a rewarding solution.

It is important to note that it is not only the frequency of interactions that contributes to enacting emotional care to elderly people during the COVID-19 lockdown in Rwanda. Also significant are the comforting words contained in messages.

5.3 The Role of Comforting Words in Enacting Emotional Care

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic created a feeling of fear and distress among people, especially elderly people. This is because, in the wake of the pandemic, all media reported that Coronavirus is more dangerous to elderly people than to the rest of the population. For most people, it was thus the appropriate time to receive comforting words from their relations as they expressed their compassion to them.

In my conversation with elderly people, they reported the importance of comforting words in encouraging them to live through the exceptional period of COVID-19 lockdowns without boredom. This observation corresponds to the idea of Vine et al. (2020:3) on the role of emotional words in generating emotional well-being. The role of comforting words in enacting emotional care is also observed in Rwandan popular narratives where they say "*Ijambo ryiza rirakiza*", which literally translates as "*a good word heals*".

Even if the conversation between elderly parents and their children on WhatsApp is part of their recurrent private discussions, elderly people reported having received different comforting words in their chats with their distant kin. The comforting words in interactions express a kind of solidarity and compassion in difficult situations. From this perspective, elderly people who feared to get infected with the deadly COVID-19 virus needed words of encouragement from their children. One of the informants recounted her experience in the following terms:

> "I feel very happy and relieved when I hear a voice message or read a WhatsApp chat from my daughter like "Don't worry, we are there for you". I think that she cares about me, and she always thinks about my well-being". (Old woman,72 years old, December 17, 2020, in Karongi district).

Another informant said:

> "Whenever I talked to my son through WhatsApp, I expressed my concern about COVID-19. He always told me to be strong and believe that nothing bad will happen to me. This encouraged me not to have negative thoughts about my life and made me feel that I was supported in any situation". (Old man, 73 years old, December 12, 2020, in Karongi district).

The elderly people who use social media that I talked to reported having despaired when they heard that the COVID-19 disease was dangerous to elderly people and there was no treatment for it. Even if none of them was infected with COVID-19 or knew someone in their social networks who was infected, they were worried about what would happen in case they were infected. The information they heard in the media about the COVID-19 situation throughout the world made them more discouraged. An informant concurred with this idea when she said:

> "When I heard the news on the radio that many people were dying of COVID-19, and then the majority of them were elderly people, I thought that it was time for us elderly people to die. Fortunately, my son comforted me through our chats on WhatsApp and told me that I had to be strong and that not all elderly were dying. What I had to do was observe the protective measures and avoid panicking". (A woman, 72 years old, December 17, 2020, in Karongi district).

In a time of crisis, human beings express their concern about their loved ones especially when they do not live together. This goes with attachment theory which stipulates that it is in stressful or threatening circumstances where emotional support is needed most (Westmaas and Silver 2001: 426). From this perspective, in the period of COVID-19 lockdown in Rwanda, elderly people in rural areas needed more emotional support than ever since they were worried about their lives and their relatives. In this time, social media like WhatsApp served as an instrument that facilitated various interactions between elderly people living in rural areas and their children in the city of Kigali. Using WhatsApp, grown-up children living in the city succeeded in conveying comforting messages to their elderly parents to express their attachment to them as well as their compassion during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns.

In this care practice, social media played a paramount role in connecting elderly people with their children despite their different geographical locations. In this regard, I argue that it is not only the routinized interactions that convey emotional care through WhatsApp, rather it is the comforting words that are contained in the interactions that play a significant role in emotional supportiveness.

However, it is important to note that the use of social media in the interactions between elderly people and their children is associated with challenges. Elderly people have reported facing a range of difficulties in the use of social media.

6 Challenges Facing Elderly People in Using Social Media

It is a fact that elderly people in Rwanda use social media to create or maintain a social network with others. However, the empirical evidence identified several challenges that prevent elderly people from using social media to meet their expectations.

6.1 Access to Smartphones
In the interview with elderly people, they reported access to smartphones as a challenge that they face in their use of social media to interact with others. An informant put it this way:

> "A smartphone is very expensive compared to a non-smartphone. It is much more expensive, and it is not easy to have money to buy one. Furthermore, there is no shop here that sells mobile telephones. You have to go to the big business centre to buy it". (Old man, 73 years old, December 12, 2020, in Karongi district).

This old man shares the problem of access to smartphones with many other elderly people in his region. Another informant said:

> "It is not like 'Karasharamye' [small mobile telephone]. With 10,000 Frw you can buy a 'Karasharamye', but with that amount of money, you cannot buy a smartphone. You must have much more money". (Old woman, 72 years old, December 17, 2020, in Karongi district).

A smartphone is a commonly known device that allows people to access social media platforms. It is obvious that with the difficulties of accessing a smartphone, several elderly people find it impossible to use social media in their communication with their social networks. Some elderly persons have reported having only started to use social media after they received a smartphone as a present from their children. An old man put it as follows:

> "These days I use WhatsApp because I have a smartphone. Before I couldn't afford it, I could not use the application till a smartphone was sent to me by my son". (Old woman, 68 years old, December 9, 2020, in Karongi district).

Another informant stated:

> "I very often heard my neighbour talking about video calls on WhatsApp, and I requested him to show me how it works. Unfortunately, I didn't have a smartphone because it was expensive. I started saving money in the savings group until I got the required amount. Now I have a smartphone and can make a video call on WhatsApp". (Old man, 69 years old, December 22, 2020, in Karongi district).

The above quotes show that there are many ways of accessing a smartphone. An old person can get it either through buying it or getting it from someone else, especially from their child. However, I can infer from the above narrative that the limited financial means constitute a big challenge for elderly people to use social media. For anyone to use social media, an appropriate device, especially a smartphone, is required. According to the Ministry of ICT and Innovation in Rwanda, smartphone penetration is still low. While mobile phone penetration stands at 79.8%, smartphone penetration remains too low and stands at 14.6% (MINICT 2017:12). Most of the Rwandan population cannot afford to own a smartphone. Smart devices, like smartphones, are still expensive compared to the average income of the citizens. The fact that smartphones are expensive makes the rural population consider them as luxury devices and hence reserved for some individuals who can afford to buy them. The issue of low access to smartphones prompted the government of Rwanda to launch a programme of distributing smartphones to households that are unable to afford them (Mwai 2019:1).

It is worth noting that access to smartphones is not the only challenge faced by elderly people as far as the use of social media is concerned. Even when they have access to smartphones, the lack of digital skills may prevent them from using smartphones effectively.

6.2 Digital Illiteracy

Digital literacy is a prerequisite to the use of social media by elderly people. For effective use of social media platforms, one needs to have not only a smartphone, but also the skills to operate it. During the fieldwork, elderly people reported having little knowledge about how to use a smartphone and much less about the use of the features of WhatsApp. The lack of digital literacy by elderly people was reported by informants as one of the challenges hindering the use of social media. An elderly person summed up his experience this way:

> "When I bought a smartphone, I didn't either know how to use it or download the WhatsApp application. It was my neighbour who downloaded it on my smartphone and showed me how to use it". (Old man, 69 years old, December 22, 2020, in Karongi district).

The lack of digital skills for elderly people makes them rely on others to operate their smartphones and social media applications as confirmed by the statement of one informant who said:

> "I was taught how to use a smartphone and WhatsApp features by my grandson. He was the one who helped me to download WhatsApp and taught me how to use its different features like voice and video calls". (Old man,73 years old, December 12, 2020, in Karongi district).

The lack of skills in using digital devices and social media applications is a common problem for elderly people I talked to in this research and even many elderly people in Rwanda. The limited knowledge of digital skills among the Rwandan population has already been recognised by the country's Minister of ICT who suggests massive investments to furnish digital skills to the Rwandan population and allow them to consume ICT-based services (MINICT 2017:10). The lack of digital skills among elderly people relates to their level of education. Indeed, the literacy rate among elderly people in Rwanda is still too low. According to the National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda (NISR), only 28% of elderly people can read and write in Kinyarwanda, 3% can read and write in French, while only 1% can read and write in English (NISR 2014:24). The little knowledge of foreign languages among elderly people is a stumbling block for them to use social media because all the features of social media are displayed in foreign languages. This constitutes an obstacle that continues to prevent elderly people from effectively using social media in their daily interactions. In addition to that, the lack of digital skills makes some elderly people decide to stay away from social media altogether. In their research on bridging the digital divide for older adults, Ma et al. (2020:2) argue that limited access and low technology literacy are key reasons why elderly people are excluded from being fully engaged in the digital world. Furthermore, (Dawyer and Molony 2019:3) point out the existence of disparities in the use of social media between urban and rural areas in Africa, where social media use is prominent in urban areas and low in rural settings because of the problem of accessibility and affordability.

Elderly people are aware of the importance of the use of social media in communication with their social networks. Recognizing their limits in digital literacy which prevents them from effectively using social media in their everyday interactions, they call upon the skills of the young generation to mitigate this challenge. That means that they do not stand powerless in the face of the lack of digital literacy. Rather, they constantly seek alternative solutions including learning the skills from the young generation.

It should be noted that data presented in this paper depict the image of care relationships through social media between elderly people in rural areas and their children living in the city during the COVID-19 crisis in 2020. Many things may have changed since that period till now, as the pandemic that prevented people from social contact is no longer there. Therefore, this paper should be regarded in relation to the period considered for data collection.

7 Conclusion

This article explores the role of social media in enacting emotional care to elderly people during the period of COVID-19 pandemic and its related lockdown in Rwanda. It uses the narratives of both grown-up children and their parents to show how elderly people are integrated into the digital world through the use of social media, especially WhatsApp. The article has revealed that the use of social media is not only a privilege of the youth as the popular discourse suggests, rather it expands to elderly people who are currently using it in their daily interactions with distant relatives. This article particularly highlights the usefulness of social media that goes beyond its use as a communication tool to serve in enacting emotional care to elderly people. Evidently, social media helps in the provision of emotional care for elderly people by creating strong ties, belongingness, and attachment to older members of society. The most striking care practices through social media are early morning calls and chats, frequent calls, and chats as well as comforting words.

Notwithstanding the efforts of elderly people in using social media, the discussion points out that they face several challenges such as those related to access to digital devices, which tend to be too expensive for elderly people to afford. Access to a smartphone is still a problem despite the commitment of the Rwandan government to ensure a wide penetration of mobile phones throughout the country. Another challenge is related to the lack of digital literacy among elderly people, which prevents them from using social media. In the face of these challenges, elderly people adopted alternative strategies to help them adapt to the digital world and use social media in their daily interactions. It is important to note that for elderly people to fully use social media in Rwanda, there is a need to investigate the role of state institutions in promoting digital literacy among elderly people and in eliminating barriers preventing elderly people from using social media.

Overall, this article offers a wider view of caring practices during the crisis caused by the outbreak of Covid-19 and subsequent lockdowns imposed to curb its spread. It demonstrates how caring practices keep transforming to respond to care demands during the COVID-19 pandemic. It further shows how social media goes beyond just informing to delivering care to specific demographics in society. Thus, care is not a fixed script; it keeps changing and taking various forms depending on social changes occurring in society. Situating it in an African setting where there is a dearth of research, the paper transcends the dominant social media discourse in Rwanda that attributes social media use to young people. It shows how elderly people continually strive for inclusion in the digital world by adapting social media in their daily interactions with their children to exchange emotional caring practices.

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9 10 Latest UBT African studies working papers

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