Chapter 7

Internet Use among Older Adults: Constraints and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

Older adults (65 and above) are the fastest growing population to use computers and the Internet in their everyday lives. The primary purpose of this chapter is to use a Lifespan Developmental Perspective to examine both the constraints and the opportunities of Internet use among older adults. Given age-related changes in physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional processes, older adults may encounter different constraints in Internet use from younger adults. The Selective Optimization with Compensation model is used to explore opportunities for older adults in using the Internet to improve quality of life. Future product designs and training programs should take into account older adults’ physical and cognitive limitations, as well as their socio-emotional needs. It is also recommended that social policies should help older adults overcome these constraints in order to reduce age-related digital divide and promote quality of life for older adults.

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INTRODUCTION

People around the world expect to live longer in the new millennium. Advances in medicine and health technologies have made significant contributions in extending longevity. Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate the average life expectancies of men and women in the U.S. at 75.7 and 80.6 years respectively (Kochanek, Xu, Murphy, Minino, & Kung, 2011). It is projected that by the year 2030, one in five, or 70 million people in the United States will be age 65 or older (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). As the oldest members of the Baby Boomer generation reach age 65 in 2011, we face a rapidly aging society not only in the U.S., but all across the globe as well.

The new millennium has also witnessed tremendous growth in computer-based information technology. The influence of information technology has been profound, particularly with regard to the Internet. It is estimated that 2.09 billion people, or 30.2% of the global population, are current Internet users; this figure has exploded from 360 million in December of 2000, resulting in a 480.6% increase of Internet users over the past decade (Internet World Stats, 2011). Much like aging populations around the world, the rate of growth for Internet use is staggering. For better or worse, the Internet has changed the way many people live their lives, but what happens when a rapidly aging society collides with rapidly increasing computer-based information technology?

Older adults (65 years old and above) are the fastest growing population who use computers and the Internet in their everyday lives (Hart, Chaparro, & Halcomb, 2008). In the year 1996, only 2% of Americans aged 65 and older went online, whereas in the year 2004, about 22% of Americans over 65 reported using the Internet (Fox, 2004). Older adults do all sorts of activities on the Internet: from email to playing online games, from information searching (e.g., health, travel, leisure, etc.) to using government and community services, and from shopping to banking (Lee, Chen, & Hewitt, 2011). There seems to be great benefits for older adults using the Internet. For example, older Internet users reported positive experiences such as reduced feelings of loneliness and depression, and enhanced feelings of connection, competence, and psychological well-being (Chen & Persson, 2002; Gatto & Tak, 2008). At the same time, however, a digital divide has been reported in “developed” countries such as the United States and some European countries (Gilleard & Higgs, 2008). Compared to younger adults, older adults seem to be reluctant to adopt new digital technology such as the Internet (Charness & Boot, 2009). According to the Pew Tracking Survey in 2007 (http://www.pewinternet.org), there were 39% of older Americans between 65-74 years old who used the Internet, compared to 85% in the age range of 18-24, 25-34, and 35-44 years old. What factors may contribute to the new digital divide? What kinds of constraints and opportunities would older adults have in Internet use?

The primary purpose of this chapter is to use the Lifespan Developmental Perspective (Baltes, 1987) to examine both the constraints and the opportunities older adults may encounter in using the Internet. The Lifespan Developmental Perspective proposes many important theoretical concepts in understanding the lifespan development of human behavior, such as intelligence. When it comes to new technologies, people often assume the stereotype that “you can’t teach an old dog new tricks.” Contradicting this assumption, the Lifespan Developmental Perspective suggests that development is a life-long process and understanding the dynamics between gains and losses is crucial for supporting older adults in their learning and use of information technologies.

More specifically, the chapter will be organized as follows: First, we will introduce the theoretical framework of the Lifespan Developmental Perspective and review age-related changes in physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional processes. Second, we will use our own study to illustrate
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