Chapter 7
Digital Keepsakes: Older Adults and the Extended Use of ICTs and Digital Artifacts

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ABSTRACT
This chapter presents research from a study of novice older adult users of ICTs and the Internet from Ireland. Through the concept of digital keepsakes, this chapter connects with theorising around greater mobility and more dissipated extended families. In particular, connections can be seen with current research themes, which explore how citizens may extend the use of ICT communication act so that digital artifacts may offer emotional containment, extended time for reflection, through comments reinterpretations and sharing of experience and meaning. The value and benefit of digital artifacts can extend beyond a personal onscreen experience. Respondents reported valuing both portability and having a record of the good intentions. Such messages consisted of wishes of good luck, sympathy, or empathy.

INTRODUCTION
The primary aim of the research was to shed light on how people who have never used the Internet before as adults take up the technology and what they do with it. Within this attention was paid to the effects of engaging with ICT’s on social networks, social capital and the behaviours and attitudes the older adults developed having embedded ICT’s into everyday life.

The motivation for this research arose from reviewing the outcomes of eInclusion projects directed at a key group perceived to be outside the information society, namely older adults. It seemed curious that while many projects had taken place and indeed there were reports on the outcomes they did not study the longer-term effects of the training courses. The reports were positive about the older peoples experiences and attitudes to both ICT’s and the training however these reports mostly taken from surveys which were carried out very close to end date of the older peoples participation in training either at the end of the training or up to six weeks later.

This raised questions as to if these new skills were maintained and even embedded into everyday life once the training was over and what did the older adults do with these new skills. Could any
differences in the use by older adults as oppose to other generations be found and how did being an older adult effect their longer term use of the Internet due to what ever meaning (attitudes, perceptions, assumption and experiences) ICT’s have for older adults?

Consequently, research was undertaken to better understand how the older adults may have embedded their newly learned ICT skills into their everyday life. The research uses in-depth semi-structured interviews, name generators and critical incident technique to gather data. The participants were interviewed seven to eighteen months after completing their courses. To gain deeper and richer ‘thick’ descriptions from the respondents, the use of questions and scenarios around social support was incorporated in the study. Everyday scenarios around health issues and domestic situations provided the opportunity for the participants to recount their behaviors, experiences and perceptions, in relation to ICT use. The use of a name generator afforded mapping the social networks of the respondent with attention to tie strength which used descriptors such as, kin links and identifying those whom the respondents would discuss important matters with to help identify tie strength.

The sample reflects the characteristics of older Irish adults who were targeted for training via the BenefIT eInclusion programmes not the general population. Twenty-seven older adults aged sixty to seventy-two who participated in ICT and Internet training course were interviewed. Older adults made up the greatest segment of those who participated in the training programme. The sample consists of people from rural (40%), urban (40%) and city (20%) contexts in the same proportion as participation rates in the training schemes (Jordan, 2010). More women participated in the training programmes than men. the sample reflects this participation rate with one third of participants in this study being men. Most of the participants had left formal education at second level with just three of the sample having third level qualifications.

The sample does not reflect the general population in regarding gender composition, but mirrors the participation rates on the training programmes. The sample is made up of older adults who participated in targeted training courses and does not represent all Irish older adults

This chapter will present a review of literature of key regarding older adults and engagement with ICT’s and the Internet. This will be expanded to include more general uses of the ICT’s and the Internet regarding that offer deeper insight into the perceived value ICTs and Internet use by older adults such as media multiplexity, co-presence and the important of ICT mediated communications in relationship maintenance. Factors such as the strengths and weakness of various mediated communication channels are discussed. By using the concept of digital keepsakes, where individuals store and re-engage with messages or other digital artifacts that offer comfort or support in times of need, offers insight into the use and reuse of ICT and Internet communications, the original findings of the study are then presented and discuss in relations to the current literature.

Finally the outcomes of the findings are drawn out to suggest both future possible avenues of research an how these enhanced understandings of older adults behavior and attitudes may inform us regarding future uses of ICTs as they become even more embedded and invisible in peoples daily lives.

BACKGROUND

To enable a rounded discussion of the extended uses of ICT enabled communications by older adults the literature review will present both background on specific literature and research focused on use of the Internet and ICTs by older adults and compliment this with research focused on more general uses and the associated behaviours.
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