How Does Digital Literacy Affect the Social Wellbeing Of Older Adults In The Context of Covid-19?

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Introduction

The outbreak of Covid-19 gave rise to the growing attention towards social wellbeing. As with the phenomenon of the ageing population, the lockdown exacerbated the issues of loneliness and social isolation for older adults, forcing them to adapt digital tools to interact online. This research scrutinises the means of the web, computer and smartphone usage for older adults during the pandemic and their approach of utilising digital literacy skills to support their social wellbeing in the digital world.

Methods

10 participants above the age of 60 were invited to participate an audio interview in the form of narrative enquiry based on Keyes' social wellbeing dimensions (1998):

- The way digital technologies influence participants' interaction with other people.
- Participants' perception of the social responsibility they
- hold in the digital community.
- The meaningfulness of digital technologies to
- participants.
- Participants' evaluation of their self-potential of
- using the web and their view on the trajectory of the digital society.
- Participants' evaluation of their acceptance in the digital society.

The interviews were transcribed into word documents. The participant's name were pseudonumised and the identifiable personal information were removed.
Once the data has been transcribed, quotes from the participants were openly coded and categorised into five organising and 21 basic themes relevant to the research project (as shown in the diagram on the right).

Interpretation of Research Findings

Data collected for this research highlighted four key areas of how older adults interact with technology to support their life during the first COVID-19 lockdown (March to August 2020):

1. Willingness to utilise digital skills but worries over losing and misrepresenting their online social identity.
2. Creating self-explanatory tools to assist online communication.
3. Strategic use of digital tools to protect their identity
4. Digital literacy skills are able to drive their social wellbeing through online interaction with friends and families.

Discussion

First, older adults who are capable of using the web are also capable of applying their digital knowledge to provide convenience for their online interactions. The finding corresponds with the Technology and Older Evidence Review Report (Age UK,2010) and the more recent evidence from the ONS statistics, which demosntrates the rise of internet usage in the 65 to 74 age group form 52% in 2011 to 83% in 2019 (Tabassum, 2020).

The reason for older adults' online presence was to reduce loneliness and social isolation. Older adults were conscious of the social benefits of using the web and it was one of their key motivators for doing so. Utilising digital skills can also be beneficial to older adults as a source of life enrichment (Hampel & Vergallo, 2020). Online platforms can act as a social stimulus which contributes to the older people's cognitive reserve, thus encourages the use of the web.

However, older adults are also aware of the risks that were exposed to when going online. In particular, older adults pay attention to their social vulnerability in the online community. What drives them to keep using the web is that the benefit of using the web outweighs the potential risks involved.

To minimise the risks involved, older adults may create self-explanatory tools to mimic the more complicated digital softwares and online social platforms so that their online interaction is more manageable.

The study invites researchers to rethink about the digital divide created by age. Our research has found that older adults are not incapable of using the web, but the courage to create and contribute novel digital content in a safe online environment.

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