The Internet Behavior of Older Adults

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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 expe-

rience 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.

Why have older persons been less likely to go online? Initially, few persons over age 65 had Internet access (Lenhart, 2000), partly due to many being retired and some living on fixed incomes. However, economic factors never by itself explained the age differential. A second major factor was lack of contact with computers, and this was true even for older Americans with college or graduate degrees. As detailed by Fox (2004), most older persons lived lives far removed from

the Internet, knew few people who used email or surfed the Web, and could not imagine reasons for spending money and time learning how to use a computer. In addition, Fox (2004) reported that persons over 65 were more likely than any other age group to be living with disability, which could hinder their ability to obtain computer training or read the small type on many Web sites.

Since the initial 2000 report, each subsequent Pew paper has described an increase in older persons' Internet use, especially between 2000 and 2004, when Fox (2004) reported a 47% jump. In 2001, Fox enumerated the top Internet interests among seniors who go online to include mainly email, but also hobby information, news, health information, browsing "just for fun," and weather updates. By 2010, although users age 65 and older were still primarily using email to maintain personal contacts, 13% - more than three times as many as in 2009 - were relying on social media to manage their daily communications – sharing links, photos, videos, news and status updates (Madden, 2010). By 2013, the percentage of social media users had jumped to 27%. Yet, older computer users are still significantly less likely than all American adults (63%) to use social networking sites (Smith, 2014). According to Duggan (2015), of the five major platforms of current social media, Facebook is the most popular among older adult Internet users (48%), though they are less likely to go on Facebook than all U.S. adult Internet users (72%). Connected older adults also use – though less frequently – the social media platforms Pinterest (16%), LinkedIn (12%), Twitter (6%), and Instagram (4%). Relatively few older wired users participate in other online platforms such as discussion forums (8%) and Tumblr; only 2% of Internet users ages 65 and older report doing so (Duggan, 2015).

Since 2000, wired seniors consistently have been more likely than their offline peers to be younger, married, white, highly educated, and enjoying relatively high incomes; recent data confirm this trend (Smith, 2014). Lenhart and Duggan (2014) noted some interesting behaviors

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