Chapter 20

Elderly People and Information Communication Technology (ICT): Issues, Challenges, and Opportunities for Better Quality of Life

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to present up-to-date knowledge on elderly people’s use of Information Communication Technology (ICT), online social networks, and eventual positive effects of advanced technology on the quality of life of elderly people. The chapter is based on two previous literature reviews and a new integrated literature review focusing on three main criteria: use of ICT, attitudes of elderly people toward ICT, and benefits of and barriers to the use of ICT. A comparison of the literature reviews shows the level of currently known facts about computer use among the elderly and presents the necessary steps for future research on how to increase the computer engagement of elderly people toward a better quality of life.

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INTRODUCTION

ICT opens up several prospects in information and service delivery. Through ICT, information reaches more people and has the potential to provide information for universal assessment. Although there are approx. 900 million computer users in the world today (Google data centers vs Microsoft infrastructure – a battle of the titans, 2011), Internet access and interest in it has developed more slowly among older people than in any other age group (Barton, 2001). At the same time, many elderly people could have feelings of loneliness, uselessness, or isolation, but even in their 3rd age, people should stay active, socialized, and independent. Therefore learning computers and ICT skills could be a great benefit for them (Fokkema & Knipscheer, 2007).

It is a reality that online social networks are becoming more and more important, and so it is necessary to consider how the elderly are involved in this kind of socialization, and what could influence their involvement in computer networking so as to improve their quality of life. As the number of older people is increasing each year; it is necessary to find ways to actively include seniors in the society to enable them to feel more confident and needed and less isolated, to escape loneliness and, on the other hand, to enrich society and younger generations with their knowledge, wisdom and philosophy (Brabazon, 2011). Social networks, whether people meet and interact in actual life or via the Internet, are nowadays very important, because they provide instrumental and emotional support to senior citizens. Evidence even suggests that interaction through the Internet can have a great impact on seniors’ life prospects and life style (Shapira, Barak, & Gal, 2007).

This chapter aims to review current knowledge in the field of ICT and elderly people and to prepare, by means of the new integrated literature review, recommendations, and conclusions on how ICT use can positively affect the quality of life of elderly people. Within the chapter, authors discuss people aged 55+ using the terms seniors, older people, elderly people, because authors want to stay authentic with the researchers cited and discussed; however, authors are aware that the definition for ‘elderly’ is different across countries. At the beginning, authors will present two previously published literature reviews, which provide information about computer use, attitudes toward ICT and benefits of/barriers to the use of ICT among older adults. Through a new integrated literature review, authors will draw parallels using the same criteria and later discuss and present up-to-date knowledge on ICT use among elderly people.

BACKGROUND

Research concerning ICT and elderly people has increased during the last few decades, and even some summarising reviews concerning these areas can be found. As a starting point for the chapter, authors have chosen two of them (Kim, 2008 and Blaschke, Freddolino, & Mullen, 2009) and summarised their main results for the purposes of this chapter. In addition, to update previous knowledge, authors carried out a new integrated literature review in 2011, which will be presented later in the chapter.

Kim (2008) examined 70 studies, mainly focusing on five themes: motivations and barriers of the elderly regarding the use of computers, age-related differences in learning computer skills and use, instructional tips from different perspectives, changes in attitudes and benefits from the perspective of elderly people and the general Internet use of older adults. The studies discussed in the review were made between 1988 and 2005; the majority are from the years 2005 (11), 2002 (10), 2000 (9), 2004 (8), 1998 (7), 1999 (7) and 2003 (6).

Blaschke, Freddolino, and Mullen (2009) included in their review 76 research papers and other literature focusing on elderly people and the