

OPP: HEALTH & SELF ESTEEM

Participation of U3A students in virtual activities during the Covid-19 pandemic

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Purpose The COVID-19 pandemic emerged swiftly and unexpectedly, bringing about significant changes in individuals' health, particularly among older adults. Due to the imperative of social isolation during the pandemic, many educational and health promotion programs transitioned from in-person to virtual delivery, including initiatives such as the Universities for the Third Age (U3A). U3As serve as venues for lifelong learning, fostering knowledge, leisure, education, and socialization. However, the integration of technology among older adults poses a challenge for the community, as many face difficulties in navigating these technologies. Such challenges may impede participation in virtual activities, such as those offered by U3As during the pandemic, and diminish the social interaction facilitated by these platforms (Blanco, Cesário & Castro, 2021). Therefore, the objective of this study is to identify whether older individuals participating in a U3A engaged in virtual activities during the COVID-19 pandemic and whether they had previous experience or initiated the use of information and communication technology (ICT) during this period. **Method** This study adopts a cross-sectional design with a qualitative approach and was conducted with participants from a U3A located in São Carlos, Brazil. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this U3A ceased in-person activities and transitioned to virtual platforms. A total of one hundred and nineteen U3A participants aged 50 years or older, who had previously taken part in a survey conducted in 2019, were invited to participate. Those who consented were interviewed in person in 2023, following the resumption of in-person activities at the U3A. Each participant underwent an interview comprising sociodemographic questions and four additional inquiries: 1) Did you engage in U3A classes during the pandemic?; 2) Did you utilize any ICT prior to the pandemic, such as cell phones, computers, and the internet?; 3) Did you commence using any of these technologies during the pandemic?; 4) Are you currently utilizing any of these technologies? The interview responses were transcribed by the evaluator and analyzed using relative and absolute frequency, as well as mean and standard deviation. **Results and Discussion** Among the 119 individuals contacted, 65 could not be reached, 21 declined to participate, 2 relocated to another city, and 1 deceased. Consequently, 30 individuals partook in the study, with the majority being female (83.3%) and aged between 60 and 75 years (80.0%). Regarding education, a predominance of individuals with completed secondary education (46.6%) or higher education (36.6%) was noted. Concerning participation in U3A's virtual activities during the pandemic, only 10 individuals (33.3%) engaged in remote classes, all of whom utilized ICT before, during, and after the pandemic. Of the 20 individuals who did not partake in U3A's virtual activities, 19 had utilized ICT before and during the pandemic, with all 20 continuing to use it post-pandemic (Figure 1). Despite the sample exhibiting considerable digital literacy and a high level of education, there was minimal adoption of virtual learning methodologies, consistent with findings from the study by Formosa (2021), which underscores the challenges faced by older individuals in embracing online activities within U3A settings and emphasizes the necessity of accessible technologies and training initiatives tailored to this demographic. Additionally, this outcome may be attributed to the preference among U3A participants for face-to-face interactions, potentially explaining their reluctance towards virtual engagement.

References

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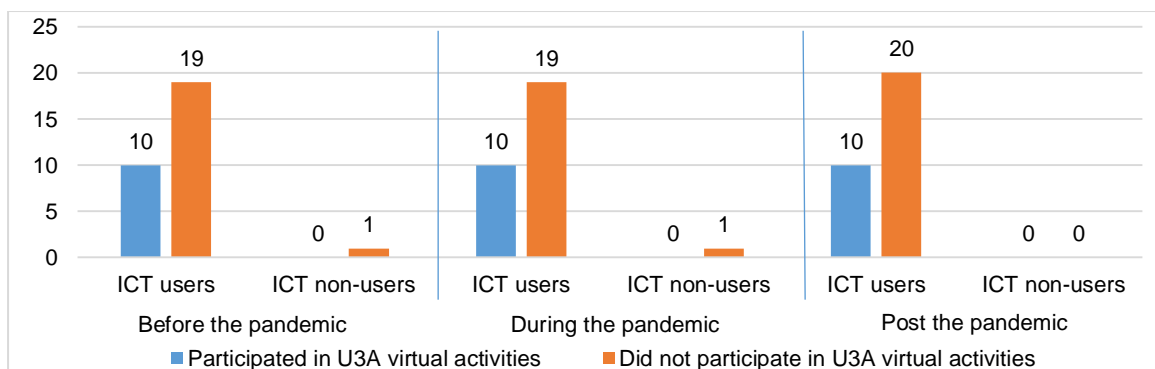


Figure 1. Number of participants and non-participants in U3A virtual activities according to the use of ICT before, during and post the Covid-19 pandemic