



## ONLINE MEDIA LITERACY OF INDIAN ELDERLY: PERCEPTIONS AND CHALLENGES

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** *New media and technology have become imperative for us for every walk of life. While we hear that India is the youngest nation, we somehow tend to neglect the population that is not younger. Our senior citizens – those above 55 are also an equally important part of the society. With improved medical conditions and increased life expectancy, they are usually in an earning and healthy state. Technology to them does not come as naturally as it does to the youth, who were sort of born into it. The purpose of this study is to find out if the senior citizens are keen to learn the digital ways of life and whether they have an environment conducive for them to do so.*

**Design/ Methodology/Approach:** *a mix of quantitative and qualitative research methods was employed to gain an in depth understanding of the objectives. Observation and informal interviews at four mobile stores and cyber cafes gave elementary peep into the behaviour of the senior citizens at these hubs. Four focus Group Discussions were conducted with eight participants – four males and females each, with non-users and users of the internet. Sixteen in depth interviews were used to have a detailed deliberation on the online usage behaviour, perceptions, reactions and willingness. An online survey was conducted with 150 respondents of all age groups and genders.*

**Findings:** *Senior citizens are keen to learn and use the online media on their phones and computers for day today activities involving work, entertainment and connectivity. The challenge is dearth of learning opportunities and lack of time with their family members to teach them. The government needs to have policies to give the senior citizens opportunities and push towards learning and using the new media and technology.*



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### INTRODUCTION

The world is changing at a lightening pace. Technology is modifying every action- any thought- all the ways. People born six or seven or eight decades ago are overwhelmed by the fast alterations in the methods of living. We now talk, shop, date, learn, entertain and educate ourselves, all - over the phone or the computer, fuelled by the internet. The new media is the new way of life. With such changes, is it expected for the senior citizens to follow pace? Are they too old to learn the new ways of the new media? Or can



they have a lease of life if they are given opportunities to train in the new technologies. Is the adoption of methods possible or would it be a steep slope for them?

India is a young nation with burgeoning population in their twenties. With the scope of this generation as a market, companies, and the governments alike, seem to be worried only about this Generation – the Gen X and Gen Y. Are we ignoring the population who is past its capacity of being an active workforce? Is technology rendering them outdated? Can this very technology come to their rescue and give them beautiful second innings? Can the senior citizens, who were born, educated and worked before the internet invaded the world, still use it to their advantage? Can we train them to be new media savvy? Will they be willing to go up that learning curve? Or is new media not for the old? All this was explored in the research study discussed here.

Excerpt from a famous poem sets the ball rolling for the base of this research: “The Little Boy and the Old Man - said the little boy, "Sometimes I drop my spoon." Said the old man, "I do that too." The little boy whispered, "I wet my pants." I do that too," laughed the old man. Said the little boy, "I often cry." The old man nodded, "So do I." But worst of all," said the boy, "it seems Grown-ups don't pay attention to me." And he felt the warmth of a wrinkled old hand. I know what you mean, said the old man.” — Shel Silverstein.

The pain of an old man, ignored by the society is beautifully portrayed in these few lines. Folk lore and literature emerge out of our society and culture. Media mirrors the society and even inspires it by shaping public opinion. A lot of inspiring stories are covered about the young blood. Forbes, Film fare, Business Today – all these magazines are known for bringing out lists of the young and the dynamic. And in all this hallaboo and wooing the young, the media sometimes seems to ignore the ‘Old’. Coverage of the elderly in our newspapers and television stories is like finding a needle in the haystack. And whatever little is said about the elderly, is not a healthy portrayal. And with the power of the media to influence opinions and dictate the State Policy, the minimal mention of the seniors in the media somehow results in them becoming marginalised when policy making is concerned.

### **The Internet**

The internet is a global network connecting millions of computers. More than 190 countries are linked into exchange of data, news and opinions. According to Internet Live Stats as of December 30, 2020 there were an estimated 4.66 billion internet users worldwide. The number of internet users represents nearly 40% of the world’s population. The largest number of internet users are of China, followed by the United States and India. Internet provides a variety of information and communication facilities, consisting of interconnected networks using standardized communication. There are a variety of ways to access the internet. Most online services offer access to some internet services. It is also possible to gain access through a commercial ISP.

### **Usage of Internet in India**

There are 4.66 billion internet users in the world today. The total number of internet users around the world grew by 319 million in the past 12 months – almost 875,000 new users each day.



The Indian population is unevenly distributed on the basis of income. Rich gets richer and poor remains poor. Because of the uneven distribution of income among the classes India has a lot of disparity with respect to availability of resources

According to a survey conducted by IMRB and IAMAI (Internet and Mobile Association of India)

- Mumbai is the top Internet using city in the country in 2019 with over 11.7 million users
- Delhi (including NCR) comes second with 11.2 million internet use Kolkata is in third place
- Tech city Bangalore is a low No. 6

The survey also found that towns with a population of less than 2 lakh collectively returned a much higher number of Internet users than the top four metros put together.

The sample size of the survey comprised 13,065 households and 49,942 individuals in the urban segment, and 3,500 households and 13,209 individuals in the rural sector.

#### Uses of Internet in day today life:

- Best information retrieval systems available.
- Most effective means of communication
- Business transactions
- People can take action and avoid adverse circumstances. For instance, hurricane, storms and accidents can be tracked through the internet
- Interchange of ideas and resources
- Millions of books, journals and other material
- Digitization of public domains
- Enable to learn all new sorts of things.

#### Little Discussed Demographic Group

Situation Analysis of The Elderly in India by Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation, GOI, revealed, most senior citizens to be:

- Working
- Economically Independent
- Financially Active
- Most from India's middle-class or more affluent groups, where better long-term nutrition and healthcare has extended lifespans far beyond the current national average of 66 years.
- 100m Indians are above age of 60
- World's second-largest senior population after China
- Will rise to 170m in next 13 years

United Nations Population Fund and Help Age India Report (2018), cites that:

- 9% Indian Population elderly
- Growing @ 500 %
- 20% by 2050



- India had 90 million elderly persons in 2011
- The number expected to grow to 173 million by 2026

This research took its sample from Delhi, hence let us look at how this city treats its aging population.

- Delhi is hard for old people
- Chaotic and Crowded City
- Social Isolation
- Transportation Problem
- Traditional extended family safety net eroded by rapid social economic transformation.

### State Policies

- The National Policy on Older Persons: 1999.  
A step in pursuance of the UN General Assembly Resolution 47/5 to observe 1999 as the International Year of Older Persons
- National Programme for Health Care for Elderly in 2010, with the basic aim to provide separate and specialised comprehensive health care to senior citizens Did not quite take off
- The enactment of the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007, was a legislative milestone Implementation poor
- Why no ICT policy / Provisions for Our Senior Citizens?

### Internet and Senior Citizens

Nelson report 2020:

- People from the age of 18-24 uses internet the most
- Hardly any elderly uses the internet

However, various researches reveals:

- The retired population is keen on adapting to the new technology
- They want to learn internet usage eagerly
- Internet is bridging the gap between generations
- Many gadgets are being marketed for the senior citizens like mobile phones for the senior citizens.

National Trust UK: Ageing and the Use of the Internet Current Engagement and Future Needs, reveals:

- Research into how the internet is, and can be, used to support those over 65
- Highlights the mechanisms, themes and social situations that best enable this group to benefit from the internet.
- Approaches to support people over the age of 65 to get online in a sustained and meaningful way
- Highlights supportive and innovative approaches that are being developed or in place

### OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

For the purpose of this study, the terms will be used to mean:

**Senior Citizen:** and Elderly are interchangeably used to for a person who has attained age of 55+ in this research or a person who is retired or about to get retired.



**Challenge:** difficulty in a job or undertaking that is stimulating to one engaged in it. We refer to hinderances faced by the elderly population during the process of learning internet, environmental factors, financial conditions, anxiety of using technology, age a major factor, memory and eye sight.

**Perception:** The act or faculty of perceiving, or apprehending by means of the senses or of the mind; cognition; understanding.

Here we refer to the point of view of the youngsters towards the usage of internet by their parents or grandparents.

**Reality:** Something that exists independently of all other things and from which all other things derive. Here we refer to, the actual fact which is still hidden from the society and the youngsters is about their grandparents and their curiosity of learning internet.

### OBJECTIVES

A plethora of research focus on only youngsters being online users. According to the Nelson report 2019 people from the age of 18-24 use internet the most and there is no mention of the internet usage by the elderly. But with the passing time it is evident that age group of internet users have changed in past few years. Not only people below the age of 24 use internet but their parents and grandparents are getting curious to learn internet.

While travelling in metros, buses, visiting mobile stores or cyber cafes, we see elderly using internet for whatsapp to talk to their friends and play games. Facebook is really in trend for the seniors as they also want to walk with us in this digitalised world.

Based upon review of literature and life observations, this research aims to find out:

- If the senior citizens use internet for personal work
- The perception of the youngsters towards the internet usage by the elderly
- Whether the environmental factors are conducive or hindering for the seniors to learn the digital ways of life
- Whether the senior citizens are keen to adapt to the new media

### THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

This study gets its theoretical base from the following theories:

**Medium is the Message:** "The medium is the message" is a phrase coined by Marshall McLuhan meaning that the form of a medium embeds itself in the message, creating a symbiotic relationship by which the medium influences how the message is perceived.

For this study, internet is the medium. When the medium changes, the message and its' meaning also changes with age and various other factors.

**Technological Determinism:** is a reductionist theory that presumes that a society's technology drives the development of its social structure and cultural values. This theory says that only through medium we grow in this technological world. Technology is the extension of man, but few who are fast learners adapt this technological change. This study aims to find out how the old would actually adapt to these technological changes around them.



**Diffusion of Innovation:** explains how, why, and at what rate new ideas and technology spread through cultures. Everett Rogers, proposes that four main elements influence the spread of a new idea: the innovation itself, communication channels, time, and a social system. The categories of adopters are: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards.

This theory says that there are different kinds of people who according to their adapting levels and age learn new technologies. Some are swift learners while some are moderate. Everyone adopts technology according to their capabilities. But age is a big factor. Thus this theory gives a broad framework to this study.

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

**Pew Research, Internet Project (Washington, Dc 20036):** Social media use by age group over time. The way we have a life shell, and everything in this world has a phase which will go after some time to welcome a new phase of it, it could be technology, us or anything. This was an amazing research which showed almost every country's demographics on the basis of internet usage. This research said that:

- 71% of online elderly use Facebook,
- 23% of online elderly use twitter,
- 26% of online elderly use Instagram,
- 8% use LinkedIn and Pinterest

**The New Yorker – September 10, 2019:** An article by Maria Konnikova outlined that, it is not compulsory that you always feel happy with using Facebook or any social side. This was an article on how Facebook makes us unhappy.

**Times of India, PTI/July 15, and 2019:** 50% of adult internet users seek social media vacation. This article talks about how people desperately want a break from their social media life as they are irritated with their continuous pings and mails and notifications.

**Z News, ANI, and January 13, 2018:** A study shows 80% of adult internet users own smart phones (research done in Washington). There has been a 47% increase in the purchase of tablets which directly or indirectly increases the internet users.

**Bridging the generation gap across the digital divide:** Teens teaching internet skills to senior citizens, 2018: This research was carried out in order to bridge the gap between the generations through internet. This was a pilot project carried out on a large scale of population.

**The U.S. department of commerce (2020)** reports that people over the age of 50 had the lowest rate of internet use (30%) compared to the other age groups. However usage increased 11% from 1998 (19%). Research shows that the senior citizens are interested in learning and using computers, citing various benefits:

- Socialization,
- Learning new skills,
- Researching special interest,



- Staying informed of current events,
- Personal financial management,
- Developing online companionship,
- Shopping,
- Keeping in touch with family and friends and,
- Assisting the homebound or disabled.

Several programs have been established in which youth and young adults teach computer skills to older adults. Seniors who participate in these programs shows a positive change in attitudes towards computers and the Internet, and a gain in confidence in their own proficiency with technology.

Pre- and post – test evaluation and retrospective thinking techniques were used to collect data on change in skills and attitudes over time with participation in the project as either a teen trainer or a work workshop participant, focus group study for the teenagers and a survey. The results indicated that not only the seniors loved to learn internet and computers but also the teenagers handling this project turned out to be a good leader.

### **METHODOLOGY**

Triangulation approach combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to gain in depth understanding and generalization were employed.

The four fold research tools were used:

- Observation and informal interviews
- Focus group discussions,
- In-depth interviews
- Survey, choosing participants and respondents by purposive ad snowball sampling.

Observations at two mobile stores and two cybercafés, to discover the participation of elderly into the usage of internet at these spots.

Three informal interviews with the staff at these places. To unearth the perception towards the usage of internet by the seniors, sixteen in-depth interviews were conducted, with four users of internet equally divided in terms of gender and profession, four non users of internet.

Four focus group discussions of different age groups. An online survey of 150 respondents.

### **ANALYSIS OF RESULTS:**

#### **Observations and Informal Interviews:**

Senior citizens visit mobile stores for latest internet plans and Wi-Fi connections. The monthly footfall of elderly in Vodafone store was nearly 50.

Where as in Airtel mobile store, daily 3-4 elderly people i.e., approximately 150 elderly come for internet plans, Wi-Fi connections and to learn internet from the executives. It was also observed that they are curious to learn internet but because their own family members are not patient enough to assist them, they Visit the store to get help from the executives there.



While at the cybercafés, there were less elder customers. Very few came and that too for a print out or so. As per the mobile stores managers, elderly people do want to use internet. But because of their age they are not very quick in the process.

Many time elderly (age 60+) come for 3G internet plans for their usage, and they try to learn it there and then. So there is a shift of internet users which is going unseen by many people, youngsters and the producers of big technology companies and may be this is the reason that the elderly population finds their surroundings unfriendly.

Airtel launched its one touch plan for elderly so that they can use it easily. Similarly Samsung launched a specialised phone for the senior citizens with special and different features. Vodafone doesn't provide any special plans for elderly people because they are the slow learner. But they do come for internet plans and that too because most of their children are settled out of Delhi or India, so need internet to connect with them.

#### **In-Depth Personal Interviews:**

Sixteen in-depth interviews conducted for both users and non-users – 8 users of internet (4males +4 females) and 8 non users (4 males and 4 females) in the age group of 55 to 84.

#### **Responses from Users:**

People do use internet, and age does not matter at all. “Sikhne ki koi umar nahi hoti.” Says Mr H.A. Bindra, retired engineer (age 84 years old). He was the eldest internet user interviewed. He had started using internet a year ago in order to track his trade and shares online. And with that he became an internet user who uses it not just for official work but also for doing shopping for his wife. According to him, internet is not a curse it is God's blessing to human beings. He generally uses his mobile phone and laptop for accessing internet. He is very happy being an internet user and wants to convey to his non-users' friends that they should learn internet; it makes your life easy.

All the users generally use internet for official work and apart from that they use it for connecting to friends and family across the world. They believe that internet is something which cannot be neglected by anyone and everyone should use it and if they don't know how to use internet they are not a part of this globalised world where every person is connected with each other through internet.

According to all the users, government should provide senior citizens some internet learning classes and special perks to them so that they don't have to rely on anyone to teach them.

#### **Responses from the non-users:**

“Kaash mujhe bhi koi internet sikha deta.” says retired principal Mr Manoharlal Sunaria (79 years old). He is a non-user but he wants to learn internet but according to him the younger generation is more aggressive towards them and don't have the patience to make them learn. On the other side he is fine without internet in his life as he believe that at least when he don't know how to use internet banking, online bill payments he can go to banks and phone stores to pay his bill which gives him immense happiness as he gets the chance to walk and talk with other people. He loves to walk, he is happily retired person. But if someone patiently can teach him internet he would love to.





The nonusers believe that government can not do anything for seniors like them, because providing special internet learning classes will not help them unless they are interested or are willing to learn themselves.

#### **Focus Group Discussions:**

All the elderly should learn internet and senior citizens are keen learners of internet.

Internet is very important in today's time. The Users, use internet for: official work, online shopping, social media, connecting to family and friends, watching cookery shows, doing Skype with their children living abroad, their grandchildren's home work and assignments. They started this with encouragement for their children . because their children want them to learn internet.

The non-users showed keen interest in learning the new technology only if their children would be more encouraging. Poor financial condition, weakening eye sight, memory lapses, tender body are not to deter them, if they get the opportunity.

#### **Survey:**

An online questionnaire comprising eighteen questions was used to gather data from 150 digital citizens to know their options on the usage of the new media by the old of their society. The results indicate:

- 100% respondents use internet.
- 23% respondents were of age group 55-70+ ; 63.1% were of age group 18-26
- 79.2% use internet for more than two hours a day
- 68.5% of the users spent less than 1000rs in a month on internet while 25.5% spent more than 1000rs a month
- 82.6% suggested that people above the age of 55 should learn internet. 2.7% says that they should not
- 92.1 % use smart phones
- 83.2% feel the government should provide special classes and perks to the senior citizens so that they can learn internet while 16.8% believe otherwise
- 52.3% of the youngsters have tried to teach internet to their grandparents and parents while 47.7% have never tried because of their literacy and age factors
- 51.7% of the people think that 55+ people are keen to learn internet

#### **CONCLUSION**

Everyone uses internet in one of the other form either for personal or for professional work. Contrary to the general notion that only youngsters are new media consumers, the reality is that senior citizens too are digital natives – willing and capable of embracing the new technology. Also, the results clearly indicate that the learning is not subject to gender or age.

Youngsters have a positive attitude towards the internet use by the elderly. The environmental factors were found to be non-conducive for the senior citizens to learn the new technology, The senior citizens were seen to have a lot of value addition by adapting to the digital world. They use the apps and sites for online shopping and social connectivity.



This study unearthed some perceptions of society and youngsters towards the senior citizens becoming digitally literate and the challenges faced by them.

The notion of the society is that, senior citizens don't need internet. But the elderly are inclined to get digital education and use it thereafter.

The only challenge for them is the lack of learning opportunities.

There are many policies for senior citizens for their wealth, health and livelihood but there are no such policies for senior citizens like special internet plans, special learning classes for them or anything related to ICTs.

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

Usage of internet is very common in the entire world. There have been many researches on internet, internet users, youngsters using internet but hardly on the elderly internet users. This research is not only useful for media students but also for the producers of mobile companies, network providers who are just not paying attention to this part of the population. The government is making wonderful schemes for the livelihood of senior citizens but none in regards to internet. This study has shown that there a lot of senior citizens using internet on regular basis which is going unseen by many people. This research leaves behind a lot of scope for future research. First and foremost, it leaves scope for a similar research to be conducted with different audience groups and over a longer period of time. Understanding the perceptions and reality of youngsters and elderly.

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