



Exploring the landscape of rural older voluntarism in Peterborough County: The case of social interaction technologies (SITs)

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly revolutionized all forms of human activity, deepened preexisting inequalities, and exacerbated entrenched vulnerabilities across societies worldwide. Beyond just health issues, the pandemic's profound impacts sent shockwaves across socioeconomic and political divides, highlighting the interconnections and fragility of our global systems.

During the first wave of the pandemic, scholarly evidence demonstrated varying degrees of adaptability and vulnerability among rural older volunteers and volunteer-based programs in Peterborough County. Specifically, the transition from an in-person approach to voluntarism to the use of social interaction technologies (SITs) (specifically Zoom) seemed notable.

Meanwhile, the specific needs of older people are often overlooked in the design and manufacture of these technologies. This raises concerns about the potential lack of user-friendliness and accessibility of SITs for older volunteers, which threatens the effective integration and sustainability of SITs in older voluntarism.

Against this background, the contemporary, post-pandemic state, this study will explore the current state of rural older voluntarism in Peterborough County regarding SITs usage and the corresponding effects on task performance and program sustainability. The study's findings will provide insights into the post-pandemic dynamics of rural older voluntarism, crystalizing the implications and sustainability measures.

Objectives

1. To investigate the current state of SITs usage in older voluntarism since the relaxation of COVID-19 protocols.
2. To ascertain how SITs usage has affected the task performance of older volunteers.
3. To establish how SITs usage has impacted the sustainability of rural volunteer programs.

Study Design

This study will adopt a community-based approach, employing a case study methodology that will focus on three rural-serving volunteer organizations in the County of Peterborough. Data will be collected through one-on-one interviews with the managers of these volunteer organizations and older volunteers (aged 65 and over). The ensuing data will be analyzed thematically.

Potentially, the study will also include a focus group discussion with the Association of Managers of Volunteer Services (AMVS) in Peterborough County as a unit to understand their perspectives on the dynamics and impacts of SITs usage on the sustainability of rural volunteer programs.

To inform policy and practice, a summary of the study's findings will be shared with the individual managers of volunteer organizations involved in the study, the AMVS, and the academic and research community.

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