



# Older adults' experiences and perceptions of digital technology: (Dis)empowerment, wellbeing, and inclusion



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## ABSTRACT

As more and more of the business of society is transferred and conducted online, older adults frequently find themselves without the skills to participate effectively. This is frequently confounded by limited physical mobility and a decrease in their social network and contact. This paper examines the lived reality of that process and how digital technology could be used to enhance the life activity of older adults and their wellbeing by increasing their social network. Seventeen older adults (10 female, 7 male Mage = 71.67, SDage = 10.05) participated in two focus groups that each lasted approximately 90 min. Interpretative phenomenological analysis yielded two main themes: digital technology serving as a tool to disempower and empower. Findings support evidence of a digital divide and how that divide is evolving from the ideographic perspective of digitally-engaged older adults and for society. Discussions also surround barriers to digital technology use for older adults, the codification of digital technology use within society, and how older adults use digital technology in a facilitative and inclusive way to empower themselves and protect them from the negative effects of the digital divide.

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## 1. Introduction

The increase in the relative proportion of older adults in the UK (Cracknell, 2010), has resulted in both enhancing older adults' social inclusion and promoting social and community connectiveness to be identified as crucial agendas by the government and numerous stakeholders (e.g., Dilnot, 2011). Behind this impetus to enhance social inclusion is the recognition that we live in a changing society with many services and resources accessible only through digital means as a mechanism to meet funding shortfalls (Lam & Lee, 2006; McMellon & Schiffman, 2012). Although older adults represent a growing group of technology users (Vroman, Arthanat, & Lysack, 2015), the ever evolving nature of technology means that individuals need ever increasing levels of digital literacy to maintain their sense of inclusion. Therefore, gaining a greater understanding of the lived experience of older adults' technology use will facilitate the implementation of such approaches. The present study addressed this issue through conducting two focus groups with older adults and using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore their experiences.

### 1.1. How do older adults engage with digital technology?

Vroman et al. (2015) proposed a socio-ecological model of older adults' digital technology use. At the centre of the model is the individual with their unique characteristics including their attitudes to digital technology, their needs, and their capacity to use digital technology which aligns to using technology to maintain social contacts. The next level of technology use is as a tool for carrying out day-to-day activities. The final level represents the most sophisticated level of digital connection with the individual making connections with their broader community which are not restricted by geographical boundaries. The theoretical model proposed by Vroman et al. is developed from quantitative analyses which may fail to fully encapsulate older adults' experiences. Specifically, older adults are a disparate and heterogeneous group with regards to their digital technology use because their past employment, motivation, and existing knowledge varies (Lee & Coughlin, 2014). Further, although some older adults have actively embraced digital technology use, others are more reluctant resulting in an emerging digital divide (Carvalho et al., 2012). However, research examining this digital divide has typically reflected impacts at the micro (individual) rather than the macro (societal) level and it remains unclear whether older adults' perceive and experience this divide. Consequently, the present research explored with older adults issues aligned to how they engage with digital technology.

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### 1.2. Benefits of technology use for older adults

Whilst the increasing digitalisation of society has been identified as a risk factor for reducing social inclusion and weakening social ties, because of the potential reduction in face-to-face contact that it affords (Chen, 2013), digital technologies may offer one mechanism to enhance social inclusion in older adults. For example, older adults with limited mobility can use digital technology to maintain their social networks and ultimately facilitate their wellbeing (Choi & DiNitto, 2013; Winstead et al., 2013). Greater computer knowledge can also serve to empower by allowing older adults to be more independent, maintain their social networks, and enhance their knowledge of health issues (Heart & Calderon, 2013; Karavidas, Lim, & Katsikas, 2005). Time spent constructively also reduces feelings of loneliness (Pettigrew & Roberts, 2008) and prevents cognitive decline (Tun & Lachman, 2010). In support of these arguments, recent quasi-experimental research has reported that internet training significantly reduces loneliness, a proxy of social isolation, in older adults (Blažun, Saranto, & Rissanen, 2012; Fokkema & Knipscheer, 2007; Shapira, Barak, & Gal, 2007). However, not all studies have reported a comparable enhancement of perceived social inclusion (e.g., White et al., 2002) prompting critics to argue that the reported enhanced social inclusion occurred as a training/support effect rather than because of the digital technology per se (Dickinson & Gregor, 2006). Together, these studies suggest that it may be the activities that older adults engage in when using digital technology that facilitated social inclusion and empowerment. The current study aimed to gain further insight into these issues through a qualitative exploration of older adults' experiences of digital technology use and their perceptions of wellbeing.

Empirical evidence reports that although older adults tend to predominately use the internet for communication and information seeking purposes (Erickson & Johnson, 2011), a sense of social inclusion was found to be fostered when older adults spent more time using the internet (McMellon & Schiffman, 2002; Sum, Mathews, Hughes, & Campbell, 2008). Also, those older adults who spent more time using the internet often had a larger computer mediated social network and, this in turn, promoted feelings of connectiveness (Nahm, Resnick, & Mills, 2003). Similarly and more recently, older adults who reported that they frequently used the internet also reported that they rarely felt lonely and isolated whereas those that rarely used the internet reported that they often felt lonely and isolated (Mason, Sinclair, & Berry, 2012). Moreover, similar results have been reported in older adults in assisted and independent living communities: increased internet use is associated with reduced loneliness and increased social contact (Cotton, Anderson, & McCulloch, 2013). Using the internet and digital technology as a means of communication may allow older adults to compensate for potential mobility loss and lifestyle changes associated with ageing (McMellon & Schiffman, 2002) and foster a sense of empowerment. From a theoretical perspective, how older adults communicate online may also impact on their sense of social connectiveness and social inclusion. According to the media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Daft, Lengel, & Trevino, 1987), the richer the communication medium in terms of the available social cues, the more effective the communication. For example, when communicating face-to-face, individuals are able to use words, vocal cues, and non-verbal behaviours to communicate factual and social information in a quick and unambiguous manner (Dennis & Kinney, 1998). Therefore, a Skype communication with a web camera enabled would be more effective and 'rich' than a Skype communication without a web camera.

### 1.3. Attitudes to digital technology

Another likely contributor to the psychosocial benefits of older adults' digital technology use is their underlying motives for engaging with technology. Through exploring evaluations of the benefits and uses of digital technology with older adults, insights can be gained as to what the enablers or barriers are to access the many benefits. For example, older adults who use the internet to communicate with others reported lower levels of social loneliness (Sum et al., 2008). One possible explanation for the increased wellbeing due to computer-mediated social support is the likelihood of interacting with someone with similar life experiences who may be more accessible in the digital world (Pfiel, Zaphiris, & Wilson, 2009). Moreover, giving and receiving support through digital means enhances a sense of connectiveness and wellbeing (Thomas, 2010). An alternative explanation is provided by the hyperpersonal model (Walther, 1996), which proposes that it is possible to have social relationships characterised by high levels of intimacy through computer mediated communication because of characteristics of those communicating. Specifically, self-presentation of the sender, over attribution of similarity of the sender, asynchronous channel use, and self-fulfilling feedback prophecy enhance intimacy.

Aligned with motivation for using technology, an individual's sense of self-efficacy also bears on their technology use and their acceptance of digital technology (Igarria & Iivari, 1995). Specifically, an individual's belief in their capabilities to perform certain tasks and to organise information such that they can produce positive outcomes influences how they perceive and subsequently use technology (Hsu & Chiu, 2004). In support of this proposition, studies with adults across the life-span have consistently found that a greater sense of self-efficacy is associated with greater technology use (e.g., Eastin & LaRose, 2000; Karavidas et al., 2005). Further, a greater sense of self-efficacy specifically for the internet is associated with greater internet use (Lam & Lee, 2006; Salanova, Grau, Cifre, & Llorens, 2000). Additionally, research has focussed on capturing and quantifying behaviours and phenomena throughout the life-span (Weil & Rosen, 1995). Therefore, when considering the benefits of digital technology for enhancing older adults' social inclusion and social connectivity, it is important to acknowledge older adults' perceptions of the abilities to complete the required tasks rather than simply their knowledge of particular tasks. For example, older adults who perceived social networking websites as easy to use and useful are more likely to use them (Braun, 2013). However, Dickinson and Gregor (2006) caution against misattribution of causality and generalisation of findings in such studies because the participants tend to be self-selected and experienced computer users.

### 1.4. The current study

It is clear from the preceding discussions that digital and social care agendas set by stakeholder groups need to meet the needs for older adults to maintain their sense of inclusion through increasing their digital literacy, especially when information and services are migrating to exclusively digital access (Barnard, Bradley, Hodgson, & Llyod, 2013). Within the context of an ageing society, planning for social resilience in this way has been a focus of the literature both in the US, UK, and other countries and is crucial to future proofing our public services and current levels of support (McMellon & Schiffman, 2002; Gatto & Tak, 2008; Lam & Lee, 2006). Recent studies have used quantitative survey methods to examine older adults' experiences of technology use (e.g., Vroman et al., 2015); however, to gain a deeper insight and understanding focus groups were conducted in the current study. Gaining a further insight into older adults' experiences of digital

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