

DEVELOPING WEBSITES FOR THE SENIOR CITIZENS – CASE STUDY

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Abstract

Engagement of senior citizens in Digital Learning is based on understanding of learning as a natural process of personal development and social activity in life. In Greece, although the senior citizens are 18% of the total population (2005), the third largest in the EU, they don't seem to be familiarized with ICT remarkably. Lack of Internet's use is significantly connected more to problems about accessibility, the lack of skills or to the feeling that it is not necessary.

In 2010 the New Technologies Laboratory of the University of Athens conducted case study research including survey with questionnaires, in order to design customized web sites for senior citizens. Conclusions were formulated about the knowledge of respondents on computers and the Internet, their desire for knowledge and eagerness to create content in websites. Main findings of the case study is that, although over 75% of respondents rarely or not at all have access to a computer that has Internet access, over 85% of respondents want to learn about computers. The results show a need for communication. Over 75% would welcome such a prospect. Also, the research focused on what interested them to write about in a website. The results showed that most informers were interested in recipes, personal documents and writing comments. The questionnaire included section with questions about informative and news sites. Replies were registered about preferences, specifically about multimedia content, and online services, such as advice by scientists like doctors.

Résumé

L'engagement des seniors dans l'apprentissage numérique est basé sur la compréhension de l'apprentissage comme un processus naturel de développement personnel et de l'activité sociale dans la vie. En Grèce, bien que les seniors soient le 18% de la population totale (2005), le troisième dans l'Union Européenne, ils ne semblent pas être familiarisés avec les ICT remarquablement. Le manque d'utilisation d'Internet est nettement plus connecté à des problèmes d'accessibilité, de manque de compétences ou de sentiment qu'il n'est pas nécessaire.

En 2010 le Laboratoire de Nouvelles Technologies de l'Université d'Athènes est mené de recherche, y compris une étude avec des questionnaires, afin de dessiner des sites internet personnalisés pour les seniors. Les conclusions ont été formulées sur la connaissance des répondants sur les ordinateurs et l'Internet, leur désir de connaissance et le désir de créer du contenu dans les sites web. Les conclusions principales de l'étude sont que, bien que plus de 75% des répondants rarement ou pas du tout ont accès à un ordinateur qui a accès sur l'Internet, plus de 85% des répondants souhaitent en apprendre davantage sur les ordinateurs. Les résultats montrent un besoin de communication. Plus de 75% souhaiterait une telle perspective. En outre, la recherche s'est concentrée sur ce qui les intéressait d'écrire à propos d'un site web. Les résultats ont montré que la plupart des informateurs ont été intéressés par les recettes, les documents personnels et des commentaires par écrit. Le questionnaire comprenait une section avec des questions sur l'information et les sites de nouvelles. Des réponses ont été enregistrées sur les préférences, en particulier au sujet du contenu multimedia et des services en ligne, tels que des conseils par des scientifiques comme les médecins.

Keywords:

Senior Citizens and ICT, digital learning, websites development, accessibility

Mots clés:

Seniors et ICT, l'apprentissage numérique, le développement des sites Web, l'accessibilité

1. Introduction

The rapid development of new technologies and the spread of the Internet facilitates everyone to adjust to the new information society. However, according to the National Statistical Service of Greece, the senior citizens in Greece do not use ICT significantly, although they amount to 18%¹ of the total population (2005)², the third largest in the EU. The lack of Internet use is associated with problems related to accessibility, lack of skills or attitude that it is not necessary.

The research interest of the New Technologies Laboratory in Communication, Education and Media Studies, University of Athens, in the issue of ICT use by senior citizens, is dated back to the late 90s. In March 2010 as part of the Action "3rd AGE ON LINE" research fellows of the Lab visited the Open Care Centers for Senior Citizens (public service) of Nikaea and Ellinikon Municipalities in Attica. Questionnaires were also distributed to seniors who would participate in the action, so that the Lab could investigate and draw conclusions about basic research question "whether and to what extent older people may want and find interesting to get initiated into the world of new technologies". The ultimate goal is the optimum design of websites of interest to older people.

In the case study sample had 34 potential informers and 29 of them completed questionnaires. The 65% of participants are women and 28% men. 6 people from the Open Care Centres Nikaea and 26 from Ellinikon participated.

¹ People under 65 years old.

² Secretariat-General of National Statistics Office, Press Release
<http://didefth.gr/meletes/plythismos07.pdf>

2. Seniors citizens and ICT Use

Over the years, life expectancy continues increasing. However, combined with the decrease of birth rates in Western societies it gradually them into societies of elderly and very elderly people. By 2050, an increase of 70% of Europeans aged over 65 and 170% of those older than 80 years³ is expected. Thanks to free time older people have the opportunity now to explore new leisure experiences and to be creative in those activities which they choose undisturbed. Learning in the Third Age is based on understanding of learning as a natural process of personal growth and social activity in life. It is recognized increasingly as a key to a vibrant, healthy and good aging process. Thus, learning not only serves in what has to do with the knowledge applied in work, but is essential for the well-being of people.

Internet allows seniors to connect to different sources of social and psychological support and to replace the increasingly difficult and poor interpersonal communication, which is rare over the years. According to a new U.S. scientific research, based on questionnaires completed by 7,000 people over 55 years who had retired, networking reduces depression in old age by at least 20% (Ford & Ford, 2009). The feeling that they can 'network' combats depression. Another recent survey had found that the use of the internet by elderly beginners improves brain and cognitive functions (Gamberini et al, 2006).

The use of ICT can help them improve working conditions. Specifically, through telework the duration of their work period could be lengthened. Physical barriers of accessibility, due to either age or disability, are overcome easily by using ICT and working at home (Observatory for the Information Society, 2007).

3. Methodology

Survey with a structured questionnaire was conducted. Specifically three types of questions were included: a) closed-ended questions or questions with given options b) open-ended questions and c) questions graded scale in which the seniors are required to indicate their inclination towards a range of views and relevant issues.

The questionnaire included introductory questions such as demographic data (age, sex, marital status). The first section includes questions related to the knowledge of participants with computers and the Internet. The second section relates to participatory websites. The third section refers to informative sites. Finally there are some inference questions about the participants' preference for participatory or informative sites. The collection of questionnaires was followed by codification. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the basic features of the data in the case study.

4. Results

86% of the participants are in age group 61-75 years (age group 61-65 years : 31%, age group 66-70 years : 17%, age group 71-75 years: 38%). The majority of participants (48%) are married with children. 30% of participants don't have any children and 55% have grandchildren (Figure 1).

³ The Public Health Portal of the European Union:
http://ec.europa.eu/health-eu/my_health/elderly/index_el.htm

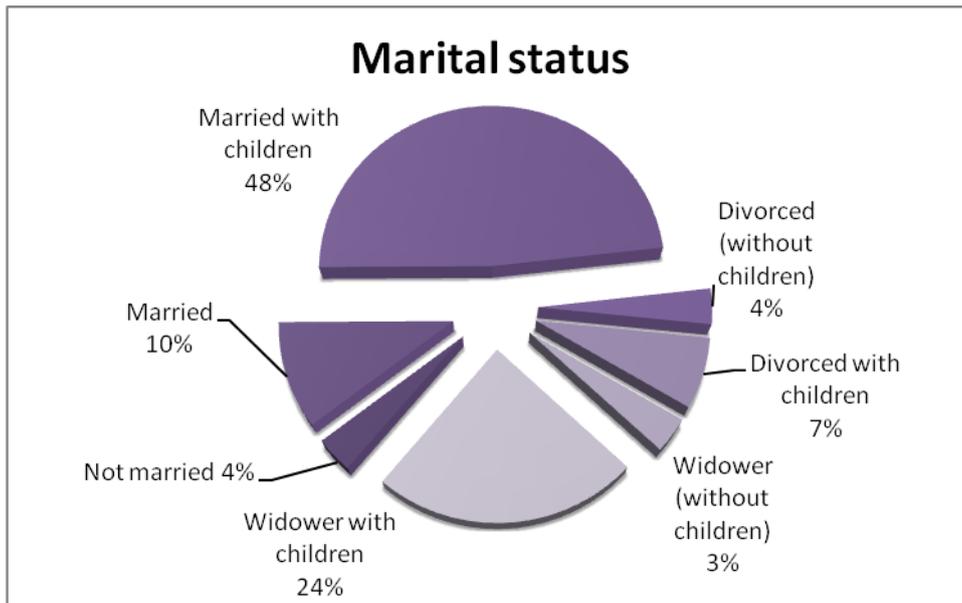


Figure 1. Marital status

Knowledge of computers and internet

34% did not have any knowledge at all, while over 60% of the sample had low or very low level of knowledge (Figure 2). Results on the knowledge on the internet were similar. 28% have no knowledge about the Internet, almost 70% of the sample have low or very low level of knowledge (Figure 3). Similar results were obtained about the use of computers and the Internet. More concretely, 73% stated that they never use PCs in their work, while only 10% made daily use. Also, more than 75% stated they rarely or not at all have access to a computer that has Internet access.

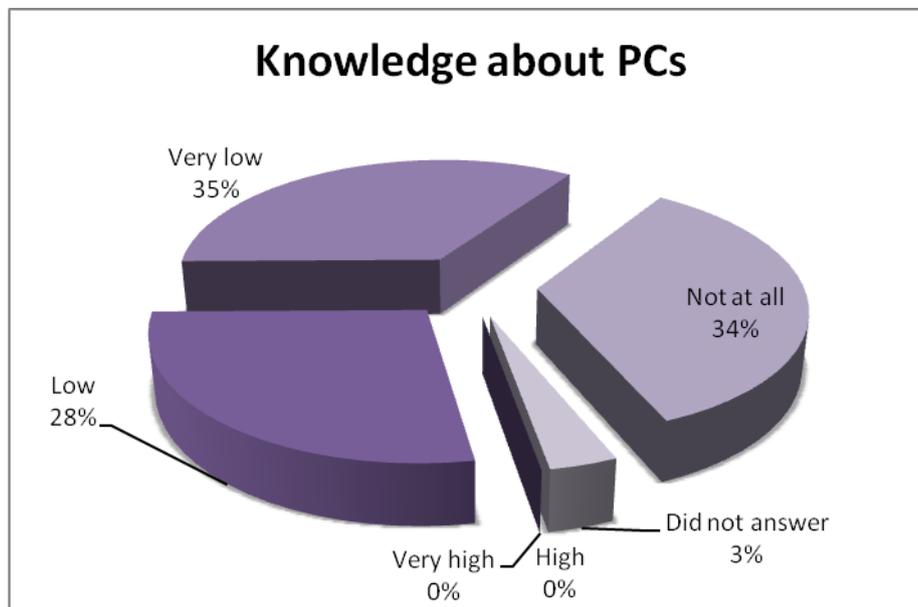


Figure 2. Knowledge about PCs.

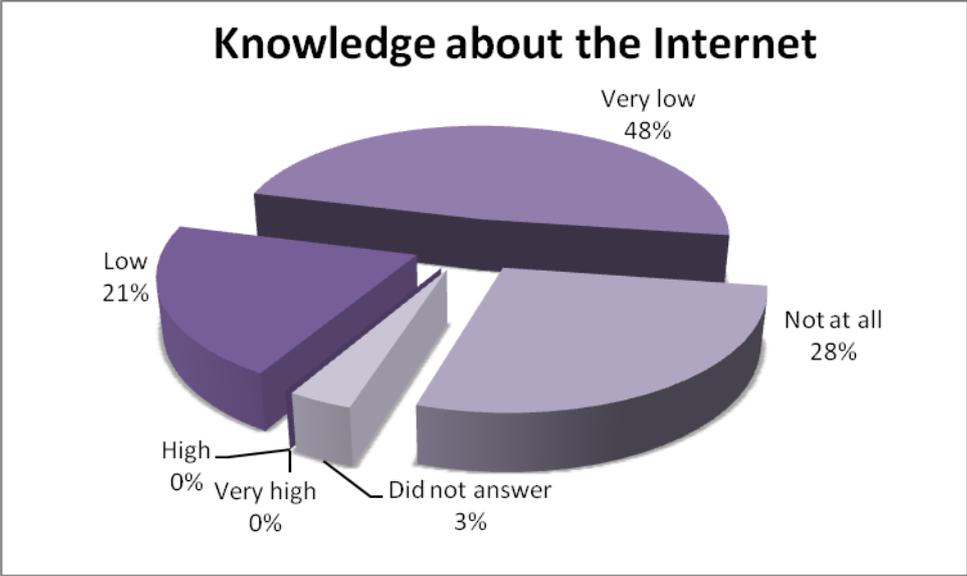


Figure 3. Knowledge about the Internet.

The result on the participants' interest in gaining knowledge about the internet was expected, given their participation in the workshop. None of the participants expressed the opinion that he/she doesn't want to gain knowledge about the internet. Over 85% of respondents want to learn.

Participatory websites

According to the results obtained about whether the participants wish to involve themselves in the content enrichment of a site almost 70% responded positively. The pie chart below reflects the degree of interest among participants in sharing and contributing knowledge (of their own) with other users. A significant proportion (35%) said they would not be at all interested in this prospect (Figure 4).

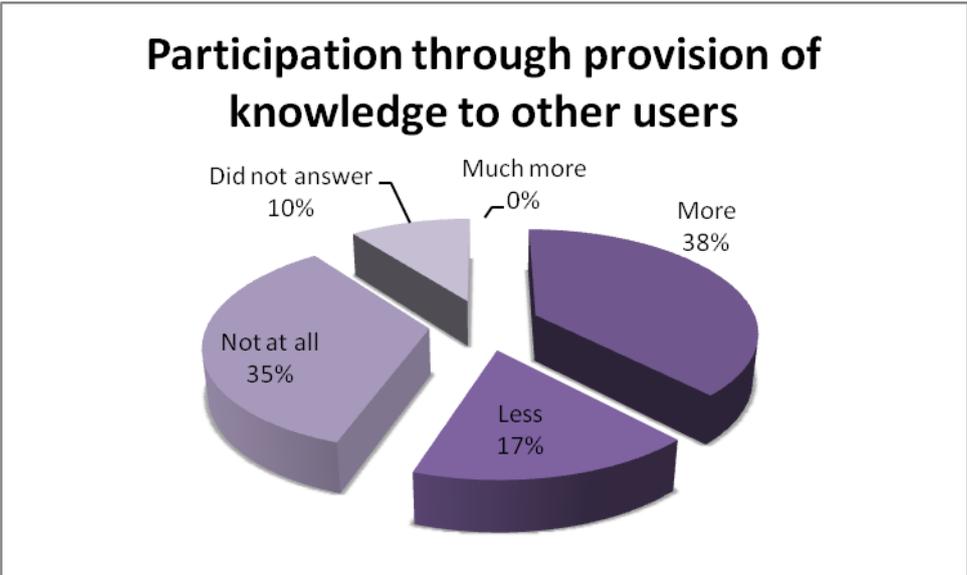


Figure 4. Participation through provision of knowledge to the other users.

Attempt to record the issues that would interest people in the third age to write about in a website was made. The results showed that most participants are interested in recipes, texts and comments written by themselves. The preference for recipes is justified, since most participants are women. Also, replies were including music, travelling and sports freely given (Figure 5).

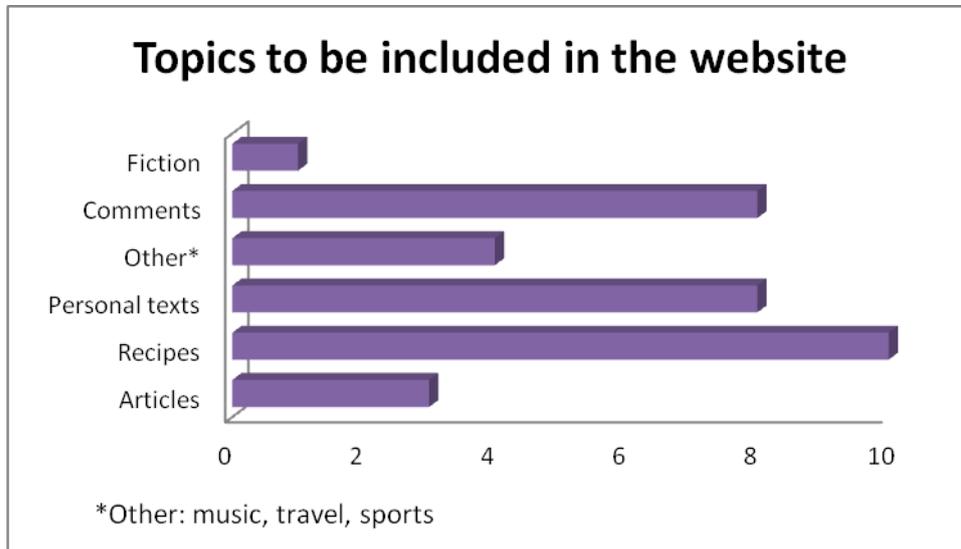


Figure 5. Topics to be included in the website.

Results about the desirability of group discussions on a website were impressive, as the percentage of participants who would like such a perspective, even at a small degree, is over 75%. The results show the need for people to communicate.

The above conclusion is reinforced by the results obtained on the willingness of informers to participate in a forum, where common interests provide them with the opportunity to exchange messages on the website. Only 21% said they do not want any team synchronous discussion and more than 75% responded positively.

The chart below shows the results obtained for the subjects that interested the participants: mainly travel, health and family relationships. The technology issues appear not to be within the direct interests (Figure 6). 45% said they did not want at all to know people from around world.

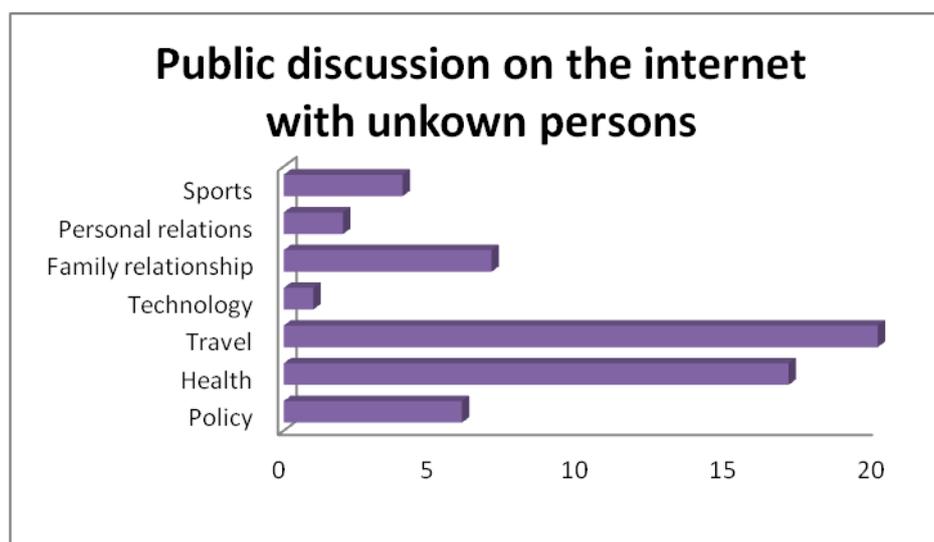


Figure 6. Topics that would interest the Senior Citizens in a public discussion on the Internet with unknown persons.

Informative websites

The results on informative sites showed that more than 80% of respondents would welcome a web site especially for the third age, aiming at informing them on various issues.

The content on an informative website that would interest the participants are primarily about health and weather. Respondents were given the freedom to record and other issues, such as entertainment, food, cooking, music, recycling, human relations, religion, travel, beauty, nature and culture (Figure 7).

Over 90% of respondents would be interested in submitting to a possible informative website queries on specific issues e.g. finance, insurance, legal, health, etc. 45% of respondents consider this service as very important.

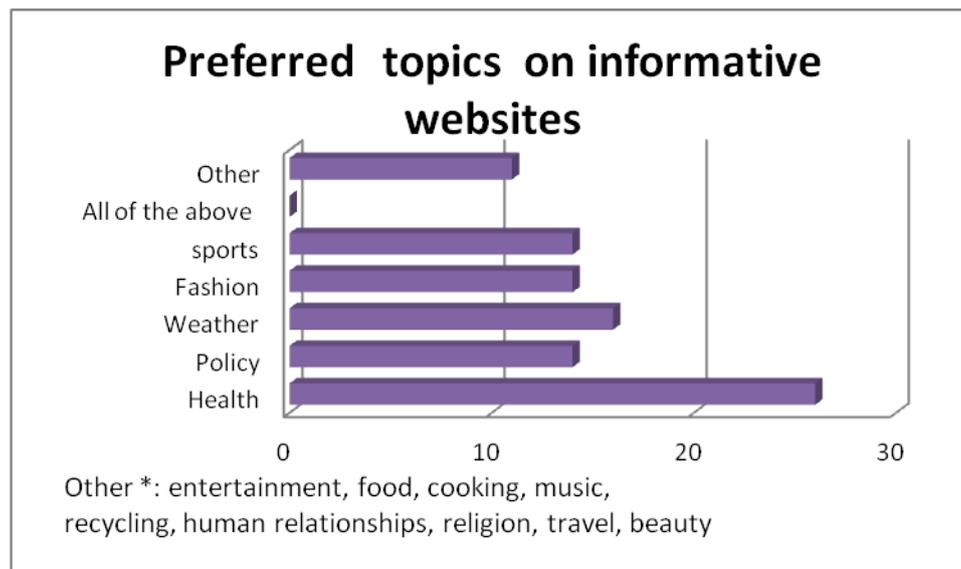


Figure 7. Preferred topics on informative websites

Also, the results of the questionnaire revealed that almost 70% considered important to access extensive content in video format. A significant proportion of respondents (45%) expressed that they are interested in shopping online. But provision of special offers (discounts) for travel products, books, services, etc. interested more than 70% of participants.

5. Conclusions

This case study confirms the already recorded trends on the relationship of people of third age in Greece with computers and the Internet, characterized by the lack of accessibility, lack of knowledge on the PC and the Internet, non-use in everyday life. Yet the desire for knowledge and to follow the pace of society is high.

The basic conclusion is the interest of people in communication, as it is proved by a positive attitude towards the possibility of their involvement in content enrichment of a website, the desire for the group discussions on a website, and their desire for participation in the forum.

The lack of desire of participants to know people from around the world (45%) may be attributed to introversion or perhaps to language barriers.

Another conclusion is their persuasion that the Internet can help them in everyday life through an informative web site dedicated to third age people. Topics of interest are health, weather, politics, fashion, sports, entertainment, food, cooking, music, recycling, human relations, religion, travel, beauty, nature and culture. Submitting questions on specific issues -e.g. finance, insurance, legal, health - in an informative site is an extremely important service.

The replies to the concluding questions of the questionnaire revealed that participants are interested in informative websites, with content oriented to general audience as well as with content oriented only to people of third age, and participatory websites.

Higher preference was expressed for the informative website.

At the end of the questionnaire participants were provided with the opportunity to fill out anything considered relevant to the subject and not covered by the above questions with free text. The responses focused on issues and services on the internet that senior citizens would like to exist. Also, in respondents' opinion, high living costs and not satisfactory general level of knowledge are considerable barriers.

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