SOCIAL INTERACTION AND EMPOWERMENT FOR THE ELDERLY: BETWEEN "NO NEED" AND "NO TIME"

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Abstract

Cognitive decline, poor social networks, and limited social engagement (empowerment) are often cited as major challenges faced by elderly individuals residing in urban communities. Addressing these challenges is part of the mission of day centres, nursing homes and, at a different level, senior universities. With that in mind, we initiated the development of two online platforms offering free-from-charge cognitive stimulation activities over the past 3 years. The first platform, "CerUp", consisted of a series of interactive exercises designed for users to solve. The second platform, "Question Club" (Clube das questões), introduced two additional features: (1) a user-friendly interface

facilitating the creation of exercises by users themselves (promote social participation) and (2) a small-social network enabling users to register and meet other users based on common interests, (foster social interaction). For "Cerup", 112 institutions were informed and invited to use it with no costs or obligations. After 3 years, less than 10 opted to utilise it. Regarding "Question Club", more than 50 institutions were contacted in the last 6 months. However, even with a system of incentives based on participation prizes, only five institutions are currently actively engaged with the platform. To better understand the reasons for this low adherence rate, we conducted non-systematic observations of feedback comments from elderly users and held interviews with the technical personnel. Data from both elderly users' feedback and technicians' input suggest that elderly users may harbour reservations about meeting new people and may not prioritise the aspect of empowerment. On the technicians' side, the primary reason for limited engagement is associated with their heavy workload, institutional routines, and the competition with ongoing activities. Our findings highlight potential imbalances between strategy and activity in institutions and raise questions on how strategies are, could, or should be designed.

Keywords: empowerment; social interaction; institutional practices