

Still Hungry for Information: Information Seeking Behavior of Senior Citizens in South Korea

Sumi Kim¹ and Heekyung Choi¹

¹Seoul National University

Abstract

In Korea, the rapid development of information and communication technologies and the aging of the society have caused a wide information gap between generations and the effective exclusion of the elderly. As such, this research attempts to discover ways in which the modern elderly in Korea's metropolitan areas seek information, as well as factors that influence their attitudes. The results of this field study show that the elderly people value interpersonal relationships most when seeking information. They actively seek information from human information sources, which in turn triggers further information seeking. Seniors do use digital devices, but there is a high barrier that prevents them from actively using digital devices to locate information. These findings would bring meaningful insight with which to investigate "new seniors," the generation of seniors who possesses digital literacy, in the future.

Keywords: information seeking behavior, senior citizens, new seniors, information gap; digital literacy

Citation: Kim, S., & Choi, H. (2014). Still Hungry for Information: Information Seeking Behavior of Senior Citizens in South Korea. In *iConference 2014 Proceedings* (p. 889–894). doi:10.9776/14300

Copyright: Copyright is held by the authors.

Contact: tnal0922@snu.ac.kr, hkoong16@snu.ac.kr

1 Introduction

Korea has been experiencing unprecedented speed in population aging, which has created various social concerns. Consequently, social interest in seniors has increased. At the same time, the information gap between generations has widened amidst the rapid development of information and technologies (Dewan & Riggins, 2005).

The majority of Korea's elderly have typical characteristics. They have devoted their lives to supporting their children, and as a consequence, they have not been adequately prepared for their senior years. In addition, these seniors have relatively low levels of education and have not had access to digital devices until reaching their senior years, so their learning capabilities for digital devices are low. This low digital literacy gives rise to an information gap, contributing to socioeconomic inequality and obstruction of social integration (Norris, 2003).

To close this information gap, it is critical to understand the ways that senior citizens seek out and obtain information. The elderly often prefer face-to-face communication, which also improves their self-esteem (Vela-McConnell, 1999). We observed and interviewed some Korean seniors in order to understand their information-seeking patterns. Based on the findings, we are proposing an information-seeking behavior model for Korean seniors.

2 Research Setting

The subjects of this research are the seniors in the Budnae Senior Center located in Suwon, a metropolitan area in Korea. Most participants had few restrictions on their physical activities and communication capability. The center had various information media sources, such as newspapers, TVs, and personal computers (PCs). The senior center collaborates with several voluntary organizations, including churches and schools. For example, the schools offer informational and educational services to the center and seniors from the center provide lectures about gardening. Vibrant information-seeking activities take place there.

The senior center is similar to YMCA community centers in the United States, which act as a social welfare institution helping seniors to socialize. However, unlike the YMCA's paid membership and program-oriented activities, general Korean institutions for seniors have strong welfare characteristics with government financial support. The centers usually offer free memberships and provide gathering places for seniors with low incomes.

3 Method

We observed the seniors in their natural settings and conducted individual semi-structured interviews to identify the factors influencing their information-seeking activities.

3.1 Observations

We observed seniors in the center for a total of 6 hours, 3 hours each day on two weekdays. There were approximately 200 seniors in the center when we were observing. Seniors were participating in daily activities such as playing Go and Pocket Ball. Observations were conducted using noninvasive methods to accurately understand the contexts.

During the observations, we found that seniors frequently talked about health and hobbies. While discussing the information, we observed the seniors taking various roles as information sources and triggers for additional information needs.



Figure 1: The Senior Observation (Playing Go and Pocket Ball)

3.2 Interview

Interviews were conducted based on the observation results to confirm seniors' information-seeking behavior. We recruited 7 interviewees with the help of the center. We asked the seniors what kind of information they needed regarding health and hobbies. We also asked how they pursued their information needs and why they needed the information. In-depth one-on-one interviews were held with 3 women and 4 men in their seventies. Each interview was about 30 minutes long.

4 Findings

The study result showed that seniors mainly needed information about health and hobbies. Preferred sources for the information were people, TVs, and newspapers. This result reconfirmed previous research findings that showed that seniors need information about health, hobbies, and entertainment programs (Kim et al., 2011).

The interviews revealed that the seniors' main source of information was their fellow seniors. These interactions with other seniors enhanced their interpersonal relationships and self-satisfaction. The seniors

also showed strong information needs with regard to their particular individual interests. However, they tended to avoid unfamiliar topics, because of high entry barriers to advanced information devices.

4.1 Lonely but Active to Seek Information

The Budnae Senior Center served about 25,000 senior members in their 60s, 70s, and 80s.¹ The observation subjects were physically and mentally healthy, but most had no job and had not prepared for their senior years. Today's seniors (aged 65 and older) often have family-centered lifestyles and low levels of education. Many of them live separately from their children, without a spouse. Loneliness is a common problem for these seniors.

“It's very painful for someone to sit idle and do nothing. I can't just die either, right? That's why I come here every morning and get along with people. Loneliness is the most fearful thing for someone living alone. Like me.”

Furthermore, the seniors' use of information is insignificant compared to that of younger generations. Although Internet use, generally, has been found to strengthen people's existing interpersonal relationships and maintain friendship networks (Valentine & Holloway, 2002), most seniors are not aware of the benefits of social networking services. However, the desire for acquiring and learning customized information is actually as high as that of the younger generation. We also discovered that the seniors tended to prioritize happy lives and pursue a variety of information, improving social relationships.

4.2 People as Primary Information Resources

The most noticeable information-gathering characteristic of the seniors was that people, particularly their peers, were the key sources, as well as triggers, that created information needs.

One reason for this might be the role of Korean culture in interpersonal relationships. The seniors share information through interpersonal interactions, which also reconfirms the meaning of their existence and raises their self-esteem (Sung, 1991). This is significantly important for the seniors who show relatively low levels of social participation, compared to people of younger generations (Armbruster & Armstrong, 1993; Sagiv & Schwartz, 2000).

However, seniors have difficulty acquiring information through digital devices. From the interview, we learned that this is due to the high costs of learning and the psychological burdens from their low learning efficiency. According to a related survey, seniors avoid digital devices due to the difficulty of use; additionally, they also do not feel the need for such devices (Van Dijk & Hacker, 2003).

“Now I'm an old man. Old people don't like complicated things. Even if smart phones were free, I don't want the complications. They're a headache. I ended up avoiding them.”

4.3 Comparison with the Younger Generation's Information Seeking

The Korean seniors preferred to communicate with people who share their experience. This is because they tend to customize practical information based on shared contexts. Particularly in Korea, customized information is very useful because there were large generational gaps, such as previous educational background (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989; Sung, 1991).

¹ <http://www.budnae.or.kr/website/index.php>

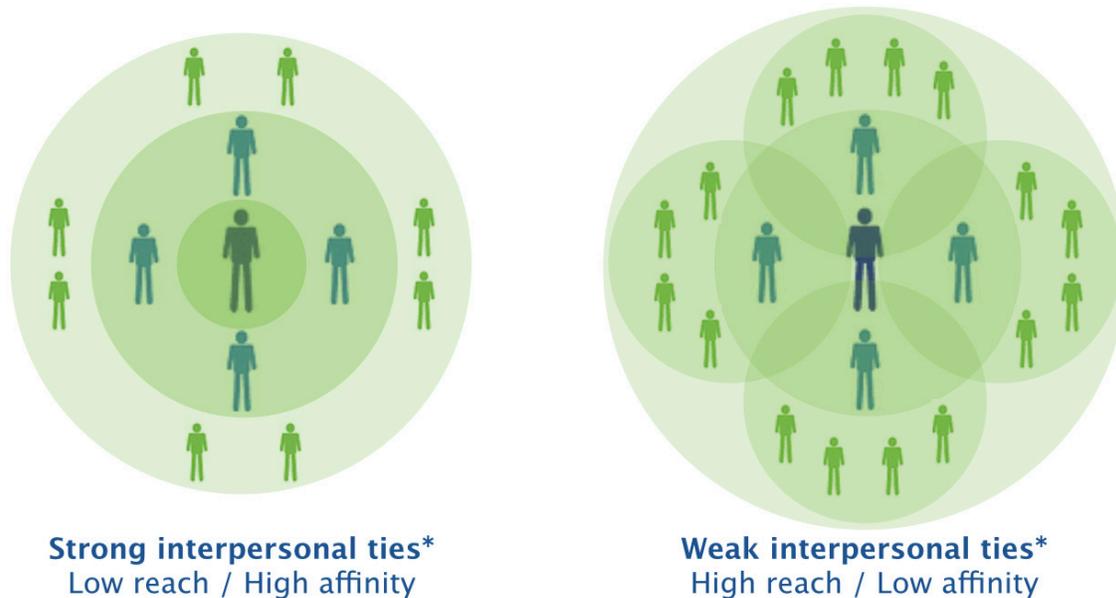


Figure 2: Hierarchical Layered Structures for Information Seeking Behavior for the Seniors (Granovetter, 1973)

Figure 3: Hierarchical Layered Structures for Information Seeking Behavior for Younger Generations (Granovetter, 1973)

As a result, the seniors' range of information sources was limited (low reach). However, they tended to have a strong relationship with their information sources (high affinity) (Turner, 2004). This shows hierarchical layered structures with regard to information-seeking behavior (Sung, 1991). Figure 2 shows that seniors often found human information resources among those with whom they had close relationships. Furthermore, from the interviews, we found information-seeking behaviors usually took place below the third layer, which corresponded to less chance of using unfamiliar information sources.

On the other hand, most numbers of younger generations showed weak interpersonal relationships, with large-scale complex networks (high reach, low affinity) (Turner, 2004). This expansion is made possible by various network-based communication tools (Dewan & Riggins, 2005). Figure 3 expresses the broad range of human information resources of the younger generations. However, most of the diverse relationships are based on weak interpersonal ties (Sung, 1991). Figures 2 and 3 imply that the number of close relationships is similar between the older generation and the younger generations (Greene et al., 1989; Kim et al., 2011).

5 An Information-Seeking Model of Korean Seniors

Drawing on Dervin & Nilan (1986) and Wilson (2000), an information-seeking behavior model of the Korean seniors is suggested based on the findings above (Figure 4).

Information needs arise from various environmental triggers. Then, entry barriers are evaluated based on the individual's contexts, followed by the decision to seek information or not. In the information-seeking process, appropriate information resources are searched first and some of them are selected for gathering information. After collecting information, seniors use the information when they need it. If it fails or proves inadequate or unsatisfactory during the process, jumping to any stage is always possible.

In the case of seniors, their information sources are usually fellow seniors with a shared context. Once information is collected, it is either discarded or used once and memorized. The memory can be used as a resource or trigger, leading to another information-seeking behavior.

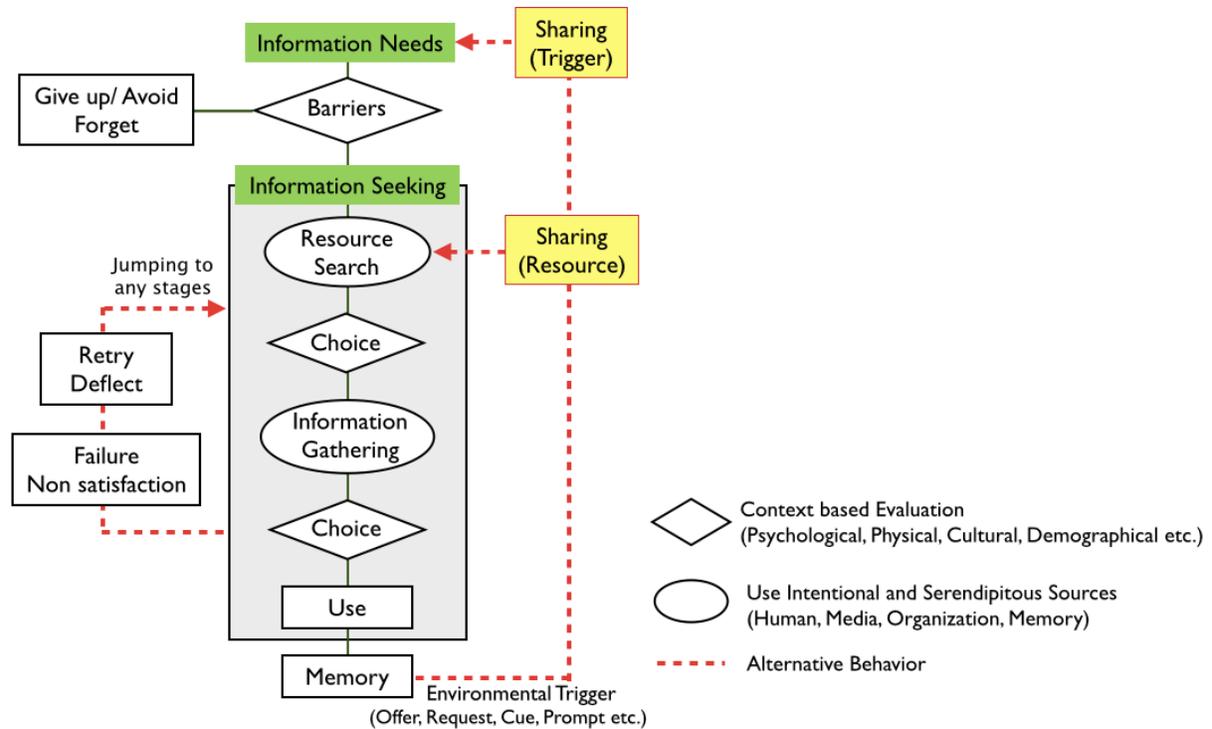


Figure 4: Information-Seeking Behavior Model of Senior in Korea

6 Conclusion

The goal of this poster was to understand Korean seniors' information-seeking behavior, especially in Korea's metropolitan area located in Suwon. This study has limitations for explaining generally Korean seniors. Also, there are many contexts that cannot be explained by the model presented here.

However, by understanding the seniors' relatively limited information-acquiring opportunities, this research can be used to design information systems or to develop social policies to help seniors' information-seeking in the future. Additionally, more specific studies on seniors' information-seeking and information-sharing activities would help bridge the information gap. A transition from traditional seniors to "new seniors," who possess digital literacy, has been taking place across the world. In such a transitional period, we expect that the findings from this study can be useful for solving the various social issues caused by the rapid development of information technologies and rapidly aging populations.

7 References

- Armbruster, B. B., & Armstrong, J. O. (1993). Locating information in text: A focus on children in the elementary grades. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 18*(2), 139-161.
- Dervin, B., & Nilan, M. (1986). Information needs and uses. *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology, 21*, 3-33.
- Dewan, S., & Riggins, F. J. (2005). The digital divide: Current and future research directions. *Journal of the Association for information systems, 6*(12), 298-337.
- Granovetter, M. S. (1973). The Strength of Weak Ties. *American Journal of Sociology, 78*(6), 1360-1380.
- Greene, J. C., Caracelli, V. J., & Graham, W. F. (1989). Toward a conceptual framework for mixed-method evaluation designs. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 11*(3), 255-274.

- Kim, H.-S., Harada, K., Miyashita, M., Lee, E.-A., Park, J.-K., & Nakamura, Y. (2011). Use of senior center and the health-related quality of life in Korean older adults. *Journal of Preventive Medicine and Public Health, 44*(4), 149-156.
- Norris, P. (2003). *Digital divide: Civic engagement, information poverty, and the Internet worldwide* (Vol. 40), Taylor & Francis.
- Sagiv, L., & Schwartz, S. H. (2000). Value priorities and subjective well-being: Direct relations and congruity effects. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 30*(2), 177-198.
- Sung, K.-T. (1991). Family-centered informal support networks of Korean elderly: The resistance of cultural traditions. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology, 6*(4), 431-447.
- Turner, K. W. (2004). Senior citizens centers: What they offer, who participates, and what they gain. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work, 43*(1), 37-47.
- Valentine, G., & Holloway, S. L. (2002). Cyberkids? Exploring children's identities and social networks in on-line and off-line worlds. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers, 92*(2), 302-319.
- Van Dijk, J., & Hacker, K. (2003). The digital divide as a complex and dynamic phenomenon. *The Information Society, 19*(4), 315-326.
- Vela-McConnell, J. A. (1999). *Who is my neighbor?: social affinity in a modern world*, SUNY Press.
- Wilson, T. D. (2000). Human information behavior. *Informing Science, 3*(2), 49-56.

8 Table of Figures

| | |
|--|-----|
| Figure 1: The Senior Observation (Playing Go and Pocket Ball)..... | 890 |
| Figure 2: Hierarchical Layered Structures for Information Seeking Behavior for the Seniors..... | 892 |
| Figure 3: Hierarchical Layered Structures for Information Seeking Behavior for Younger Generations ... | 892 |
| Figure 4: Information-Seeking Behavior Model of Senior in Korea..... | 893 |