

IT'S ALL A MATTER OF "CHOICE"

Understanding society's expectations of older adult ICT use from a birth cohort perspective

JOHANNA L.H. BIRKLAND AND MICHELLE L. KAARST-BROWN
Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, USA

Abstract. Little research exists that examines older adults and their Information and Communication Technology (ICT) use or society's expectations of their use. Using an intensive interpretive interactionism case study methodology, this paper examines how older adults ages 65-75 (from the Lucky Few birth cohort) view their own use and how other birth cohorts view the Lucky Few's ICT use.

1. Introduction

Several conceptual papers have focused on how older adults (those over age 65 (American Psychological Association, 2008)) risk falling victim to the digital divide, experiencing lower ICT use rates due to lower societal expectations (Millward, 2003). However, no research has actually explored if society expects older adults to be using advanced ICTs. Understanding societal expectations of older adults' ICT use is important because such expectations can influence policy (of governments and institutions), employment (if people are seen as capable), and social support (access to information or technical support). While there are many models of the digital divide (Van Dijk, 2005) we did not enter this study with the presumption that such models would apply nor did we seek to test positivist theory.

This study uses the concept of birth-cohorts¹ to understand expectations of older adults ICT use. Birth-cohorts represent distinct sub-cultures within a society. Members of birth-cohorts experience historical events at roughly the same age range, which means that these events impact members in a similar way. Researchers have found that events such as recessions, wars, and educational system changes tend to impact members of a single birth cohort similarly, while affecting other birth cohorts differently (Carlson, 2009) This paper begins the exploration of whether birth cohorts have distinct expectations of older adults ICT use.

¹ Birth-cohorts (commonly referred to as generations) differ from society to society, in both the "years" that a birth cohort spans and in the cultural attributes of each birth cohort. For example, the "baby boom" that occurred following WWII started much earlier in the US than in European countries, despite the shared event of the war. In addition, shared experiences will differ from country to country and society to society.

2. Literature Review

Birth cohorts (Table 1) each have unique experiences with ICTs because of their relative age at which ICTs were introduced to society. Some technologies have existed since before their birth while others are introduced when a birth cohort is middle or old aged. For instance, for the Lucky Few, wireless radio existed before their birth, television was introduced while they were young, personal computers were introduced into the workforce when they were established in their careers, and smart phones were introduced during retirement. This is a much different experience than Millennials, for whom television, radio, and computers always existed; and smart phones were introduced while they were young adults. Although these ICTs are the same, these birth cohorts have very different experiences with them because of their relative age and life stage (child, adult, working, retired) when they were introduced.

Table 1. Birth Cohorts Living in the US

Birth Cohort Name (Carlson, 2009)	Years of Birth
Good Warriors (World War II Generation)	1909-1928
Lucky Few	1929-1946
Baby Boomers (Boomers)	1947-1964
Generation X	1965-1982
Millennials	1983-2001

The theory of technological generations combines the concept of shared experiences of birth cohorts with technological progress (Larsen, 1993; Rama, De Ridder, & Bouma, 2001). The birth cohorts that are children and young adults when an ICT is introduced set the norms for that ICT's use. These norms then flow downwards to younger birth cohorts (who inherit them) and upwards to older birth cohorts (who must adapt). Individuals in older birth cohorts are often not seen as being "valid" users and may struggle with learning the norms of using new ICTs (Larsen, 1993). Technological generations theory does not state if use expectations vary by birth-cohort. This paper examines if different birth cohorts have different expectations of a single US birth cohort, the Lucky Few. As "young older adults" these individuals will likely have long experiences into the future with ICTs as their life expectancies cover several future decades, suggesting lasting implications for US society.

The Lucky Few represent a small birth cohort born during the Great Depression and WWII. The Lucky Few were more likely to finish secondary education and less likely to suffer long-term health effects than the Good Warriors before them. They reaped many of the benefits that were created for the Good Warrior birth cohort; such as the G.I. Bill (educational benefits for military service) (Carlson, 2008). They were exposed to television, telephones, and radio at a young age. In addition, those who worked were likely exposed to computer technology in the workplace, depending upon occupation type.

3. Method

An intensive, interpretative case study methodology was chosen for this study (Yin, 2009). Each case study consisted of a primary participant (a member of the Lucky Few birth cohort) and several secondary participants (friends, neighbors, family members, or coworkers of the primary participant). Each primary participant was interviewed 3 times for approximately 2 hours each session, using a semi-structured interview methodology to explore their use of and experiences with various ICTs in daily life. The interviews with secondary participants focused on the relationship and expectations of the primary participant or others in the same birth cohort. For this early paper, the results concentrate on 5 female primary participants and the members of their social network (see Table 2). "Jackie's" case did not have secondary participants. She was willing to share her own experiences and expectations, but later became hesitant to ask for further help from her support network. The data was collected and analyzed using an interpretative interactionism approach (Denzin, 1989) and birth cohorts were compared to determine if differences in expectations emerged. With the exception of Jackie's case, each case averaged 11 hours of interviews.

Table 2. Primary and Secondary Participants in Study (Pseudonyms used)

Primary Participant	Secondary Participants		
	Name	Birth Cohort	Relationship w/ Primary Participant
Natalie	Maria	Boomer	Friend
	Jackie	Lucky Few	Friend
Jackie	-	-	-
Alice	Fred	Lucky Few	Romantic Partner
	Julie	Boomer	Friend
	Chloe	Generation X	Friend
Margaret	Bob	Good Warrior	Friend
	Anna	Boomer	Friend, "Sister"
	Charles	Generation X	Neighbor, "Son"
Nancy	Bobbie	Boomer	Friend, Neighbor
	Danielle	Boomer	Friend, "Sister"
	Bette	Boomer	Daughter

4. Perspectives on "Choice"

All of the secondary participants tended to rate the primary participants (their Lucky Few friends, neighbors, and family members) as either "average" or "slightly above average" users of ICTs compared to others in the birth-cohort. This was despite wide variance in ICTs used by primary participants. For example, Nancy had not used a computer in 10+ years but Alice owned 3 computers and a smart phone. What emerges from this data is that ICT use by the Lucky Few is largely seen as a "choice" by those interviewed from other cohorts, however, each cohort held distinct beliefs about the consequences of this choice.

5.1. LUCKY FEWS' EXPECTATIONS OF THEIR COHORT AND OTHERS

Lucky Few individuals tended to express a lack of interest in setting expectations for their own birth cohort's ICT use, and considerable tolerance. Jackie indicated her hesitancy to set expectations: "I have no expectations... I use what I want, others should too." Most often, they would describe their inability to "rate" their peers was due to the vast differences they saw in use. Alice, a relatively sophisticated ICT user stated, "There's so much diversity. There are people like Fred who teach it, and there are people who don't own a computer and don't want one. And that's O.K."

The Lucky Few were more than happy to speak about their opinions of younger birth cohorts. There was expressed distaste for the over-enthusiasm they felt younger birth cohorts showed for new ICTs, such as social networking and smart phones. Margaret spoke about her Boomer friend: "She's stressed; just stressed beyond belief all the time... And I'm thinking 'you just spent six hours of your day going on Facebook!'" There was also concern expressed that Millennials were "programmed to want the newest things that come off the line!" by advertising and television (Jackie), which was "offensive" (Margaret) to the Lucky Few, who when young, dealt with the Great Depression and a world at war.

While such behavior was seen as distasteful, the Lucky Few were also quick to praise the Millennials' skills. Natalie spoke about needing a "12-year old geek" to help her, while Nancy – a non-computer user -- commented on how texting was "just natural." They also emphasized a perception that Millennials had lost vital skills: "We [the Lucky Few] are better at communicating and young people are better at technology" (Margaret).

5.2. BOOMERS' EXPECTATIONS OF THE LUCKY FEW

Boomers expressed expectations that members of the Lucky Few should be using computers and cell phones. Bette felt: "I would be hoping that they would be kind of tech savvy or at least know what a computer is, like how to turn one on. At least that [level of] savvy... They may not know how to send an e-mail, but hopefully some of them do."

Most of the Boomers felt they co-existed with diverse levels of use among their friends and family who are members of the Lucky Few. "I've got friends that won't even own a cell phone. So it really depends on the personality of the individual and, I think, how much you want to be part of this technological piece," stated Danielle on her impressions of the Lucky Few. Although being a part of the "technological piece" was seen as a choice, choosing not to use ICTs such as the computer, internet, and cell phone was also perceived as limiting and isolating. Julie shared her thoughts about her own mother and how she felt their relationship could have been strengthened through ICTs:

I remember trying desperately to get my mother on a computer...The relationship I wanted to have... There was so much that had changed in technology that I could then share things with my mother like 'oh look here's a picture of this', or 'here's what I'm doing today'... I couldn't have that relationship with my mother because she wasn't into technology. So it limited my world of expression.

Not only did Julie feel her mother's choice limited her mother's (and even her own) expression, but it was seen as preventing them from having a closer relationship, something which she was immensely sad about.

5.3. GENERATION X'S EXPECTATIONS OF THE LUCKY FEW

Generation Xers tended to have a nuanced view of the Lucky Few's use of ICTs, saying that they should be able to use whatever they liked and should not have to use ICTs if they did not want to use them. Charles reflected about the partner of his neighbor, Margaret, "Anything that would make his life more complicated, he doesn't really want to be involved with. It's not that he's an old fart, it's just that his business is fairly well set. And what he does he does and you gotta respect that, you know? It's not stupid, it's a very mature way of looking at stuff." While the theme of choice is still present in the Generation X's mind, older adults are not seen as being affected negatively due to their choices, "Probably many of them don't use it, because why do they need to?" (Chloe)

6. Conclusion

But how do these differences in expectations of choice actually impact the Lucky Few? Mitroff (1983, p. 104) once stated "Irony of ironies: the computer, perhaps THE archetype of the impersonal, cold, calculating science and technology, has itself become the projective dumping ground of humanity's inner psyche." In qualitative studies such as this, the value of these findings is not statistical significance, but in illuminating older adults' feelings, stories, and choices regarding ICT's in their daily lives. This paper shares some early insights on the issue of choice and how people close to these older adults also perceive them.

Some felt that there was clearly a trade-off in skills and opportunities provided by ICT's, making choice a self-determined one. Others interpreted a clear loss in the quality of the relationship when one party chose not to use ICT's. Rather than simply a "digital divide", communication and relationship gaps and even fractures were reported. The issue of self-determination was also not a clear cut one from the side of the Lucky Few participants. All of them felt that society at large did not realize the difficulties they faced in learning, using, and purchasing new ICTs. While most of these struggles were seen as relatively minor (such as not being able to receive a paper bank statement), all expressed worry that such struggles were "the tip of the iceberg" (Margaret), or a "warning signal" (Jackie) that the time will come when the alternatives they depend on will not exist. Another expressed fear that younger birth cohorts will not understand their struggles.

While the theme of choice permeated all of the birth cohorts' perspectives on the Lucky Few, the consequences of this choice was viewed differently by the various birth cohorts. Generation X's view of choice mirrored the Lucky Few's. The Lucky Few tend to be the parents of Generation Xers and it is likely that these two birth cohorts have had substantial contact in school environments and families. Both represent small birth cohorts who were raised during times of political upheaval, depression/ recession, and

war (Carlson, 2009). It could be that similar experiences shaped their views on ICTs. Boomer's, however, seem less sympathetic to the upside of non-use by their older family members or friends. Perhaps this is because they were a generation forced to deal with rampant technological change? It raises the question of whether Millennials will be even less tolerant and hold higher expectations of choices for ICT use in their relationships with others – including older adults.

Several limitations exist in this early study. All primary participants and most secondary participants were female. Much more research is needed to understand if these birth-cohort differences are seen in larger samples and if gender impacts these views. This study has also not interviewed any Millennials to date (and only one Warrior). It is important that future work capture these perspectives and expectations. Despite these limits, the early findings suggest that perceptions of voluntariness or choice in use of ICT's may indeed differ by birth cohort and shape expectations of the roles ICT's should play in older adults' relationships, therefore being a valuable contribution to literature on the digital divide.

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