Preferences of older persons in using computer or Internet: research among older learners/

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Abstract

Internet and computer technology is rapidly becoming a part of everyday life in different and diverse fields (Ansley & Erber, 1988; Weisman, 1994; Browne, 2000; Cohen, 2002; Saunders, 2004). You can hardly find a field that this technology has not penetrated yet or a person that has not been influenced by it. In addition to this growing phenomenon, there is a global phenomenon, the "old age's phenomenon" (anonymous, 1954). The senior population can also harness computer and internet technology for their own needs, enriching their knowledge and improving their quality of life. We, as a society, should help the senior population to do so, since we will all benefit by it.

The purpose of this study was to find the different computer and internet interests of the senior participants of a program, taking place at one of Israel's universities, which is aimed at increasing the contribution of senior Israeli citizens to society and at transforming old people into a source for self and social empowerment.

This study aims at better understanding our interest group and to give us the ability to introduce education programs that better fit their needs. In addition, this study can help improve marketing campaign for this program, reaching people that do not use computers and internet.

This study examined different interests and goals associated with computer and internet use, such as obtaining medical information, interactive use (on-line shopping, downloading etc.), communication (e-mail, chat) and more. In addition, the frequency of computer and internet use by the interest group was examined along with the examination of the connection between the elderly perception of the computer/internet

and the frequency of his or her use. Finally, the reasons for not using computers and internet by the elderly were reexamined.

This study presents three assumptions and two questions.

The first asks to examine if there is a connection between the demographic background of an elderly person (age, education and gender) and the way he/she perceives computer and internet use as beneficial.

The second asks to examine if there is a connection between demographic background factors (age, years of living in Israel, country of birth) and frequency of use of computers/internet.

The assumptions are:

1. Computer usage frequency and interests will be dependent on the following variables: gender, education and last position before retirement.

2. Computer usage frequency will be higher for those who have friends or relatives living abroad than for those who don't.

3. If computer and internet use is perceived by the elderly people as beneficial to them, their frequency of use will increase.

The research was conducted in two stages:

- The first stage was a mail survey. Research questionnaires were mailed to elderly people who participated/ are participating in the program. The questionnaires were supposed to be mailed back.

- The second stage was research questionnaires handed out during classes which took place as part of the program. Most of the questionnaires were collected in this way.

All in all, 150 questionnaires were collected from people aged 55 and up, 57 by use of mail survey and 93 in classes.

The research questionnaire is based on a 2004 PEW questionnaire, an organization that deals with research in the field of society, the public, etc.

The questionnaire is made up of four parts:

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1. Background and general information about the person filling out the questionnaire.
2. Questions regarding computer and internet interest and usage, rated according to frequency of use, on a 0-5 scale, where 0 is no use and 5 is daily use.
3. This part was meant to examine the benefits perceived through the use of the computer/internet.
4. The reasons for not using computers and/or the internet.

This study is based on the first three parts of the questionnaire.

The research found that all the senior citizens who filled out the questionnaire own their own computer, and use it on a daily or semi-daily basis for means of communication. 63% use their computer for e-mail and 71% browse the internet. A high percentage noted that they rarely use the computer in order to look for medical information or cultural information.

The research also found that senior citizens with a high school level education use the internet more frequently in order to search for medical information than those with higher education. In addition, it was found that senior citizens with post high school education use the internet more frequently for means of communication than those with high school or academic education. No significant differences were found in computer usage between male and female senior citizens in most interests examined other than searching for medical information and interactive use. In addition, no significant differences were found in usage frequency and different interests according to position before retirement, other than the fact that senior citizens who held a consulting-psychological oriented job tend to use the internet more for communication and medical information than senior citizens who held a research or managerial position.

It was also found that the more beneficial the person perceives computer and internet use, the higher the frequency of use will be. The most significant benefit was the emotional benefit (83%), and the second was the use of leisure time (80%). No relation was found between having relatives and friends abroad and the frequency of use of e-mail or VOIP calls.

In conclusion, the first assumption was partially validated, the second assumption was not validated and the third assumption was fully validated.

The findings of the study were discussed at length, and in addition some suggestions were made regarding the questionnaire, such as the fact that it was too long and not completely clear. In addition, suggestions of new studies were brought up, such as the reasons why certain senior citizens do not use computers and internet, why certain senior citizens choose to study while others don't, what are the differences between the two groups, etc.

The findings of the study, and specifically the third assumption, strengthen the importance of computers and internet use for the elderly. I can only hope that in the near future more and more senior citizens will be exposed to this technology, and those who are already exposed will be able to widen their use and enjoyment.

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