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

Yaprak Dalat Ward
y_dalatward@fhsu.edu
Fort Hays State University
Hays, KS 67601, USA

James G. Ward
jgward@fhsu.edu
Fort Hays State University
Hays, KS 67601, USA

Li-Jen Lester
lester@shsu.edu
Sam Houston State University
Huntsville, TX 77341, USA

Abstract

This study investigated the digital existence of the food bank users in a university town in Texas, and subsequently, aligned with the research's pragmatic focus, the researchers designed a training model for these food bank users. Two research questions guided the study: What are the digital existence levels of the food bank users, and what training model would best serve these food bank users? Data were collected by means of a survey from 230 individual food bank users representing households. Additional data included observations and conversations with food bank staff, and documents and materials from the site which provided deeper insights. 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; and 3) had feelings of desperation, vulnerability and isolation. Regarding training offered at no cost, the food bank users did not show much interest, which was attributed to the food bank users' insufficient digital knowledge. The three-level training model was designed with the following objectives: 1) Prepare participants for training; 2) introduce the concept of *digital;* and 3) teach basic computing and cybersecurity skills. To implement this training, an interactive learner-centric model was created demonstrating collaboration among university instructors, volunteer students and the food bank staff. The study concluded that to exist in digital societies affordable broadband connectivity, needs-based devices, and continual support and training were needed for such underserved groups.

Keywords: digital existence, underserved populations, training model, computing skills, cybersecurity, food insecure

An updated and full version of this manuscript may be found at https://isedj.org