Chapter 32
The Internet Behavior of Older Adults

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ABSTRACT

Older adults are increasingly joining younger ones in using the internet, including social media, although use decreases with age, especially after age 74. Most older adults who become first-time internet users are enthusiastic users, frequently going online. Barriers to their use of the internet remain, such as physical and cognitive limitations. Attitudinal barriers may exist, but it is unclear whether this result from lack of experience or aging. Marketing research has found that older persons are less likely to engage in online purchasing. Research still has not clarified whether the ongoing pace of change in technology, along with changes associated with aging, may mean that there will always be fewer older than younger adults using the newest technologies. However, as current internet users age into the senior population, they are likely to maintain positive attitudes towards technology and continue frequent use, which the research suggests may benefit mental health and social relationships.

INTRODUCTION

Internet activities of persons over age 65 include communication (i.e., email, instant messaging); social media (i.e., Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter), search engines (e.g., Google), online newspapers (e.g., nytimes.com), magazines (e.g., salon.com), discussion forums, classifieds (e.g., craigslist.org), photo sharing (e.g., Flickr), online banking, and bill paying. Most studies on this topic (i.e., Choi & DiNitto, 2013; Madden, 2010) have concentrated on email, texting, web surfing, banking, shopping, and more recently, social media, and are notable for being conducted by researchers in fields as diverse as psychology, business, communications, social work, gerontology, computer science, engineering, and robotics.

Although this entry emphasizes research with persons over age 65, some studies exclude age information, preferring instead the phrases retirees (Hahm & Bikson, 1989), senior citizens, or, as in one early publication (Edwards & Englehardt, 1989), members of AARP (age 50 and over). Publications that do specify participant age often group together persons differing in age by as much as 30 to 40 years (e.g. Trocchia & Janda, 2000; Zhang & Kaufman, 2015), inconsistently define *older adult* as beginning at ages 55 (i.e., Wong, Yeung, Ho, Tse, & Lam, 2014; Zhang & Kaufman, 2015), 59 (e.g., Berner et al., 2015;), or 60 (i.e., Choi & DiNitto, 2013), or do not specify age distribution past the defined minimum age (i.e., Reisenwitz, Iyer, Kuhlmeier, & Eastman, 2007; Zhang & Kaufman, 2015).

BACKGROUND

The earliest publications concerning older persons' Internet behaviors – before the word *Internet* was ever used - speculated that technological solutions, connected computers included, could improve the daily lives of older persons in their homes and communities. Theorists initially centered their attention on two-way communication, especially to mitigate perceived loneliness. For example, Ramm and Gianturco (1973) envisaged a "picture communication system with the aid of computers" (p. 325) that could personalize entertainment, education and home employment in order to fight isolation and feelings of uselessness.

As editor of a special issue of *American Behavioral Scientist* on technology and aging, Monk (1988a, 1988b) emphasized the significance of networked communication to the isolated elderly and argued that the elderly are often active users of technology rather than passive recipients. In 1989, Edwards and Engelhardt (1989) explicitly introduced the concept that older persons are not necessarily technophobic. The self-selected college-educated survey respondents over age 50 were generally positive about computers, notably in terms of a short-term change in attitudes as a result of their brief supervised technology experience and interest in Internet-related computer use for health insurance benefits, personal and family medical history, genealogy, and stock market information. In a comparison of retired and employed computer inexperienced public utility workers in California, Hahm and Bikson (1989) found that email increased interactions among retirees, though, according to the authors, "older adults must be given multiple sources of instruction" (p. 127).

OLDER ADULTS AS ACTIVE INTERNET USERS

Fortunately, a growing body of theoretically informed, empirically based literature, still mostly focused on electronic mail, began appearing in the 1990s. Beyond their specialized foci, research in this area underscored that the elderly are active users of technology, more capable of understanding and enjoying the Internet than was originally assumed.

The Pew Research Center Describes the "Gray Gap"

Beginning with its initial survey of the "gray gap" between young and older Americans (Lenhart, 2000), Pew Internet & American Life Project consistently has recounted that Americans age 65 and older are among the least likely groups to go online; once online, however, they are typically enthusiastic emailers, information searchers, and social networkers.

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