

Understanding digital engagement later life

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Key findings

How does use of the internet vary among older people?

- For the English population aged 50 and over, large differences exist in the frequency of internet use by each of gender, age, wealth and region of England.
- The percentage of people using the internet frequently (at least once a week) shows a strong decrease with age. Over 90 per cent of men aged 50 to 54 use the internet frequently, but by age 80 only just over a third of men are frequent internet users.
- The proportion of women using the internet is lower. At age 50-54 81 per cent use the internet frequently and by age 80 this is the case for fewer than 14 per cent of women.
- The prevalence of frequent internet use drops to below half by age 75 for men and by age 70 for women.
- Over the ten year period of 2002/3 to 2012/13 there is an overall increase in frequent internet use for those aged 50 and over. However, frequent internet use increased at a greater rate for those who were younger than for those who were older, meaning that the gap in internet use between earlier and more recent age cohorts increased over time. Additionally, among older age cohorts (those aged 75 or older when first interviewed) the initial increase in internet use becomes a decline towards the end of the study period. These patterns are present for both men and women.
- The rate of internet use at a particular age is lower for earlier age cohorts than for more recent age cohorts. For example, at an average age of just below 72 the earliest cohort (aged 70-74) had a rate of frequent internet use of about 18 per cent, compared with a rate of about 33 per cent for the next cohort (aged 65 to 69 when first interviewed) and a rate of almost 30 per cent for the cohort that followed that (aged 60 to 64 when first interviewed).
- For the population overall, the richest fifth of the population (highest wealth quintile) were more likely to use the internet frequently, 87 per cent of men and 80 per cent of women used the internet frequently, compared with only half of men and two-fifths of women in the poorest fifth of the population.
- Frequently use of the internet is less common among those in lower wealth quintiles regardless of age group. For example, in the 75 to 79 age group less than a fifth of people in the poorest fifth frequently access the internet, compared with over half of people in

the wealthiest fifth. These associations suggest that differences in internet behaviour occur not only as the result of age, but also as a result of social position.

- The North East of England has the lowest proportion of both men and women who use the internet daily (46 per cent of men and 38 per cent of women) and the highest proportion who never use the internet (34 per cent and 43 per cent, respectively). The highest rates of internet use are found in the East of England, London, the South East of England and the South West of England (each region over 60 per cent of men and over 50 per cent of women using the internet daily).
- As population density decreases there are increasing rates of both men and women using the internet frequently. This means that men and women in more rural locations are more likely to use the internet than men and women in cities.
- There is a strong relationship between internet use and indicators of area deprivation for those aged 50 and over. Just over half of men in the most deprived areas use the internet frequently, compared with over four-fifths of men in the least deprived areas. And less than half of women in the most deprived areas use the internet frequently, compared with around 70 per cent of women in the least deprived areas.

Where do older people use the internet and which devices do they use?

- Among those who use the internet almost everyone (regardless of frequency of use, age, gender and wealth) uses the internet at home. The next most frequent place of use is work, followed by using the internet while on the move and while at other people's houses. Very few people use the internet in educational establishments (a little over 3 per cent of both men and women with little variation by age or wealth).
- Notably higher proportions of men than women access the internet on the move (27 per cent of men in total compared with 19 per cent of women). The use of internet on the move is also more common among wealthier quintiles: the percentage of women accessing the internet on the move is over twice as high in the wealthiest fifth compared with the poorest fifth of the population. There is also a large drop with increasing age in accessing the internet on the move for both men and women.
- Internet use at work is consistently higher among those in wealthier quintiles for both men and women. And, as would be expected, the proportion of people accessing the internet from places of work falls rapidly as age increases, reflecting workforce exit.
- Desktop computers are used to access the internet by 70 per cent of male and 60 per cent of female internet users aged 50 or older, and laptop computers are used at similar rates to the use of desktop computers (67 per cent of male and 68 per cent of female internet users).
- The use of other devices to access the internet is much less common, with only 30 per cent of men and 20 per cent of women in this age group using smartphones and only 16 per cent of men and 14 per cent of women using tablets.

- The use of laptops falls at a faster rate with age than the use of desktop computers for both men and women. By age 80 and over, the use of desktop computers for internet access is 8 per cent lower for men and 9 per cent lower for women than at age 50-54, while for laptops it is 23 per cent and 33 per cent lower for men and women respectively.
- Similarly, the use of tablet computers by age 80 is half the rate at age 50-54 among men, and almost two thirds lower among women. There is also a sharp decline with age in the proportions of men and women using smartphones for internet access. Almost half of all men aged 50-54 use smartphones to access the internet, but by age 70-74 this figure is less than 10 per cent and continues to decline thereafter. Over a third of women use smartphones at age 50-54, but only 5 per cent do so at age 70-74 and as for men, the proportion continues to decline thereafter.

What do older people use the internet for and does internet use compensate for lack of physical access to services?

- Among those aged 50 and older the use of the internet is particularly common for activities such as: sending/receiving email, finding information about goods or services, searching for information for learning or research, shopping or buying goods and services, news or newspaper websites, and streaming or downloading live or on demand TV or radio. Sixty-five per cent of men and 54 per cent of women use the internet for one or more of these purposes.
- Men are generally more likely than women to use the internet for financial purposes across all ages – 38 per cent of men compared with 27 per cent of women aged 50 and older use the internet for this purpose.
- For both men and women, the percentage reporting using the internet for finances lessens with age. Just over half of men aged 50-54 use the internet to deal with finances, compared with 13 per cent of men aged 80 and over.
- Network and gaming activities is the only category of internet use that is consistently reported more among women than men. And this remains across ages until the 75-79 age group. Overall 27 per cent of women and 24 per cent of men use the internet for these purposes.
- All uses of the internet become less common with declining wealth. However the rate of drop varies by type of use. So, although networking and gaming becomes less commonly reported as wealth decreases, the difference between the highest and lowest quintiles, among both men and women, is much smaller than is observable among more popular activities, such as email and dealing with finances. About a third more men and women in the richest fifth of the population use the internet for networking and gaming, compared with the poorest fifth. While more than twice as many men and women in the richest fifth of the population use the internet for email and research, and for finances, compared to the poorest fifth.
- For both men and women aged 50 or older those with no difficulty in accessing services are more likely than those with difficulty to use the internet frequently (78 per cent with

no difficulty compared with 65 per cent with difficulty for men and 70 per cent compared with 47 per cent for women). (Difficulty is defined as it being quite or very difficult to access at least one service from a predefined list of: bank or cash point, post office, corner shop, medium or large supermarket, shopping centre, general practitioner, chiroprapist, dentist, optician and hospital.)

What is the relationship between internet use and wellbeing?

- The cross-sectional association between internet use and a range of wellbeing outcomes was examined, net of the influence of gender, age, wealth and self-rated health.
- More frequent internet use is significantly associated with lower levels of depression and higher quality of life, but internet use was not associated with satisfaction with life.
- More frequent internet use was also associated with higher levels of social and civic engagement, but it was not associated with levels of social isolation.
- However, frequent internet use was associated with greater (rather than lower) feelings of loneliness.

Note on research methods

The data used in this analysis are taken from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA), which is a multidisciplinary, nationally representative, study of people aged 50 and older. At wave 6 of ELSA, collected between 2012 and 2013, detailed questions were asked of all respondents (10,372 individuals aged 50 and over) on internet use covering: frequency of use, location of use, devices the internet is accessed from and reasons for use. This allows a detailed mapping of who uses the internet, with what frequency, how it is used and what it is used for. Simple descriptive statistics are used to show the relationships between individual characteristics and internet use, and multivariate analyses are used to show the cross-sectional association between internet use and wellbeing.

Throughout the duration of ELSA (six data collections covering the period 2002/3 to 2012/14)) basic information was collected on whether or not individuals used the internet. This allowed for an examination of changing levels of internet use for individuals and how that relates to their characteristics. This analysis is based on responses from participants who were interviewed at wave 1 of ELSA and who responded to the study at least once, which gives 42,610 observations from 12,099 participants. Multilevel growth models were used to analyse these longitudinal data, which shows the average prevalence of internet use at the starting point (wave 1 of ELSA) and how this changes over time, and how these both vary according to people's characteristics.