

Wired for the Future: Youth Perspectives on ICTs in 4-H Programs

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Introduction and Need for Research

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have transformed how individuals in younger generations interact, learn, and communicate (Mivehchi & Rajabion, 2020). Yet, to harness these tools effectively, it's essential first to understand how youth perceive and utilize them. Prior research has highlighted the importance of ICTs in educational settings, suggesting that they can enhance learning experiences, foster creativity, and facilitate student collaboration (Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010). Additionally, as noted by Livingstone (2009), young individuals are not just passive consumers of digital content; they actively shape their digital environments and create meaningful connections. This research seeks to bridge the gap between theory and practice by exploring how 4-H youth participants interact with and perceive ICTs to inform future programming strategies.

Theoretical Framework

The Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) provides a framework for understanding individuals' technology adoption and utilization. Developed by Venkatesh et al. (2003), UTAUT highlights key factors like performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions. These constructs offer insights into why individuals choose to use (or not use) certain technologies. Prior studies employing UTAUT have underscored its effectiveness in predicting technology acceptance behaviors across varied contexts, from educational institutions to corporate environments (Dwivedi et al., 2019). Complementing UTAUT, the Uses and Gratifications Theory offers a perspective on media consumption that emphasizes individual agency. Rooted in the traditions of media studies, this theory posits that individuals actively seek out specific media sources to fulfill distinct needs and desires (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). This theory identifies motivations behind technology use, moving beyond mere functionality to explore deeper psychological and social needs.

Methodology

We utilized a focus group discussion to explore participants' experiences and perceptions of ICTs. As Krueger and Casey (2014) highlighted, focus groups are particularly adept at eliciting diverse views and experiences, making them an apt choice for exploring the multifaceted nature of technology interactions among youth. For this study, 15 youth participants were drawn from eight Tennessee 4-H programs. The discussion was structured around a series of prompts and open-ended questions, informed by the UTAUT and Uses and Gratifications frameworks. Data were subsequently analyzed through deductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Findings

Theme 1: Comfort with Technology: Participants' comfort level and familiarity with ICTs were evident throughout the discussions. The notion that the current generation of 4-H youth, being deeply embedded in a digital environment, is inherently comfortable with technology was underscored by R1, who stated, "Because we are a very technological generation, that us, as a generation, are very comfortable with using those kind of technologies." This sentiment resonated with the broader understanding that digital tools are integral to the daily lives of

today's youth. Yet, this familiarity brings a certain pressure; as R4 noted, "If you're not comfortable using them, you're not being successful in the world we are today 'cause everything's online...If you don't have technology, and you're not comfortable using it, you're almost a failure of the world." This perception of the stakes of digital literacy in the contemporary 4-H landscape provides insight into the value placed on technological comfort and proficiency as well as the danger of excluding individuals, with R7 noting, "I think that every person needs to have as equal an opportunity as anyone else to try to succeed."

Theme 2: Online Presence and Necessity: Another dominant theme was the importance of online presence and the necessity of social media. Participants noted with the shift to online communication platforms for various activities, including education, the imperative to be online has never been more pronounced. As Participant R2 aptly put it, "If you're not comfortable using them, you're not being successful in the world we are today 'cause everything's online..." Others noted that 4-H could increase utilization of social media, with R11 stating, "It would definitely be fun and definitely educational for everyone in 4-H if we had implemented more social media platforms into how we function". However, some participants cautioned about the harmful effects, with R9 stating, "We've learned how to properly function...not get too addicted and to not overuse it and to not overabuse it 'cause that's who we are as 4-Hers. Right? We're responsible and we serve...our community...we're going to have to decide and solve as a group of 4-Hers...how we can control usage of social media."

Conclusions

These findings underscore the current 4-H youth's deep-rooted comfort and familiarity with ICTs, with technology expectancy aligning with prior research on the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT). Their perceptions of technology emphasize the functional benefits and the deeper psychological and social gratifications, which aligns with the tenets of the Uses and Gratifications Theory. The emphasis on online presence and the role of social media in shaping 4-H experiences further attests to the importance of understanding the motivations and barriers behind technology use in youth-centric programs.

Implications, Recommendations, and Impact

Given the prominence of digital tools in participants' lives, organizations like 4-H should prioritize the continuous integration of ICTs into their programs to ensure they resonate with their youth members' digital needs and motivations. Training modules to bolster digital literacy and provide access to technology can bridge potential technological divides, especially for those who might feel left behind. Additionally, leveraging social media platforms for communication and content creation can enhance participant engagement. However, measures should be taken to inform youth of responsible social media behaviors. Given the participant's self-efficacy and stated desire to contribute to educating others, it would be beneficial to include youth members in the development and deployment of ICT education content. These measures can ensure 4-H remains at the forefront of youth development in the digital age while harnessing the potential of ICTs to foster learning, collaboration, personal growth, and community building.

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