

Internet access and use by older adults in the ‘new normal’

The COVID-19 pandemic has rapidly and dramatically changed how people interact, moving work and social communication online. Use of the internet to stay connected, socialise, shop and conduct business has expanded since the implementation of measures to curtail the spread of COVID-19.

Researchers from The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA) at Trinity College have released a new report: ***‘Internet access and use among adults aged 50 and over in Ireland: Results from Wave 5 of The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing’*** that delves into the internet habits and behaviours of adults aged 50 and over in Ireland.

The report is part of concerted efforts by researchers at TILDA to refocus its research outputs to provide a better understanding of relevant aspects of Ireland’s older population and help shape policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Given the restrictions introduced to minimise exposure to infection spread, technology plays a central role in enabling activities of daily living and in communication. Knowledge of the availability and use of technology by Irish adults is therefore key to policy decisions.

What does the report show? The report analyses data from Wave 5 of TILDA (2018) to provide insights into internet use among older adults.

Some of the key findings reveal that:

- *71% of adults aged 50 and over (c. 1 million adults) have access to the internet in their homes.*
- *Internet access decreases with age. Only 38% of those aged 80 and over have home internet access, compared to 86% aged 50-69 years, and 66% aged 70-79 years.*
- *68% aged 50+ use the internet daily (700,000 adults), while 85% (870,000 adults) access the internet at least once a week.*
- *64% of adults aged 50+ (approximately 900,000) have access to smartphones/tablets (and therefore to apps).*
- *79% of older adults use the internet for information sharing, 72% for sending and receiving emails, 43% make audio and video calls online, while 40% engage with social media*
- *30% of adults aged 50+ who live alone do not have internet access*
- *74% aged 50+ living in urban areas have home internet access, compared to 67% in rural areas*
-

The findings show a high level of access, and frequent and varied use of the internet among older adults in Ireland. The internet is a valuable resource to maintain social connections, access information and support services, and help adults carry out a variety of tasks from financial matters, to social and leisure activities.

The report outlines encouraging evidence that older adults are increasingly connected in the online world. Internet use offers positive engagement opportunities to keep older adults mentally stimulated and lessen feelings of isolation and loneliness. Nonetheless, 3 in 5 people aged 80 and older do not have access to the internet and alternative means of communication are required. For these individuals, particularly for those living alone and older age groups, more traditional forms of communication are likely to be essential. Communicating and accessing information through telephone, radio, television, and the national postal service remains important, in combination with ongoing family and community support.

Lead author of the report, Health Research Assistant at TILDA, Paul Doody said:

“These data indicate that among adults aged 50 and older in Ireland, there is a high prevalence of home internet access, with frequent and varied use. Particularly in light of the on-going COVID-19 pandemic, the internet provides a valuable resource for many to maintain social interactions, obtain information, access support services, and engage in online commerce. However, our data also indicates a relatively large section of the population are without home internet access. This is particularly the case for older age groups and those living alone. For these individuals, more traditional forms of communication and information distribution, in combination with ongoing family and community support, are likely to be essential. ”

“Our findings may be of particular interest to organisations and institutions commonly engaged with older populations, especially given the recent need to reorientate many organisational structures and resources online. Furthermore, these findings may provide a valuable resource to aid planning around contemporary provision of online shopping, continuity of medical care, and ongoing development of optional contacting tracing apps.”

Co-author of the report, Senior Data Manager, Minjuan Wang said:

“The data in the report suggests strong feasibility of the plan to use a contact tracing application to combat COVID-19, as the majority of adults aged 50 or above have access to the internet. Nevertheless, we should also bear in mind the continued importance of traditional forms of communication, as there is still a substantial section of the population that does not fully embrace modern technologies like the internet. The optimal approach would be to combine both traditional and modern methods of communication to ensure full coverage.”

Professor Rose Anne Kenny, Principal Investigator of TILDA said:

“The impact of this information goes beyond the current pandemic. More and more financial and commercial institutions rely on the internet and allied technologies to interact with customers. This leaves a significant number of citizens marginalised and disenfranchised. It is incumbent on Government and other organisations to ensure that all citizens can engage fully with organisations.”

To view the full report, visit: <https://www.doi.org/10.38018/TildaRe.2020-06>