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Life satisfaction in the internet age – Changes in the past decade

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ABSTRACT

Using data from large scale Annual Social Surveys of the CBS in Israel, the current study investigated the impact of internet adoption and internet uses on the life satisfaction of senior citizens (aged 65+), compared to those of working age (ages 20–64) during the decade of 2003–2012. The findings show high-medium levels of life satisfaction – higher in younger age group, compared to the senior citizens. Life satisfaction increased moderately over time among the younger age group, while among the older population it remained stable during the decade under study. Our main conclusion is that internet adoption and digital uses increase life satisfaction, after controlling for socio-demographic variables, sociability and health condition. In addition, internet adoption and digital uses can constitute an important channel for increasing life satisfaction among senior citizens and weaker social groups: people from low economic strata and those suffering from health problems that interfere with day-to-day functioning. Moreover, in contrast to other powerful factors impacting life satisfaction (income, religiosity, sociability and health problems) this factor can be changed with relative ease, if digital literacy becomes one of the important goals in the national agenda.

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1. Introduction

Extensive empirical literature is emerging on the determinants of life satisfaction as part of mental well-being. Social scientists from various disciplines have tried to understand the factors that impact individual life satisfaction and whether these influential factors, as well as satisfaction with life, have changed over time. Internet connectivity and usage have risen dramatically in the past decade, providing people with greater ease in obtaining information, creating economic and social exchanges, engaging in social activities and online communities and much more. However, the long-term impact of internet adoption and use on individual well-being in general and life satisfaction in particular has received limited attention from scholars. The empirical literature monitoring changes in individuals' well-being in 72 countries from 1972 to 2006 did not include ICT adoption among the influencing factors (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2008). Given the increasingly prominent role of the internet in people's daily lives, an understanding of its influence on individual life satisfaction is crucial.

In addition to its direct and indirect benefits (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Celeste, & Shafer, 2004; Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008; Kim & Kim, 2001; Mossberger, Tolbert, & Stansbury, 2003; Van Dijk, 2005; Zillien & Hargittai, 2009), internet penetration has also had a dramatic side effect: it has created a digital divide between those who have access to information and communication technologies and know how to utilize them, and those who do not (Compaine, 2001). Access to the technology and to its benefits is not equally distributed either between or within nations (Guerrieri & Bentivegna, 2011), including Western countries, and worldwide, older people tend to be on the 'wrong' side of the digital divide (Lissitsa & Chachashvili-Bolotin, 2015; Olphert & Damodaran, 2013). Moreover, senior citizens older than sixty can be identified as the social group having the lowest level of participation in the information society (Fuglsang, 2005). The European Digital Development Index (EDDI) value for the age bracket of 65 and older is constantly below the European average and shows no sign of improvement (Guerrieri & Bentivegna, 2011). Considering that life expectancy has increased substantially (Nimrod, 2013), today a 65-year-old person may expect to live an additional 18.6 years (Greenberg, 2009) and it is important to ensure quality of life for the aging population, which in our time is inextricably linked with internet adoption and use (Shapira, Barak, & Gal, 2007).

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In this context it seems important to indicate how the age based digital divide is reflected in life satisfaction during the period of internet adoption in the early years of the 21st century. Thus, the main goal of the current research is to examine the impact of internet adoption and uses on life satisfaction among the senior population (ages 65+) in Israel, compared to those still in the labor market (ages 20–64) during the decade spanning 2003–2012.

We will begin by defining life satisfaction, after which we will discuss the impact of internet adoption and use on life satisfaction in general. Following this we will focus on the impact of internet adoption and use on life satisfaction in the older population.

2. Literature review

2.1. Life satisfaction

Subjective well-being is determined by affective, cognitive and emotional components (Diener, Emmos, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). The affective component is represented by perceived quality of life, the cognitive component by general satisfaction and the emotional component by level of depression. Shin and Johnson (1978) define life satisfaction as an overall assessment of one's own quality of life based on one's personal judgment and criteria. According to Diener (1984), life satisfaction is best measured by asking individuals to rate their satisfaction with life as a whole, as opposed to totaling up their satisfaction in specifically defined areas. Other researchers in the field concur with this approach (e.g., Kahneman & Krueger, 2006; Bohnke, 2008).

The main predictors of life satisfaction are health, employment status, marital status, social capital, income, education, religiosity and ethnicity. In other words, individuals who are healthier, non-immigrants, married, employed, more religious, and have higher income and extensive social networks are more likely to report higher satisfaction with life (Amit & Litwin, 2010; Bonini, 2008; Blanchflower & Oswald, 2008; Dolan, Peasgood, & White, 2008; Easterlin, 2001; Frijters, Johnson & Shields, 2011; Helliwell, 2006; Helliwell & Putnam, 2004; Tomás, Sancho, Gutiérrez, & Galiana, 2014). However, the findings about the impact of education and age on life satisfaction are ambiguous. Researchers have reported a positive impact of education on life satisfaction (Cheung & Chan, 2009; Davis & Friedrich, 2004), as well as a negative impact (Rao, Tamta, & Kumari, 2014). Studies have revealed different factors that can mediate the negative impact of education on life satisfaction, such as a mismatch between job and education (Artés, Salinas-Jiménez, & Salinas-Jiménez, 2013), as well as educational aspirations that exceed opportunities (Ferrante, 2009).

Some studies found no relationship between age and life satisfaction (e.g., Diener & Suh, 1998), others reported a weak positive linear association (e.g., Hansson, Hillerns, & Forsell, 2005) or a weak negative relationship (e.g., Chen, 2001). Helliwell and Putnam (2004) showed that compared to a younger group, people age 65 and above reported more life satisfaction. Perhaps one of the most influential studies in recent year pertaining to these two variables was that conducted by Blanchflower and Oswald (2008) based on cross-sectional data from multiple nations. The study demonstrated that life satisfaction follows a curvilinear pattern that reaches its nadir at middle age but then increases into later adulthood. Likewise, Lockenhoff and Carstensen (2004) found that subjective well-being either increases or remains stable with age, even in the face of decreasing health. One explanation for this paradoxical finding is that several life domains (e.g., social life) improve with age so that increases in those domains offset decreases in others (e.g., health) (McAdams, Lucas & Donnellan, 2012).

As can be seen from the above findings, it is not possible to draw an unequivocal conclusion about correlation patterns between age and life satisfaction. In our focus on life satisfaction among those aged 65 + in this study, we do not treat age as a sequential variable but rather as a dichotomous variable where the 20–64 age group serves as the control group.

2.2. The impact of internet adoption and use on life satisfaction

The findings in the research literature are ambiguous regarding the impact of internet use on well-being and life satisfaction. The direction of the relationship between these variables may be positive or negative, depending on how internet use influences the social processes that contribute to mental health. If internet use facilitates these processes, we would expect psychological well-being to increase with internet use. For example, internet offers users greater opportunities and resources for promoting their careers, work, education and social status (DiMaggio et al., 2004; Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008; Kim & Kim, 2001; Mossberger et al., 2003; Van Dijk, 2005; Zillien & Hargittai, 2009) and enhancing income and social mobility, which correlate positively with individual well-being. The appropriate use of internet in areas such as online news, online forums, online counseling, etc. can help to promote self-sufficiency, psychological empowerment, lifelong learning, and a higher quality of life (Fowler, Gentry, & Reisenwitz, 2015; Hu & Leung, 2003; Leung, 2010). In the same vein, e-mail and social media facilitate the building and maintaining of social relations or online interactions with people that users have never met physically (Pénard & Poussing, 2010; Shklovski, Kiesler, & Kraut, 2006) by facilitating rapid communications across large geographical distances. Consequently, these online activities can generate greater well-being by improving and expanding social capital which is known to be one of the main factors influencing life satisfaction (Elgar et al., 2011; Oh, Ozkaya, & Larose, 2014).

Another reason to presume a positive relation between internet use and happiness is that nowadays, access to the internet is perceived as a social norm in developed countries. Non-internet users might feel ostracized or socially excluded even if they do not feel the desire to adopt the internet (Khvorostianov, Elias, & Nimrod, 2012; Stepanikova, Nie, & He, 2010).

However, internet use might also have detrimental effects. Since internet activities are largely performed in solitude and displace potentially more interactive social activities, people who spend large amounts of time on the internet may end up feeling socially isolated, cause a decline in mood (Sagioglou & Greitemeyer, 2014) and low life satisfaction (Kim, LaRose, & Peng, 2009; Stepanikova et al., 2010). Moreover, researchers have reported compulsive internet use (Muusses, Finkenauer, Kerkhof, & Billedo, 2014), which reflects an internet addiction (Cheng & Li, 2014), problematic or pathological internet use (e.g., Caplan, 2002; Davis, 2001; Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2000), internet dependence (e.g., Wang, 2001) and associated lower psychological wellbeing (Chou, Condron, & Belland, 2005; Widyanto & Griffiths, 2006). The internet might also create addictive behavior (e.g., gambling, online gaming, pornography) and thus be detrimental to mental health (Banjanin, Banjanin, Dimitrijevic, & Pantic, 2015; Li & Chung, 2006).

Although many studies have addressed various implications of internet use on different aspects of well-being, including life satisfaction, as far as we know research examining the impact of internet adoption and use on life satisfaction over time on a large sample of participants has not yet been conducted.

2.3. Internet adoption and its impact on life satisfaction among the older population

Aging is often accompanied by various physical and mental problems including deteriorating health and cognitive functioning.

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