

University of Washington School of Social Work
yjchoi81@uw.edu

Background

My research focuses on gerontology, social policy on the era of population aging, and impacts of high technologies on older adults' health and psychological well-being with social justice perspectives. Implementing publicly funded Internet-based social services that provide a wide range of professional counseling by health professionals and smartphone-based wander-management technologies for dementia caregivers, I saw the potential of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) as an advanced means in social service delivery system. Simultaneously, I also realized that many caregivers who needed supports could not benefit from the services due to limited access to the Internet or lack of skills to utilize it. Based on the experiences as both researcher and implementer of social service, it has become my long-term research and implementation goal to deploy digital technologies to bring a more comprehensive array of social services particularly to socially disadvantaged groups.

Current Research

My current research agenda is on studying barriers to older adults' access to the Internet and how Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) associate with health and psychological well-being of older adults. Though the Internet and ICTs have enabled more systematic and faster processing of information and increased social interactions than any past means in human history, not all individuals across different social groups commonly benefit from the innovations. Over the past three decades, older adults were considered notably lagged and less motivated in adopting the digital lifestyle under pervasive assumptions that they would generally be reluctant to embrace new technologies. Since they were not main actors in economic growth driven by Internet industries, relatively less public attentions have been paid to possible benefits from digital life among older adults. To reduce inequalities existed since the advent of the information society, expanding Internet connectivity, and deploying social services with ICTs become important future research areas in social welfare.

My most recent projects aim to understand digital divide among older adults with social justice perspectives. For the first paper of my dissertation projects, I completed a review of theories to conceptualize the use of the Internet among older adults and examine them with nationally representative data of older Americans. Through this project, I recognized the importance of accounting for psychological characteristics of older adults, such as perceived ageism and self-esteem, into the studies on their technology adoption. In addition to the existing theories that are generally relying on socioeconomic status as a primary predictor of utilization of the Internet and ICTs, I found that negative labeling on aging affected older Americans' utilization of such technologies. With these deeper understanding in digital divide among older adults, I am examining how gaps in digital life could be associated with inequalities in health and psychological well-being of the population.

Research Experiences and Trainings

Before my doctoral training, I worked for the Korea Institute of Health and Social Affairs (KIHASA) and National Institute of Dementia (NID) that are renowned social policy think tanks in South Korea. I had the privilege as a researcher in both institutes by participating in developing, conducting, and managing national surveys and statistics for implementing social policies for the aging population. Such experiences provided me with hands-on skills in large scale data collection, understanding in the use of empirical data, and data analysis.

During my doctoral training, I have worked for *Aging with Pride: The National Health, Aging, Sexuality and Gender Study*¹ (PI: Karen Fredriksen-Goldsen), the most extensive national study of midlife and older LGBTQ adults, funded by the National Institutes of Health/National Institute on Aging. As a part of this study, I have participated in all aspects of research design and implementation, quantitative data collection, and analysis, and gained experience with the inner workings of longitudinal studies. As a member of this team, I have developed a solid understanding of critical factors contributing to the health and well-being of LGBTQ midlife and older adults', with a focus on racial and ethnic minorities, gender differences, and sequences of life events. Along with practical pieces of training within Aging with Pride, I also have sought opportunities to enhance my expertise in advanced methods beyond the requirements of a graduate degree. I took a wide array of statistics and demographic methods courses from diverse health and social science disciplines and earned two different graduate certificates in advanced social statistics and demographic methods.

Future Research Plans

My dissertation draws from digital literacy, social support, and cognitive enrichment theories to examine the impacts of internet access and use on psychological well-being among older Americans. In my dissertation research, I am seeking to understand three specific topic areas concerning older adults' digital literacy: demographic characteristics and internet use among older adults, digital literacy and older adults' cognitive function, the role of internet access in expanding social support. I found three significant findings from preliminary results. First, older Americans with a higher level of perceived ageism were less likely to have internet access. Second, older adults who regularly used the Internet were less likely to face cognitive impairment. Third, Internet access could strengthen the social networks of older adults and mitigate their depressive mood.

My long-term research goal is to establish a community-engaged research program to produce empirical evidence towards enhancing older Americans' digital literacy and deploying social services via the Internet. This research agenda focuses particularly on nurturing digital environments towards the promotion of access to the Internet and developing user-friendly technology-based services for older Americans. In tandem, I will expand my quantitative analyses with publicly available secondary data of older adults, focusing on potential psychosocial benefits of digital literacy.