

INTERNET INCLUSIVITY OF YOUNG PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY: AN INVESTIGATION

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, inclusion for young people with a disability is a contemporary and constant concern. Inclusivity is widely recommended for helping to empower people with disabilities in society. Inclusion is important in education sectors; however, every aspect of the learning process needs to be considered. This includes inclusivity in the digital world as well. People with a disability, and their inclusivity in the digital world through the Internet, however, are not well understood. Internet inclusiveness is not commonly considered in studies, even though Internet activities play a vital role in our current lifestyles. This lack of investigation reveals a gap in the literature. Consequently, this study aimed to investigate the presence and voice of young people with a disability on the Internet, especially on Google Australia. The study was a quantitative study using descriptive statistical analysis. The data were collected during the month of December 2017. There were several key findings of this study. Firstly, the presence of young Australians with a disability on the Internet was very low by 12% and the number of self-reported stories was also low, which indicated only a small percentage (3%) of direct voices of people with a disability. Furthermore, 82% of private organization websites incorporated the presence and voices of people with a disability in various topics, such as employment, self-advocacy, etc. Most of the website authors preferred that their gender, ages and backgrounds were not disclosed. Finally, this study highlights directions for future research including recommendations for practices for better inclusion.

Key words: Internet inclusivity, Young People with a disability online, Young People with Disabilities.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the inclusivity of young people with a disability is a contemporary and constant concern for many people worldwide. Inclusivity is widely recommended for helping to empower people with a disability in society. In inclusive settings, people with disabilities feel included and supported (Hodkinson, 2005). With the emergence of the inclusion concept for people with a disability, inclusion appears to be practiced mainly in the education system (Armstrong, Armstrong, & Spandagou, 2011). Most western countries, such as USA, Canada, UK and Australia have been generally focusing on addressing social and moral obligations towards inclusive education for individuals with disabilities (Forbes, 2007). Inclusion is defined as being “about much more than the type of school that children attend: it is about the quality of their experience” (Department for Education and Skills, 2004, p. 25). Therefore, inclusion means including and accepting people with disability in place, curriculum, participation and choice. Inclusion is important in education sectors; however, every aspect of everyday living needs to be considered. This includes inclusivity in the digital world as well.

People with disabilities have equal rights to access information and participate in society, according to articles 5, 9, 21 and 30 in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, (Division for Social Policy and Development Disability, 2017; Borg, Larsson, & Östergren, 2011). Castells (2002) has exclaimed, “Exclusion from internet-mediated economic, social, political, cultural networks is one of the most damaging forms of exclusion in our economy and in our culture” (p. 3). Pattison (2005) also argued that inclusion needs to be practiced in all areas, such as inclusive counselling, sports, work and communication, as inclusion means incorporating all types of people within the same environment regardless of gender, sex, age, race, ethnicity, economic status and disability. Inclusion means becoming involved in everyday activities and having similar roles to their peers without a disability (Jaeger & Bowman, 2005). Activities may include engaging in face-to-face social activities as well as using the Internet. Without inclusion in the digital world, the social exclusion will not be eliminated completely (Lucas, 2012).

However, Internet usage by young individuals with a disability is comparatively less than people without disabilities (Jaeger & Bowman, 2005). Dobransky and Hargittai (2006) found that only one-third of people with any sort of disability have Internet access at home and use the Internet. Generally, stories or personal experiences of young people with a disability are reported by parents, partners, news reporters, researchers, caregivers, school authorities, organizations and governments (Ellis & Kent, 2011). A person with a disability can be a citizen journalist with the help of the Internet and their identity can be anonymous. For this reason, the objective of this study was to focus on stories that are shared through the Internet by individuals with disabilities.

Understanding diverse types of inclusion practices in society for people with disabilities can indicate the active presence of people with a disability. Moreover, it can provide information that they are having equal rights as the citizens who do not have any disability. This study aimed to investigate people’s presence on the Internet with a goal to discover the context of inclusion in the digital world. The study also highlights directions for future research including recommendations for practices for better inclusion supporting by literature review, descriptive research method, critical analysis and reflective concluding remarks.

RATIONALITY OF THE STUDY

Communication through the Internet can be described as “digital inclusion”, a term used to describe social inclusion through the Internet. This has a goal of improving the lives of people without discriminating against their differences (Watling, 2011). Based on the social model of disability, inaccessible structures or people’s attitudes in society create barriers and by removing those barriers we can overcome the discrimination against disability (Goggin & Newell, 2005; Siminski, 2003). For example, if a person with a visual impairment cannot access the Internet due to websites’ design, then it may create barriers for that person to be involved or included in the digital world. So, it was pragmatic to investigate the presence of young people with a disability on the Internet. Moreover, inaccessibility seems to be a major issue that leads to digital exclusion (Watling, 2011). By exploring the digital presence and voice of young people on the Internet, we can find pathways to ensure better inclusivity. As the Internet can lead to expanded inclusivity for people with a disability and therefore an enhanced quality of life, it was significant to study the current situation for these young individuals.

Digital Inclusion is defined as the “ability of individuals and groups to access and use information and communication technologies (ICTs) in their everyday life” (Building Digital Communities, 2017). Three aspects of digital inclusion are discussed by Ryngbeck in 2017: access, adoption, and application. This study considered the application aspect of digital inclusion as several studies have suggested that social inclusion seems more prioritized where young people with a disability can engage with local services, education and the workforce through assistive technology (Dobrasky & Hargittai, 2006; Raghavendra, Newman, Grace, & Wood, 2015; Tu, & McIsaac, 2002). Therefore, it was important to find out whether young people with a disability were participating actively on the Internet. As the Internet can lead to expanded inclusivity for people with a disability and therefore an enhanced quality of life, it was significant to study the current situation for these young individuals.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

A little evidence was found to advocate that people with disabilities were taking part in the new developments associated with assistive technologies. By exploring the digital presence and voice of young people on the Internet, we can find pathways to ensure better inclusivity. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the presence of people with a disability on the Internet, with a goal to determine the context of inclusion in the digital world.

This study had two objectives; firstly, to investigate people’s presence on the Internet with a goal to discover the context of inclusion in the digital world and to find out the level of inclusion through their direct voice.

Research Questions

The research questions were as follows:

1. To what extent do young people with a disability have a presence on the Internet, specifically on the first 10 pages of Google Australia?
2. To what extent do young people with a disability have a direct voice on the Internet, specifically on the first 10 pages of Google Australia?

To understand the context of this study further, it is effective and useful to provide definitions of the major concepts being discussed in this study.

Presence

Picciano (2002) defined “presence” as a sense of being in a place and belonging to a group. A person who feels that he/she is a part of a group or “present” in a community will actively participate in group and community activities that indicate his/her social presence in the society (Phirangee & Malec, 9 May 2017; Lowenthal & Snelson, 8 May 2017; Tu, & McIsaac, 2002). The word “presence” for this study means the active participation and involvement on the Internet by young people with a disability.

Voice

Voice is defined as the ability of an individual to speak and to be heard. Defining “voice” is a complex idea due to the existence of various arguments (Nierse & Abma, 2011). Cook, Swain and French (2010) defined the word “voice” as the right to speak and share views and feelings. Das and Adlakha (2001) described “voice” as self-disclosure, self-expression, self-advocacy and sharing views without obstacles. In accord with this, “voice” in this study refers to the right to speak and be heard and includes self-disclosure through self-reported stories on the Internet by a young individual with a disability.

Direct Voice

Direct voice means one’s own voice (Ashby, 2011). For example, people with a disability who have a direct voice in participating in national policy-making means people with a disability who speak directly and take part in the policy-making process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been little research indicating a gap in this field. Mostly, the personal experiences of these young people are shared by authors who are not experiencing the disability (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). Mostly, young people’s personal experiences are collected and expressed in stories in informal discussion forums, for instance, blogs, Facebook and Twitter (Ellis & Kent, 2011). Some are expressed in both written and visual forms in newsletters, and news on websites (Blowes, 2015). Few stories about young people are presented in government and organizational websites or formal documents (The

Government of Western Australia, 2015). Even if the stories are shared formally or informally, the number of self-reported personal narratives or stories of young people with a disability on the Internet appears few. Research was needed to explore this phenomenon. While communicating through the Internet, identity of a person does not always require. For example, in an email communication or an online chatting, people cannot see whether I am a male or female or having a disability or not unless I disclose. People with a disability feel that people value them similar to others without knowing about their disability status which may differ when the persons know about the disability (Spirito Dalgin & Bellini, 2008). Therefore, to ensure better and meaningful inclusion opportunities, their presence needs to be investigated.

Nierse and Abma (2011) pointed out that sharing personal stories indicated that people with a disability had a voice in a setting which empowered them. When people with a disability share their own stories, it means they have a voice, which empowers them (Ashby, 2011). Therefore, the voice of people with a disability needs to be studied to recognize the level of their involvements within their society.

Using the Internet can be an effective medium for social inclusion for people with disabilities if it becomes equally available and accessible for all. It can be a neutral platform as it addresses an individual as a person, rather than as a person with a disability (Bowker & Tuffin, 2002). Using emails to interview participants, Bowker and Tuffin (2002) revealed that people with a disability valued participation through the Internet and considered it a new opportunity for spontaneous and more instant participation than printed or visual media. The study found that an adult with a disability preferred usage of the Internet over printed or visual media as it offered instant participation and communication. However, the study did not explore the presence of youth with a disability on the Internet and their Internet usages. This gap has indicated the space for future study. Moreover, the Internet helps people with disabilities escape isolation and participation within the community, expanding their sense of independence and self-determination (Cook, et al., 2005). Fokkema and Knipscheer (2007) found that people with some physical disabilities, for example deafness, having difficulties walking or being visually impaired, felt less comfortable to be social in a face to face setting. They preferred digital communication more which made them isolated. As using a computer at home seems convenient allowing people with a disability cyberspace that can increase their self-confidence (Wilson, Jaques, Johnson & Brotherton, 2017).

Watson (2002) argued that many people with a disability do not identify themselves as disabled. The study showed that many of the participants with a disability felt normal while participating through the Internet. Having impairment was ontologically insignificant for them, as it was a part of their everyday life. People with a disability do not see themselves any differently with their disability. Saltes (2013) revealed that disclosure of identity plays an important role in how people with a disability present them while interacting on the Internet. The study focused on the social model of disability and illustrated that Internet media reduces social barriers for people with a disability and ensures better inclusion.

The social model emphasizes the possible means of eliminating barriers which restrict life choices (Hughes & Paterson, 1997). The social model of disability declares that disability is produced by a system which is organized by society or the community rather than people's impairments or differences. On the other hand, in the medical model, a person's impairments or differences are to be fixed or changed by medical and other treatments, even though the impairments or differences may not cause any pain or illness (Shakespeare, 2006). This study considered 'disability' from the social model perspective. In China, using the Internet significantly minimized existing social barriers for people with a disability in the physical and social environment, through improved and regular social interactions. (Guo, Bricout, & Huang, 2005). When considering barriers to using the Internet, the voices of people with a disability need to be highlighted and addressed. Therefore, the voices of people with a disability were also necessary to explore their presence in the digital world.

Young people with a disability may not use the Internet even though they can easily access it. Dobransky and Hargittai's (2006) study explained that some individuals with a disability were not interested in using the Internet because of a lack of awareness about its benefits, frustrating experiences, or not being allowed to use it at home. The study reported that increasing Internet use has the abundant potential for enhancing the quality of life for people with a disability. Näslund and Gardelli (2013) found similar findings. Therefore, further study is required to investigate the current level of Internet usage by people with a disability, through their own voices and presence.

To sum up, various issues were noted while investigating the current literature for the presence and voice of young people with a disability using the Internet for social inclusion. The digital world can create opportunities for social inclusion or be a reason for social exclusion.

METHODOLOGY

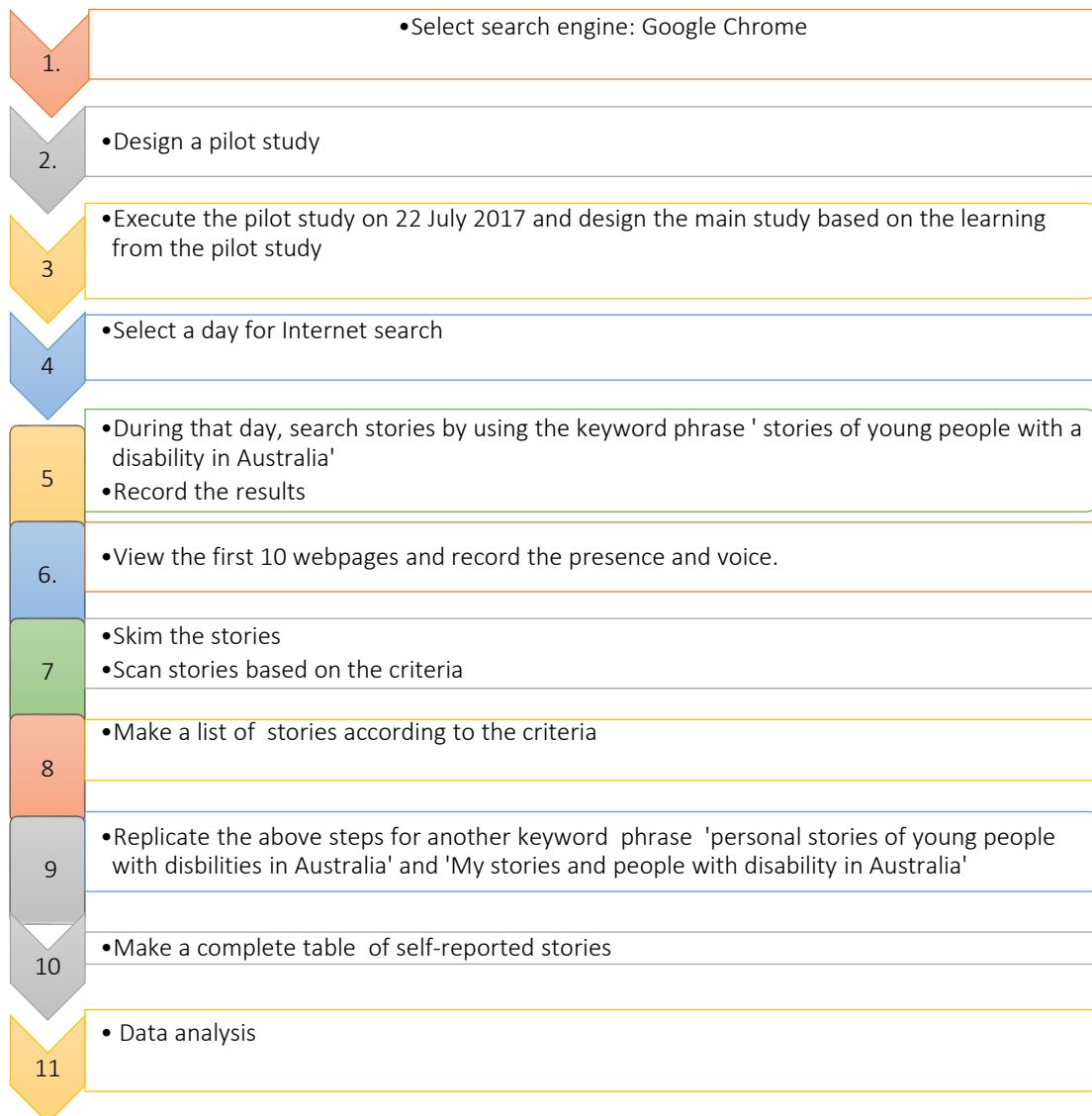
The study was an in-depth study using quantitative approach. In the quantitative design, data were collected via an Internet search using the Google Australia search engine. The researcher purposely selected the Google search engine, as it is the most popular, secure, fastest, and most accessed search engine on the Internet (Reis, Barth, & Pizano, 2009).

A systematic approach was used for searching, listing and selecting the sample stories for analysis. The steps of the whole process were interlinked creating a systematic approach. The study aimed to view the first 10 pages for each keyword phrase.

There was a maximum of three keyword phrases. Each web page consisted of 10 websites. In total, 100 websites were viewed for each keyword phrase to record the presence and direct voice of young people with disabilities. Later, the researcher skimmed the stories to check they matched the selection criteria. A table was prepared for scanned stories. In figure 3, the flowchart illustrates the entire data collection process (Figure 1).

To select the sample stories, a number of steps were taken. Firstly, the researcher inserted the search keywords into Google and a list of websites was recorded along with the time. Later, screenshots of the web pages were taken to prepare the list of sampled websites. This process was completed within a day. Secondly, after preparing the list of websites, the URL of each website was used to collect relevant stories for the study. This data collection process continued for 20 days. During this time, many new websites appeared while others disappeared after typing each search term. The information of pop out and pop in websites was recorded as well.

Figure 1: Systematic Approach for Searching Internet Data



The study was carried out from the same device (researcher’s laptop) and same place (Adelaide Metropolitan area) for a whole month.

Search keywords

The researcher looked at the first 10 pages of Google Chrome after inserting each search term or keyword. Keywords were ‘stories of young people with a disability in Australia’, ‘My stories and people with a disability in Australia’ and ‘personal stories of young people with disabilities in Australia’. The following selection criteria were used to choose the stories. The stories had to be personal narratives, self-reported by a young person with a disability, and written in English by an Australian young person.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted in order to work out the best procedure and also understand the gaps in the data collection process. The pilot study was quantitative and exploratory in design.

Data Collection Tool

In this study, data collection meant searching web pages and websites with an aim to find self-reported stories or personal narratives of a young Australian with a disability the Internet search included viewing or noticing how many websites talked about people with a disability and their personal stories or experiences, while recording information and searching for narratives. Moreover, among the stories the background information was recorded, such as, authors of the stories, the demographics of the authors (gender, age, types of disability, educational and economic background etc). Self-reported stories were considered as expressing the voices of people with disabilities.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were applied to analyse the quantitative data in examining the presence and voice of young people with a disability on the first 10 pages of Google Australia. The researcher utilized data collected from three phases using three search keywords. The data collection process was carried out throughout the month of December 2017. A total of 30 web pages were searched. Each webpage had 10 website links. In total, 300 websites were sampled to gather the data.

Underlying Philosophical Assumptions

The research question ‘do young people with a disability have a presence and voice on the Internet?’ was influenced by the study of knowledge from relativist and constructivist viewpoints (Al-Amoudi & Willmott, 2011). These viewpoints reflected the relativist and the constructivist epistemology underlying philosophical assumptions.

Ethical Consideration

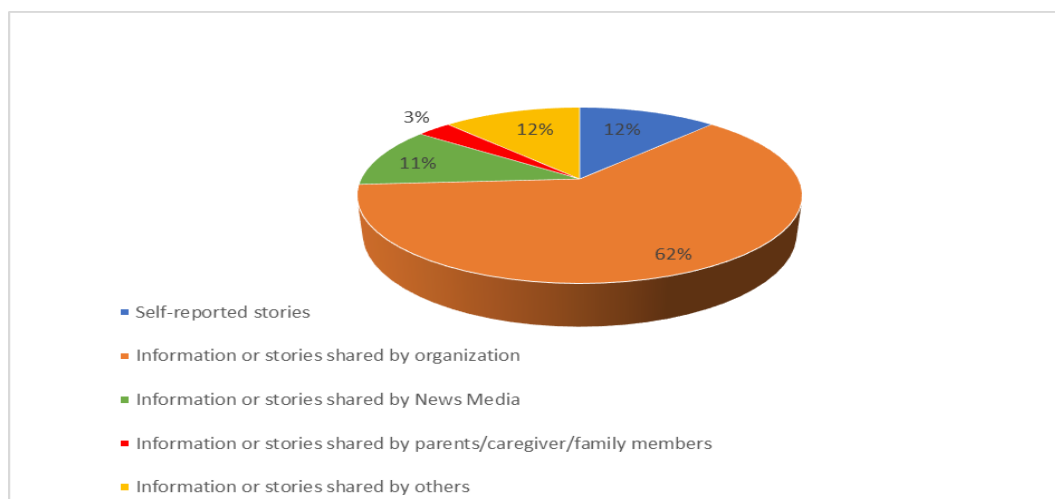
Several steps were considered to maintain the ethics of this study. First of all, the study was conducted with an ethical intention that a better understanding of the current situation will lead to benefits and improvements in the lives of the population group being investigated. Secondly, as the data was collected from Internet stories that were shared by young Australian people with a disability, informed consent was not required. The technique of collecting data from self-reported stories published online seems ethical. Moreover, the people in the stories were not identified. Thirdly, no conflict of interest was present, as the researcher gained no financial benefits and was not involved with the contexts of the study. Furthermore, the records of this study are not going to be revealed to the public in order to protect the privacy and the confidentiality of the people in the stories. Lastly, reflexivity was practiced while conducting the study, collecting data and reporting the findings.

RESULTS

Among the 300 sampled websites, 226 websites were unique, and 74 websites came up repeatedly during the search in phases I, II and III. The unique websites were those which did not repeatedly pop up while searching for stories on the Internet. Therefore, less than one-quarter of the websites (24%) were repeated during the entire search.

The research found that the presence, on the Internet, of young people with a disability, specifically on the first 10 pages of Google Australia, was comparatively low. The number of websites that had self-reported stories was 27 among 226 websites (12%). However, not all of those stories were relevant as some stories were talking about particular diseases or were not the personal stories of young Australian with a disability. Only 6 out of the 27 (22.2%) websites had relevant stories that matched the selection criteria for this study. More specifically, the presence of young people with a disability on the Internet was classified under five categories. Among the five categories, it is seen that the majority information of the websites was shared by the organizations (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Five Categories of Authors of Articles /Stories

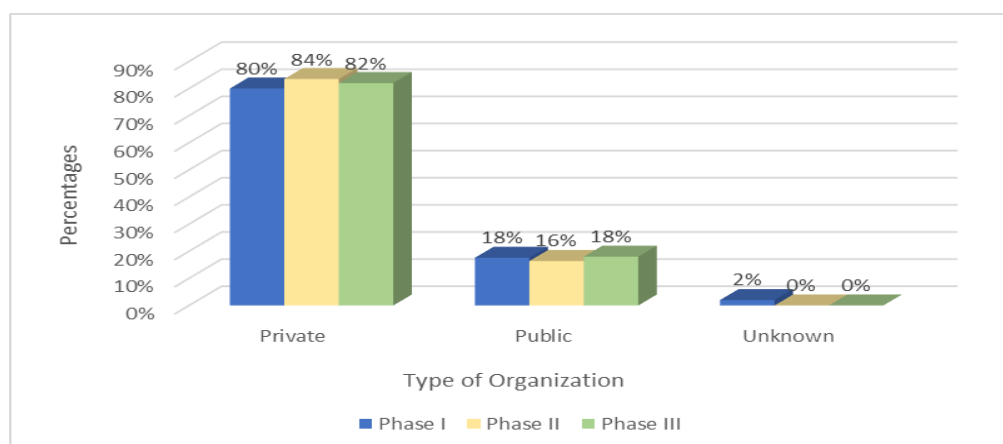


Maximum information in the websites was shared by an organization either private or public (e.g. <https://made.org> > Portfolios; <https://www.qld.gov.au/disability/adults/parents-stories>). Nearly 62 % of the stories were shared by private or public organizations (Figure 2). Among the selected stories only 21% of the stories talked about their disability and only 12% of the stories were self-reported. However, most of those stories were written or presented by people other than the person experiencing the disability. Approximately, 88 % of the information was written, shared or presented by parents, caregivers, teachers, news reporters, organization reporters or researchers (Figure 2).

Most of the writers of the information on the websites worked for a private organization by 82%. Around 17 % of writers shared the information on behalf of governmental or public organizations (Figure 3).

Nearly half of the writers did not mention their name and 53% of the writers did not reveal their gender. There were slightly more females' authors (12%) than males (11%). Similarly, more than 49% of the writers did not mention their age.

Figure 3: Types of Authors' Organization

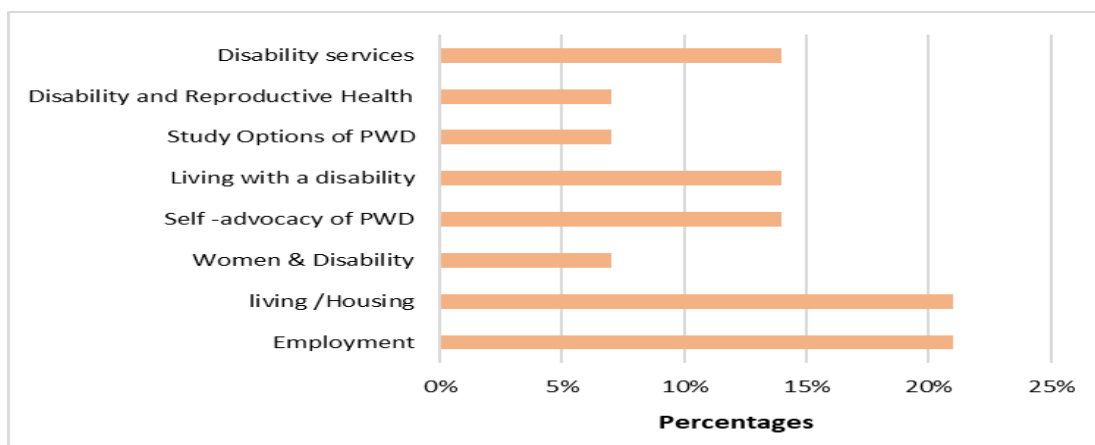


The study found that approximately 7.66 % writers were young (between 20-35 years old), average 15.66% writers were middle-aged (more than 35 years and less than 50 years old), and only 2.66% writers were elderly (above 50 years old). The number of young writers was also low. The young people may not be interested in this area or may not have adequate knowledge and understanding about people with a disability and their life.

Most of the writers on the websites did not reveal whether they had a disability or not. Only 10 % of writers were found where the writers mentioned their disability status. Fourteen websites had authors with multiple disabilities who wrote information, features or stories about their situations. Only three website authors disclosed that they had cerebral palsy. Two authors had hearing loss, one had Down syndrome disorder, one had epilepsy and two authors had an intellectual disability. Altogether only 23 out of 226 (10%) websites incorporated writers with a disability.

On the other hand, less than 3% of the websites reflected the direct voice of young Australians through their own individual stories or narratives. In phase II, the study found that people with a disability shared very few self-reported stories, indicating that less examples of direct voice were found in this phase. Though the number of direct voices seemed comparatively higher in phase I (5.5%) than phase II (1.5%), the percentage does not appear satisfactory. People with a disability shared stories of various issues. In addition, all the stories were shared from the year 2012 to 2017. It was noted that young people with a disability mostly preferred to talk about their employment, housing or living issues.

Figure 4: Topics Covered in the Direct Voice



The key findings of this study were: (a) the presence of young people with a disability on the Internet in Australia was very low; (b) only 3% of them demonstrated direct voices; (c) current online practices of direct voice of young people with a disability in Australia was mostly influenced by individual organizations; (d) Majority authors preferred not to be identified in terms of gender, age and background; (e) mostly private organizations incorporated the presence and voices of people with a disability for a range of topics.

DISCUSSION AND REFLECTIONS

The study found low presence and direct voice of young people with a disability on the Internet. There could be a variety of reasons for this. Firstly, sharing stories on websites is very public. People with a disability may like to use Internet for private purposes only, such as emails, e-banking and chatting etc. Nearly 97% of people with a disability using the Internet were mostly personal or private (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Secondly, the target group may face problems using the Internet due to their disabilities. However, the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (2017) reported that the digital world was more inclusive for Australian young people with a disability, as the index was 63 in 2017. An Australian Digital Inclusion Index of less than 45 indicates low digital inclusion (Thomas, et al., 2017). Dobransky & Hargittai’s (2006) research suggested that in order to create digital inclusion, people with disabilities need to have a deeper understanding about the uses of the Internet and the spread of new information technology. If this trend was continued, this could indicate a third reason for the lack of presence and direct voice for this group of people. Lastly, a lack of interest may be the hidden cause for the low number of self-written stories. Every Australian Counts asked people nationwide in 2012 to share their personal housing stories in their own words and only 25% of these were shared by people with a disability.

From the above findings, the inclusivity on the Internet is seen as little. A lack of social inclusion is present in the digital world. People with disabilities still face multiple barriers to meaningful participation in the digital community. This generates digital divide leading to digital exclusion. Another noteworthy finding of this study was that individual organizations, such as employment or nursing home organizations seemed to encourage the direct voices of young people with a disability in Australia. Government websites incorporated a few narratives, which were either video or edited stories of people with a disability. It is positive to observe that young people with a disability were encouraged by private organizations to participate on the Internet and to have a direct voice online. However, government organizations are required to make more space in the digital world for people with a disability to share their experiences, therefore ensuring better inclusion on the Internet.

Disclosing the identity of the authors was a concern for writers as well. Most of the authors did not reveal their information of disability (90%). People often feel uncomfortable about revealing personal information like this as they may experience discrimination and humiliation due to their disability (Matthews, 2009). Moreover, many people feel anxious about losing opportunities in the workplace or community or in getting unnecessary concerns (such as, unnecessary sympathy) in their life due to their disability (Spirito Dalgin & Bellini, 2008). This study also found similar trend.

Implications for Future Research

Similar but mixed method studies could broaden the findings of the current study. Furthermore, a large-scale study could also be conducted to explore more in-depth reasons for the low presence and number of voices of people with a disability on the Internet.

Contributing knowledge of the relationship between the digital divide and the direct voices of people on the Internet needs to be investigated as well.

REFLECTIVE CONCLUSION

Internet Inclusivity can be achieved if the Internet world includes users regardless of their disability, affordability and social barriers. It seems easier to ensure social inclusion through the Internet than real life situations. However, no evidence has been established to strengthen this statement. As younger people with a disability are motivated to use new technology especially smartphone and Facebook (Forbes, 2007), it can be effective to motivate the youth with a disability towards the digital world for interactions and inclusion.

The results and conclusions of this study provide opportunities for improvement in Internet connectivity practices for people with a disability. Nevertheless, some limitations need to be considered while evaluating the findings. For instance, the focus of the study was young people with disabilities in Australia only. However, this study has worked with a limited sample size. In order to triangulate the data, future research can also incorporate stories shared by parents, caregivers and teachers. In addition, the major limitation of the study was the use of Internet-based primary data only. Using Internet-based data had some major challenges, for example, information can be constantly changed and updated. Tracking information regarding Internet search data seemed complicated as well. Alternatively, the rigour of the study was maintained by using an audit trail, reflexivity and computerized primary sources of data. While interpreting the data the constructivist epistemology views were also considered that made the study robust. The study was suitable for a short data-gathering period. The method of data collection had the advantages of being convenient and efficient and did not require any cost. Using Internet search data made the study time controllable and zero-priced. Finally, using Internet-based computerised primary sources created a new type of data for research. This was a major strength of the study, paving the way for advancement in diverse future research.

According to the social model of disability, existing social structures need to reform in order to reduce the barriers to inclusion. As this study revealed that the percentages of presence and direct voice of young people with a disability were very insignificant, it seemed that barriers were present to share their own voice. Internet technology is required to provide the means for people with disabilities to actively engage in the digital world. It cannot be treated like a choice; rather it is needed and seen as a significant opportunity for the young people with a disability. A sparse amount of literature was found to support the findings of this study, which indicates the need for more future research in this area. It was noted that few young people with a disability were positive regarding the changes and developments in the digital world that were made for them. Georgia said in her story, "It has been a very long road but there really is a light at the end of the tunnel, things are now finally starting to look up."

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