

## Chapter 52

# Older Adults and Their Internet Behaviors

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### ABSTRACT

*Early research on older adult computer users focused on the possibility for technology to increase social interaction and alleviate loneliness. Subsequent research has been equivocal on the possible benefits of the Internet for well-being. Nonetheless, in spite of an initial “gray gap,” older adults are increasingly joining younger cohorts in using the Internet. Barriers to older adults’ use of the Internet remain, such as physical and cognitive limitations. Attitudinal barriers may exist, but it is unclear whether these result from lack of experience or differences in income or health status. Business researchers have found that older persons differ from other age groups in their Internet engagement patterns, including online buying. Future research directions include whether computers can improve cognitive functioning and quality of life, how to increase engagement levels, and if there will always be a lag in technology use among older adults.*

### OVERVIEW

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. However, most studies on this topic (Madden, 2010; Purcell, 2011; White 1999) have concentrated on email, web surfing and purchasing, and more recently, social media, yet are notable for being conducted by researchers in fields as diverse as psychology, business, communications, social work, gerontology, computer science, and robotics.

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Although this entry emphasizes research with persons over age 65, some studies exclude age information, preferring instead the phrases *retirees* (Danowski & Sacks, 1980; 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 (i.e., Furlong, 1989b; Trocchia & Janda, 2000) or do not specify age distribution over age 65 (e.g., Reisenwitz, Iyer, Kuhlmeier, & Eastman, 2007). Researchers often omit information concerning participants' gender, income, education, health, and employment status. Also, as the computer scientist Ogozalek (1991) first predicted more than 20 years ago in an early literature review of the impact of computer technology on aging, cohort effects complicate prediction from one age group of older adults to another.

## **INITIAL RESEARCH**

The earliest publications concerning older persons' Internet behaviors – before the word *Internet* was ever used – focused on the initially speculative idea that technological solutions, connected computers included, could be applied to the ordinary 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), computer scientist and psychiatrist, respectively, conceived of a “picture communication system with the aid of computers” that could aid in personalized entertainment and personalized education” as well as “allowing a person to work at home” (p. 325) in order to fight isolation and feelings of uselessness.

Elderly persons' communication through computer technology was also the focus of the first published experiment in this area. Danowski and Sacks (1980), communications researchers,

conducted a small quasi-experimental study with 30 middle income retirees living in a senior citizen complex in Los Angeles, USA. To the seeming surprise of the researchers, participants preferred interactive, real-time computer messaging with other users more than playing computer games. As Ramm and Gianturco (1973) had predicted, there were significant increases among the 13 post-treatment respondents in feeling more self-confident and less alone, and in the belief that computers can aid senior citizens. The authors concluded that online computers enhance elderly users' control and influence over the social environment.

Monk (1988a), professor of social work and gerontology, edited a special issue of *American Behavioral Scientist* on technology and aging, based on presentations from the 1986 Technology and Aging in America conference at Columbia University, USA. Though the focus of that issue is broader than that of either computers or the Internet, together the articles demonstrated that technological solutions could be applied to the ordinary daily lives of older persons in their homes and communities. In both his Introduction to the special issue and his separate contribution, Monk (1988a, 1988b), similar to Ramm and Gianturco (1973), emphasized the significance of networked communication to the isolated elderly. Also, as Danowski and Sacks (1980) had earlier demonstrated, Monk (1988a) argued that the elderly are not passive recipients of technological interventions but active users and contributors. Similarly, in this same issue, Elton (1988), a communications researcher, recommended two-way communication systems to overcome the risk of older persons passively consuming information rather than being active creators.

In 1989, Edwards and Englehardt, robotics researchers, published the first descriptive study of the willingness of older persons to use computers for specific Internet tasks; the authors explicitly introduced the concept that older persons, in this study 388 Americans over age 50 attending an

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