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The Aging Internet: Digital choice and exclusion amongst the elderly

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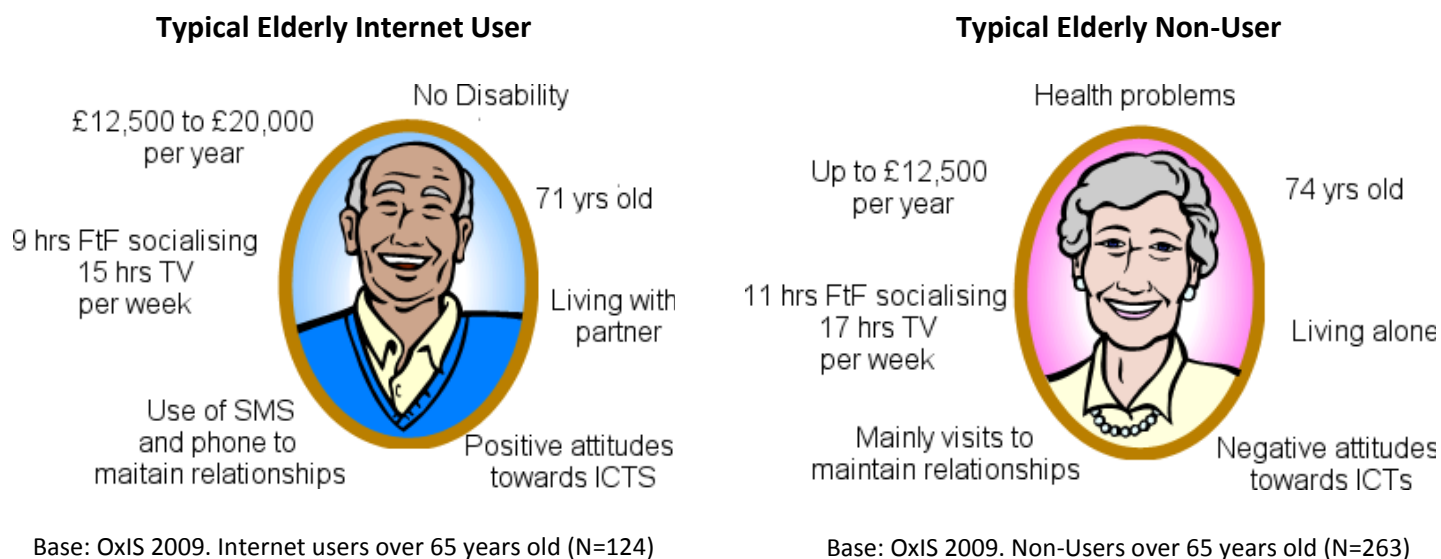
Digital exclusion is a hot topic in the UK at the moment. Charities and service providers working with older people are concerned that this group is disproportionately excluded from services offered on digital platforms and research backs this up (DCLG, 2009; DCMS, 2009; Helsper, 2008). Digital exclusion refers to those factors beyond a person's direct control that limit their access to and ability to use Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). This can be contrasted to digital choice which refers to those who make a voluntary decision to disengage from ICTs. The most frequently mentioned factors related to digital exclusion are low income, low education and disabilities. Indicators of digital choice are negative attitudes towards technologies and a lack of interest in engaging with digital content. In academic research and policy there has been a shift in recent years towards looking at disengagement rather than exclusion. This means an emphasis on socio-psychological factors in addition to economic and health factors that limit people's use of the Internet.

The Internet has come of age; costs of acquiring access have gone down, interfaces have become more user-friendly and the range of available activities has gone up. The widespread integration of Internet based services into people's everyday lives, has led some to conclude that costs and skills can no longer be reasons for disengagement from the use of the Internet. Everyone is now expected to be 'online' and those who are not are labelled 'digital refuseniks'. Since the elderly make up the largest section of non-users of the Internet, only one third (34%) of those in

retirement use the Internet, it is important to understand if their disengagement is indeed a choice or caused by exclusion.

Profiles of older users and non-users

Based on the Oxford Internet Surveys (OxIS)¹ a profile of the average older Internet user can be constructed and compared with that of the average older non-user and the average younger user. People over 65 are different from those younger than 65 on a few key exclusion factors; they are more likely to have a disability or health problem and have less disposable income. When examining the profile of a typical older non-user of the Internet² it becomes clear that what makes older people disadvantaged in general also constitutes a disadvantage amongst those within the same age group as regards digital engagement.



The figures above show a typical 65+ Internet user and a typical 65+ non-user. In comparison to their peers, older people who do not use the Internet are:

¹ The University of Oxford's OxIS is a biennial survey started in 2003 of a nationally representative survey of Britons over the age of 14.

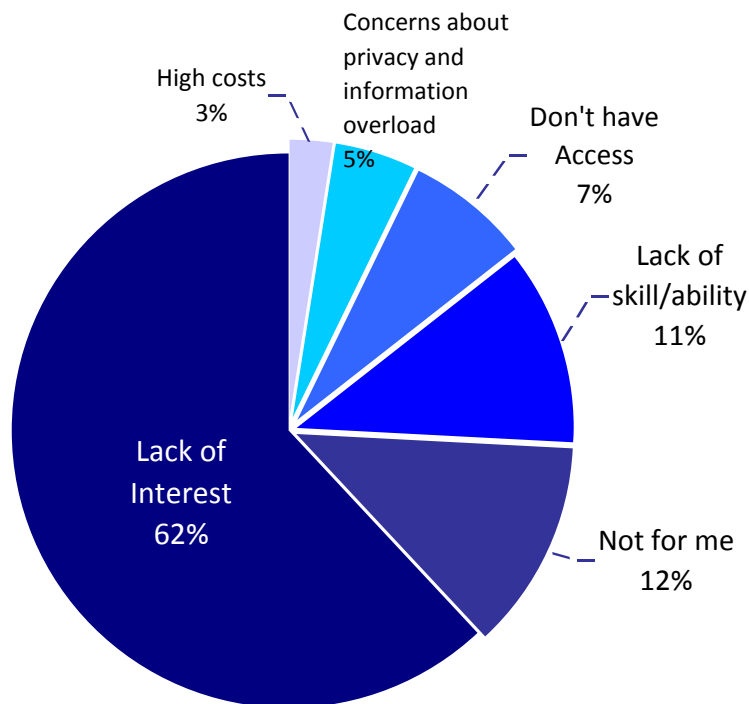
² The elderly non-users described in this article include both those who have never used the Internet before (63% of those over 65) and those who had some experience but stopped using it (5% of those over 65).

- older (average age older non-user=74yrs v. Internet user=71yrs)
- socially isolated (55% lives alone v. 24%)
- poor (56% in lowest income group v. 29%)
- female (55% v. 34%)
- with health problems (41% v. 18%)
- less familiar with ICTs (eg. 25% text messages at least monthly v. 60% of Internet users)
- negative about ICTs

Reasons for non-use

Given that the group of elderly non-users is disadvantaged in terms of health and income one might expect that the important reasons for them to disengage from the Internet are costs and a lack of ICT skills.

Reasons given for disengagement from the internet by older people



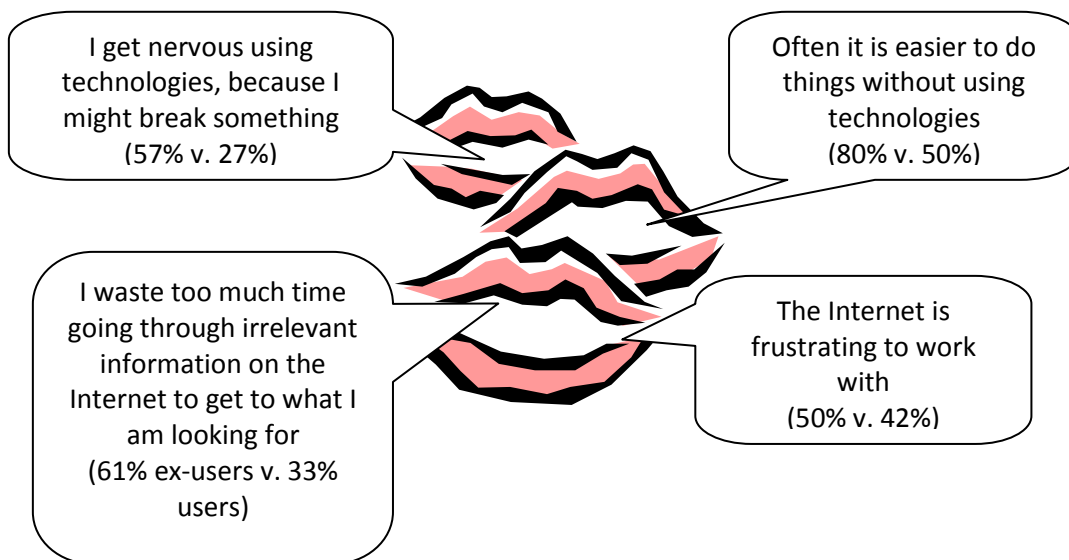
Base: Non-Users over 65 (N=259)

When older people were asked about their reasons for disengaging, costs and access are rarely mentioned. Instead, they cite a lack of interest and unsuitability for people like them. To a certain extent one can expect these answers, it is easier to say that you are not interested than to admit that you do not know how to or do not have the money to afford using the Internet.

Ease with ICTs

Nevertheless, a lack of skill was relatively important for disengaging; older people feel uncomfortable with ICTs in general.

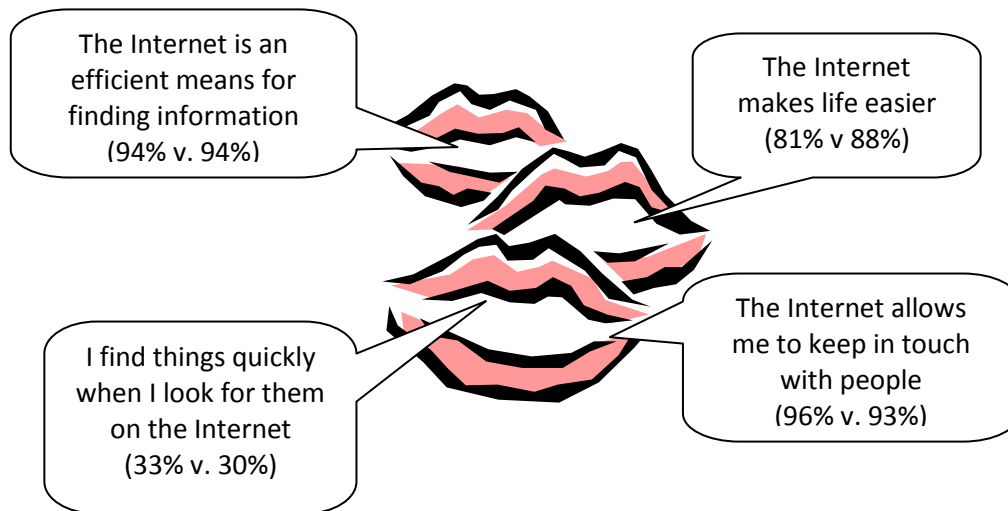
Typical statements of elderly non-users compared to those of elderly users



Base: Non-Users of the Internet older than 65 (N=259) compared to Internet Users over 65 (BN=124).

The concerns about ICTs expressed above are relatively common, even those who use the Internet believe that it can be addictive (73% older users). However, typically users are more positive about the possibilities that the Internet in particular and ICTs in general offer than non-users.

The typical statements by elderly Internet users compared to younger users



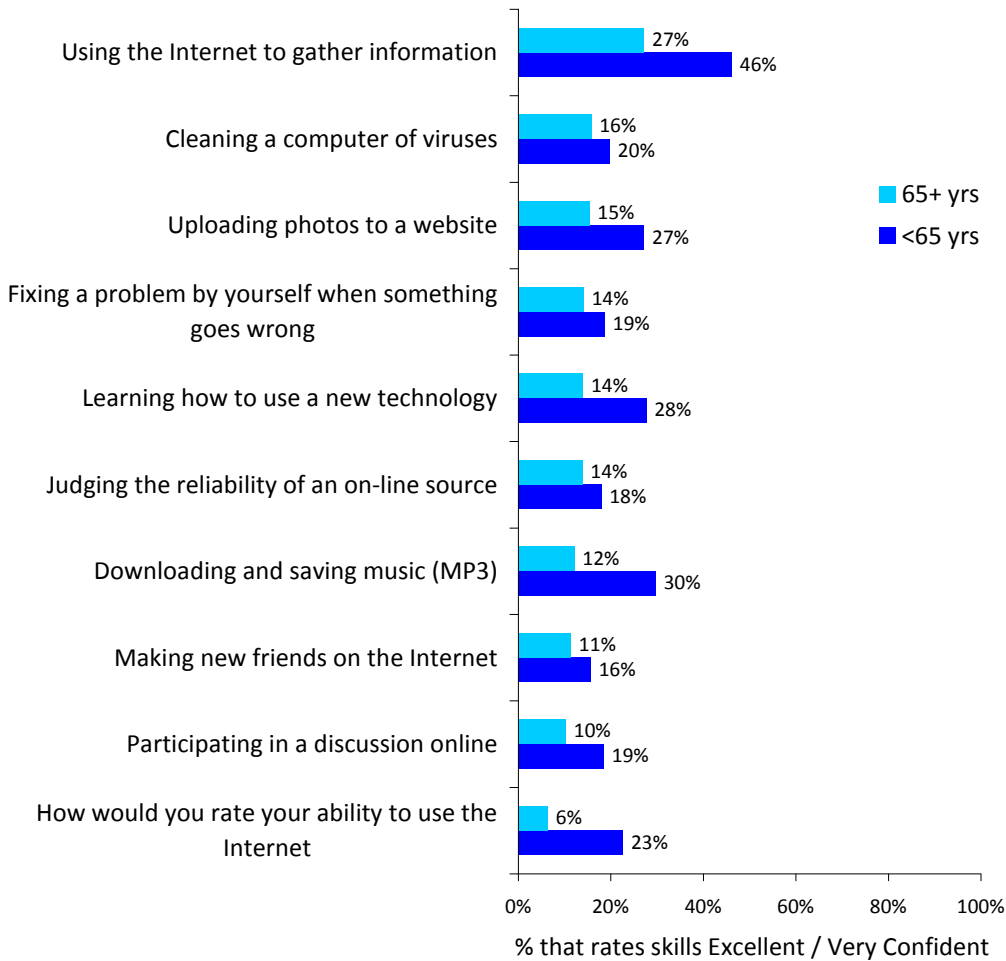
Base: Internet user over 65 (N=124) compared to Internet user under 65 (N=1267)

The differences between younger and older Internet users in their attitudes towards ICTs are small. This illustrates that when older (or younger) people have had experience with the Internet they are less likely to have negative perceptions of ICTs.

Confidence in use

Notwithstanding similarities in attitudes towards ICTs in general, older users' Internet related confidence levels are lower than those of younger users.

Confidence of younger and older Internet users



Base: Internet user over 65 (N=124), Internet user under 65 (N=1267)

The differences in Internet self-confidence between younger and older users are largest for information seeking and situations that require online interacting.

Proxy users

Few older non-users indicated that lack of access was a reason to refrain from using the Internet. This might be related to the existence of proxy-users. The elderly have traditionally depended on others to help them out for a variety of activities that they do not feel comfortable or able to do themselves. OxIS asked whether someone was available for support and if the person had asked someone to help them out:

- Two thirds of older non-users know someone they could ask

- One fifth had asked someone for help

This means that even when they know people who could help them out using ICTs, older non-users rarely ask them. Even if they ask for help, the variety of people they depend on is rather limited. People asked for help tend to be:

- Children or grandchildren (85%)
- Friends (16%)
- A partner/spouse (7%)

This shows that the ICT support network of older non-users is made up of close relatives or intimate others, very rarely do they know trained professionals or experts who can help them out.

For those who use the Internet a different picture emerges, older Internet users asked:

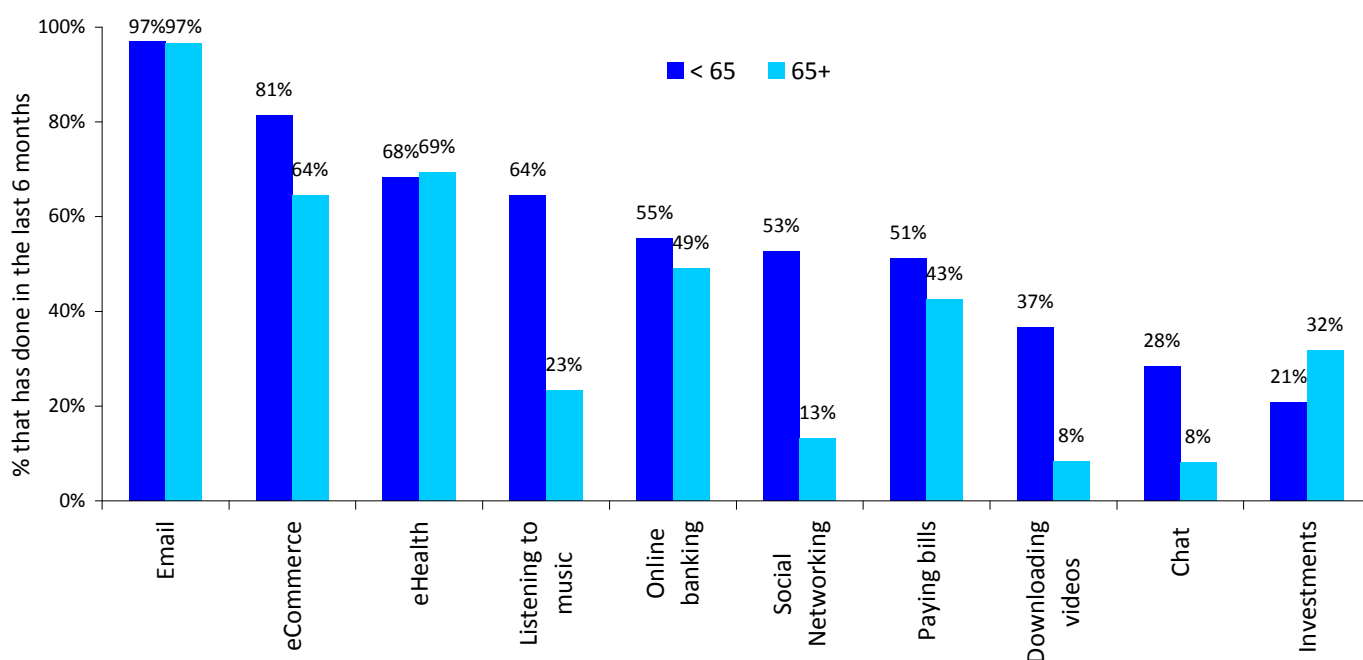
- people at work or at school (15%)
- took a course (11%)
- paid someone to help them out (7%)
- received help from family and friends (68%)
- worked things out for themselves 70%

Nevertheless, older users have less strong support networks and cannot rely as much on learning by doing as younger users (around 80% had received help from family and friends and worked things out for themselves).

Digital Engagement

In comparison with younger Internet users, older users are more likely to be focussed on health and other practical services.

Activities undertaken on the Internet by younger and older people



Base: Internet user over 65 (N=124), Internet user under 65 (N=1267)

Younger Internet users tend to undertake activities more frequently but their emphasis is on other types of engagement. For older people the so-called Web 2.0 (interactive) activities are uncommon while they are relatively popular amongst younger people. Nevertheless, the five most popular activities (emailing, checking facts, websurfing, making travel plans and looking for topic of personal interest) are the same for the younger and older internet users.

Conclusions for the health and public service sector

The Oxford Internet Surveys and other studies have shown that amongst older people disengagement from service providers on the internet is likely to be a combination of forced exclusion and choice. It is not just a matter of providing access or skills training but also of overcoming negative attitudes. Many older people indicate that they have chosen not to use a technology that is of no interest or not made for them and that they will leave it to others. Thus, before referring older people to information available online, a service provider should remember that this person is very unlikely to use the Internet but that they might have (non-

expert) others who do this for them. Ask how these others can be informed or reached if the client needs information that is only available online. Alternative resources need to be provided to counter the disinterest, technological anxiety, lack of confidence and infrequent experience that many older people have in relation to ICTs. If the person is well educated, healthy and socially active, their experiences with the web are likely to be very similar to that of the younger person, perhaps slightly more practical and information oriented. In fact, the health and service sector is one of the most accessed by older people who do use the Internet. However, most older people do not use the Internet and are uncomfortable with interactive features, important facts to keep in mind when designing digital services.

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