Chapter 11

The Internet and Older Adults:
Initial Adoption and Experience of Use

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines older adults’ adoption and experience of using Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), in particular the Internet. The main arguments are based on the experiences of a group of older people, all already users of ICT, in a collaborative, relaxed, and self-managing environment—the virtual campus of the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (an online university). Older adults adopt ICT with a personal project, sometimes as a tool to for achievement; therefore, ICT use has to be done on their own initiative, with a positive attitude, and under their control. Based on the Selective Optimization and Compensation (SOC) theory of adaptation processes, the authors believe that introducing ICT through selection and optimization strategies can be a successful means of assuring effective adoption of these technologies.

INTRODUCTION

“The Internet as being within an evolutionary process, it is an evolution, and I accepted it. It’s not about seeing it as a change, but as a normal evolution. I think this is the secret”
Joan Casals (73 years old).

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derived from it, in particular by looking at personal projects as the keystone of ICT adoption. From a psychological point of view, SOC theory will serve as a guide for examining how they commit to ICT in their adaptation processes during their lifespan trajectories.

BACKGROUND

In recent years, the literature on the possibilities opened up to the elderly through use of ICT is growing significantly. Authors in this field emphasize the personal and professional benefits linked to the use of online services, such as banking, shopping, health management, communication, or recreation (Wagner, Hassanein, & Head, 2010).

Faced with the reality of an aging society (in the coming decades the growth of the older population in relation to other age groups will be substantially higher), both public authorities and certain professional sectors see technology as a useful tool for support, care and independent living during this period of life.

Most of the empirical studies that have looked at these potential benefits have been conducted with elderly people who were not habitual users of ICT. Although Internet users older than 65 years of age are still in a minority (Rainie, Purcell, & Smith, 2011; Eurostat European Commission, 2011; INE, 2011; Idescat, 2011), they now make up the fastest growing consumer segment among Internet users (Hart, Chaparro, & Halcomb, 2008; cited in Wagner, Hassanein, & Head, 2010). Furthermore, an analysis of how they first started using ICT, what they are using the Internet for, and how they feel about this experience can provide revealing data and, in turn, be useful for obtaining ideas on how to facilitate the introduction of these technologies in the lives of older non-users.

In this context, in 2004 Blit-Cohen and Litwin conducted a study to understand how older people viewed the cyber-revolution and what impact it has had on their lives. They interviewed 10 elder users and 10 non-users about their reasons for using or resisting computer usage, and found some interesting themes emerging from the interviews. One of them was related to the different conception of time in old age: while cyber-participants (as they call ICT users) tended to look ahead in time and face new challenges in an active mood, non-participants (that means, non-users) tended to look back and to dwell upon the past. They also found that, compared with non-users, Internet users clearly agreed with the idea that elderly people are able to learn new skills, especially computer-related ones.

In the same way, Melenhorst, Rogers, and Bouwhuis (2006) designed and analyzed 18 focus groups of ICT users and non-users in order to examine older adults’ motivation to adopt technological innovation. They concluded that, although cost can be an obstacle for older adults in selecting an activity, the key factor was related to its perceived benefits. So, rather than effort, lack of skills, or expenses, the main factor that explains the adoption or non-adoption of innovation is the perception of clear benefits.

Although there are some other studies analyzing older ICT users (see Wagner, et al., 2010, for a multi-disciplinary review), these have mainly focused on this population’s activities or behaviors. As we concluded in a previous work (Hernández-Encuentra, Pousada, & Gómez-Zúñiga, 2009), the affective and emotional dimensions of the use of technology are of particular importance in the case of the elderly. Psychological variables such as attitudes, satisfaction, stress or self-efficacy, among others, may explain the elderly’s orientation towards ICT, but have often been neglected in the study of ICT adoption.

In that previous work, we have taken as a reference point the SOC Model (Baltes & Baltes, 1993), a model that is widely known in the field of developmental psychology and that is applicable to different stages and areas of people’s lives. In accordance with this theoretical approach, individuals take an active role throughout their lives,