

Chapter 20

Cyber Behaviors among Seniors

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ABSTRACT

Seniors aged 65 and over have been the fastest growing group among Internet users in the past few years. Many factors contribute to the increased use of Information Technologies among seniors, including the known benefits of adopting technologies in their later lives and the improvement of the Internet services addressing their concerns. The cyber seniors demonstrate some unique usage patterns in their engagement in information technologies. And they are more likely to be challenged by numerous barriers when learning and using new technological devices. To ensure a “useful” technology becomes “usable” for seniors, the notion of Information Technology innovation in the future must negotiate those constraints encountered by senior users.

INTRODUCTION

Seniors who are sixty-five years old and beyond have recently been identified as a cohort of the Internet users with the largest upswing in number. Particularly, from 2008 to 2009, their growth rate in adoption of broadband surged to 58%, compared with 15% growth among other general adult Americans (Horriagan, 2009). By 2010, every one of four older Americans had started using the Internet (Madden, 2010). Obviously, the wave of accessing the Internet among seniors

becomes one of the most noticeable trends in contemporary society.

Correspondingly, there has been a tremendous growth in scholarly inquiry into the use of information technologies among older adults over the past decades. Numerous benefits have been recognized for seniors to start using the Internet. Information technologies may help older adults enhance communication with their family members and friends, extend their opportunities for lifelong learning, expand social support networks to maintain a psychological well-being,

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and explore additional resources for entertainment (Lee, Chen, & Hewitt, 2011). On the other hand, research reveals that seniors, while learning and using information technologies, often encounter a number of substantial barriers. Older users may face greater challenges to read texts on a computer screen (Bitterman & Shalev, 2004), have difficulties in using a mouse or keyboard due to aging-associated dexterity problems (Charness & Holley, 2004), and lack of resources to afford themselves with the Internet connection (Fisk & Rogers, 2002). To consolidate the emerging knowledge on the use of Information technologies among seniors, this chapter will highlight the involvement of the scholarship of various selected topics on the cyber seniors.

REASONS FOR SENIORS TO BOARD THE INFORMATION HIGHWAY

The advancement of information communication technology during the first decade of the 21st century has convinced many seniors of taking the information highway to exploring the opportunities for enhancing their quality of life. Madden noted (2010) that once older users get a taste of high-speed access; they often come to rely on the Internet as an everyday utility in their lives. The frequency at which older adults use the Internet is very close to that of younger users. There are numerous factors contributing to the rapid growth of senior navigators in cyber space.

The Internet facilitates a new form of social connection that provides possibilities for older adults to pursue their professional advancement, allowing many seniors, especially those approaching their retirement age, to reconnect with the people from their past. The renewed connection may provide a powerful support network to inspire them to embark on a new career. This endowment becomes extremely important today, given the fact that life expectancy has been increasing tremendously and the number of years people

will live after reaching their retirement age has been expanded. Most older adults expect to keep working after 65 years old. Eighty percent of the baby boomers plan to be “working retirees” (Dychtwald, 2005).

Another main attraction to seniors navigating on the information highway lies in the availability of substantial health-related information on the Internet. Since aging is a deteriorative process, most older adults have at least one chronic condition and many have to live with multiple health-related problems (Greenberg, 2009). Statistically 8 out of 10 people over 65 have some form of a chronic disease (Teague, McGhee, Rosenthal, & Kearns, 1997). As the Internet offers a wealth of health-related consulting information, numerous older adults are attracted to engage in such activities as blogging or online health discussion. Fox (2004) reported that two thirds (68%) of online seniors have looked up health information. Searching for information on prescription drugs is one of the top reasons that seniors use the Internet. In particular, those well-educated older female users spent much more time online to find medical information in order to manage their chronic health problems (Campbell, 2004).

Furthermore, the information technology infrastructure also provides resources for older users to construct a new form of social support network that may help sustain their psychological well-being (Chen & Persson, 2002; Bradley & Poppen, 2003; Thayer & Ray 2006). Older Internet users have reported a range of positive impacts that the Internet provides, including reduced loneliness, enhanced competence, positive learning experience, as well as an overall well-being. Wright (2000) noted that computer-mediated social support helps older adults to form an online support network, while greater involvement in online community may help to cope with their perceived life stress. In Wright’s study, the network involvement appeared to be the only significant predictor of lower levels of perceived life stress among older adults.

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