

A Pragmatic Approach to Investigating the Digital Existence of Food Bank Users

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Forward thinking. World ready.

Introduction

Adopting and adapting to technology coined as *technology taker* (Flanding, Grabman, & Coc, 2019), is no longer a one-time option but an iterative process which makes the “keeping up with the technology” process challenging, particularly for underserved populations with limited digital tools. The problems of affordable connectivity and basic computing skills for all citizens continue to be minimized or at best ignored, generating a new form of discrimination (Dalat Ward & Ar, 2023; George, Dalat Ward, & Jones, 2022). As the digital gap continues to widen, the have nots are left to fend for their existence, at times waiting for a *warm expert* (Bakardjieva, 2005), a non-professional assisting the digitally poor, to come to their aid. The COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns not only isolated people physically and mentally but also exacerbated the challenges faced by those with limited digital resources, causing additional distress. Added to the digital stress was yet another level of concern: To be able to survive as a human being by overcoming hunger and food scarcity.

Key Findings

The study found that the food bank users 1) had little to no broadband connectivity; 2) possessed limited digital devices which revealed significant barriers to their digital existence; 3) had feelings of desperation, vulnerability and isolation. Regarding training offered at no cost, the food bank users did not show interest, which was attributed to the food bank users’ insufficient digital knowledge.

Methods

The Significance of the Research:

The significance of this research derived from two interrelated problems. First, an underserved group, food bank users, were experiencing hunger and food scarcity with unpredictable consequences. Second, left on their own, their “inability to interact with the online world fully, when where and how an individual needs to” (Digital Poverty Alliance, 2023, para.1) created obstacles for their existence. At the time of this study, while many studies were available on topics such as digital divides, digitizing food banks, or how to train elderly in technologies, there was no research on food bank users and their digital situation inclusive of designing a pilot training model. This study aimed to fill this gap. Based on the research problem, a food bank in a Texan town located near a research university was identified as the research site. The proximity was critical due to the training implementation plan which required the participation of instructors, students and food bank staff.

Data Collection:

A **survey** with three sections collected both numerical and textual data. The aim was to collect data on the digital existence of the food bank users as well as identify their training needs which would answer the two core questions: 1) What are the digital existence levels of the food users in Texas and what can be learned? 2) What training model would best serve these food bank users? The reason for using checklists for the survey was for the participants to respond with ease and to be able to increase the return rate of the survey.

**Additional data** were collected by means of observations (field notes), conversations (the food bank director, staff), documents (notes from electronic exchanges and meetings), audiovisual materials (photographs, videos from the site, newspaper clippings) (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

Analyses

A total of 230 individuals representing households completed the survey. A total of 230 individuals representing households completed the survey. Data from Section 1 asked individuals to report the number of digital devices in their households (television, cellular phone, desktop computer, laptop computer, tablet and printer, and access to the Internet). These numerical data were tallied. Section 2 data on training opportunities participants needed/wanted depending on their household needs were tallied. Section 3 revealed the perception of the 32 participants. Knowing the context in which these words appeared, working independently, each researcher used the *key-word-in-context* (KWIC) method which “entailed locating all occurrences of particular word or phrases in the text” (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012, p. 10). These responses were *less structured elicited free-flowing texts* (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey). In a way these words and phrases were similar to a telegraphic speech used by children acquiring their first language described as: “...a concise message characterized by the use of three-word short phrases or sentences made up of main content words such as nouns and verbs and void of function words and grammatical morphemes” (Gabig, 2013, p. 2076). To secure reliability, once the researchers completed their individual analysis, they used the *member checking* (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) technique to discuss and confirm their individual thematic analysis.

Results

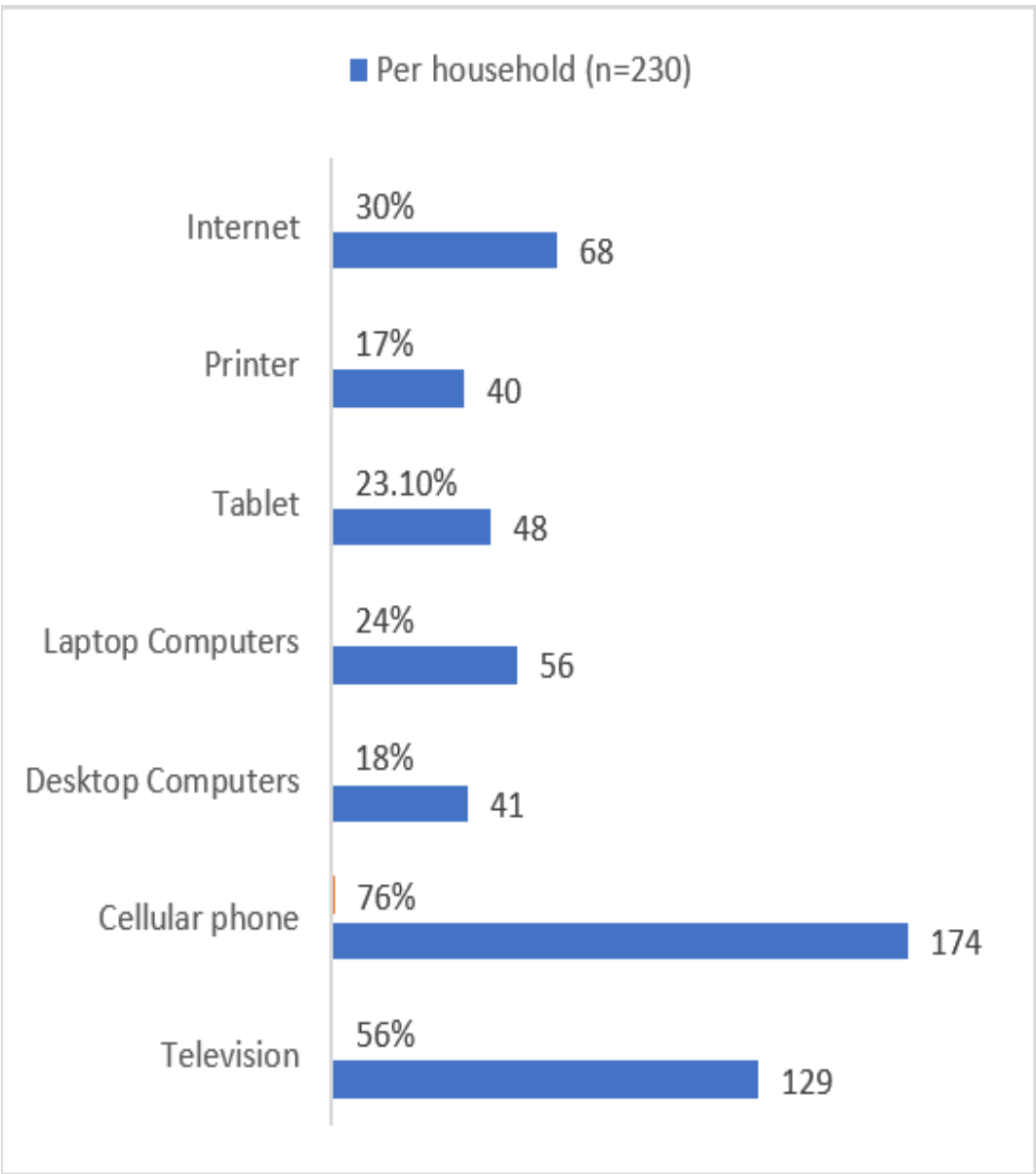


Table 1. Devices and Access per Household

Sessions	Training Topics + Duration
Session 1 <b>Engaging</b> - preparing the participants for readiness	Profile information + Needs Value-focused thinking Motivational beliefs and emotions Behavioral changes (minimum 4 hours)
Session <b>Framing</b> - the meaning of digital	Digital terminology Digital needs (minimum 5 hours)
Session 3 <b>Shifting</b> - adopting and adapting to technology	Basic computing (Microsoft Suites) Cybercrime /cybersecurity (minimum 15 hours)

Table 2. Training Model for Food Bank Users

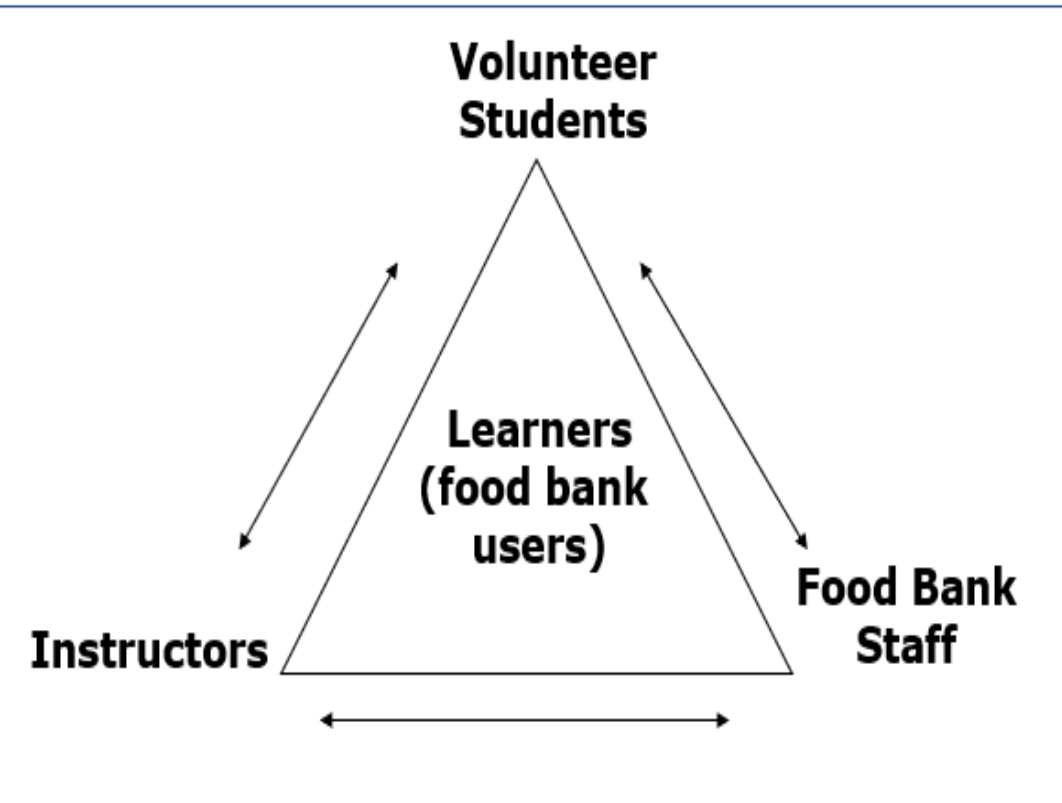


Figure 1. Interactive Learner-centric Model

The section 1 of the survey: 76% households had cellular phones; 56% owned televisions; 18% had desktop computers; 24% had laptop computers; 21% had tablets; 17% had printers in their homes; and finally, 30% of households had Internet connectivity (Table 1). All households had access to at least one of the listed devices. In addition, low interest levels in training for both adults and children were detected. Section 2 of the survey: 36% individuals expressed interest in *Computing Fundamental Workshop: Emailing, Microsoft Office Suite (Word, Excel, PowerPoint)*; 16% were interested in *Don’t Be a Cybersecurity Victim*; and 11% were interested in *Save Money-Building A Computer*. The low interest levels in training opportunities were attributed to limited levels of digital knowledge of participants. Based on *member checking* the researchers agreed on three groups of emotions including desperation, vulnerability, isolation. The researchers also agreed that these responses were symptoms of hopelessness and revealed warning signs, describing a threatening situation (Frijda, 1986).

The three-level training model objectives (Table 2) were: 1) Prepare participants for training; 2) introduce the concept of *digital*; and 3) teach basic computing and cybersecurity skills. To implement an interactive learner-centric model was (Figure 1) developed by the researchers demonstrating collaboration among university instructors, volunteer students and the food bank staff. The model was based on collaboration and encouraged all three groups to work towards concentrating on social injustice issues related to the food bank users. The food bank users were in the center of the implementation model as the focus of the training. Instructors, volunteer students, and food bank staff were located as service providers continually collaborating with each other.

For the instructors, this training would serve as a community service, as part of the academic tripartite model including teaching, scholarship, and service. For students, it would be part of their service learning (SL) defined as “a vehicle for connecting students and institutions to their communities and the larger social good, while at the same time instilling in students the values of community and social responsibility” (Neururer & Rhoads, 1998, p. 321). Training students would include the following learning objectives: 1) understand service learning, active learning and transformative learning, 2) discover self-awareness, 3) develop intercultural communication, 4) explain and analyze the culture of food insecure, 5) recognize and develop cognitive and affective empathy, and 6) understand “mind, brain, education” (Tokuhamas-Espinosa, 2010).

Conclusions

Bridging the digital divide and ensuring that all underserved individuals, regardless of their location and situation have equal access to technological resources and opportunities is critical. Technological progress should not exacerbate the existing disparities but should instead strive for inclusivity and equality for all individuals. The researchers were surprised at finding such barriers, particularly, one major barrier - limited or no access to the Internet in households was not expected. The implication of this barrier, not having access or having limited access to the internet can have unthinkable domino effects on the digital existence of such groups leading to risks in digital societies. Prior to collecting data, a simple list of training opportunities were developed with the assumption that the participants would easily select their sessions based on their needs. However, the participants were not able to select an appropriate training for they did not have an awareness of their needs nor understood their gaps based on their close to-non-existent knowledge of advanced technology. Phrases related to negative thoughts/feelings were expected due to the participants’ ongoing unpredictability battle. However, words like isolation, vulnerability, desperation gave a deeper understanding of another level of threat which emphasize the potential risks and challenges to present day digital societies. If a society ignores the well-being of its citizens, their digital wellness, this could threaten the wellness of a society as a whole. Recommendations, policy plans proposed by governments during the pandemic need to be urgently reevaluated and expedited as technology continues to advance at an unprecedented pace with no breaks.

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