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ONLINE COMMUNICATION & BABY BOOMERS: CURRENT USE, PREFERENCES, AND FUTURE EXPECTATIONS

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A survey was conducted on 210 Baby Boomers (Age mean = 51.4 Std. dev. 5.46) within the United States to determine their current use of online technology in social interactions, their preferences in these interactions, and the expectations they have of near-future online communication technologies. The findings highlight the importance of online communication in their lives and spotlight their widespread use and preference for e-mail. Despite the popularity of online communication among this generation, their attitudes are mixed over its use as a replacement for more traditional interaction. Still, Baby Boomers anticipate increasing their use of online communication technologies as they age. Most Baby Boomers expect to have access to these technologies in the future if they were to become a resident at an assisted living facility.

Introduction

In 2006, the first members of the Baby Boomer generation in the United States (those born between 1946 and 1964) turned sixty years old (US Census Bureau 2006). Over their lives, Boomers have experienced much change and innovation, particularly in the field of computer technology. Boomers watched as computers moved from the corporate backrooms to the desks of employees and to almost every single household. Consequently, they were the first adult generation to integrate computers into their work routines and the first generation with widespread computer savvy. Their savviness with computer technology is particularly evident in their use of the Internet. Nearly 79% go online¹ with the average connected Boomer having been online for over seven years².

¹ This measure was extracted from the 2006 February/March data set from the Pew Research survey of Home Broadband adoption (available at www.pewinternet.org). 1188 of 1505 respondents aged 42-60 answered, "Yes" to the question: Q6a Do you use the Internet, at least occasionally? This equates to 78.9% of those polled.

² This measure was extracted from the 2006 February/March data set from the Pew Research survey of Home Broadband adoption (available at www.pewinternet.org). For those survey respondents that specified their age in the range of 42-60, we analyzed the results of two questions: Q12 About how many years have you been an Internet user? and Q12.1 About how many months is that?, with the latter asked only if a respondent answered "less than a year" to question Q12. For consistency, answers to Q12.1 were converted to a fraction of a year. Also, answers in excess of 25 years were scrubbed from the data to remove answers outside the bounds of the existence of the Internet (eliminating six answers ranging from 30 - 85 years). Respondents who were categorized as "Don't Know/Refused" were also eliminated from the calculation. On a total of 1154 respondents we computed a mean time using the Internet of 7.67 years with a standard deviation of 4.22 and standard error of .12. The median value was 8 years.

The Boomers' aptitude for computer technology and their experience with the Internet stand out as major differences between this generation and their parents. While there are more Seniors online today than ever before, those that are "wired" still represent a minority among their peers. Although touted as the fastest growing demographic on the Internet (Eastman and Iyer 2004; Lanser 2003; US Dept. of Commerce 2001), barely half of Seniors aged 65-69 are online (Fox 2006). Among those aged seventy and above, the percentage that is online decreases to slightly more than one fourth (Fox and Madden 2005).

The Baby Boomers are likely to share more in common with the previous generation as they grow older and begin to encounter the inevitable results of aging. Increasing physical limitations, lowered mobility, and the loss of friends and loved ones can cause social isolation and foment feelings of depression and loneliness (Suparna 2000). In fact, SeniorOnline lists loneliness as "the biggest problem of the elderly," (Eastman and Iyer 2004). In a speech at the Forum on Technologies for Successful Aging, Joseph Coughlin, the Director of MIT's AgeLab, addressed this problem when he asked,

"What is the platform for personal communications? The greatest risk of aging is not necessarily disease. It is the loss of social contact. How can innovative information technologies help us maintain social connectivity?" (Coughlin 2001, p. S41)

While there are countless systems aimed at supporting social interaction among the elderly, ranging from karaoke-style group dancing systems (Keyani et al. 2005) to teleconferencing applications designed to make Seniors feel that they are in the presence of other people (Heeter et al. 2001), these systems are designed around a user group that is, as a whole, not Internet inclined. When considering the Boomer population, we are dealing with a group that already has notions and experience with online communication. While non-profit groups like SeniorNet are struggling to bring the current generation of Seniors online (Ito et al. 2001), the Baby Boomers have been sending e-mail and surfing the web for years. Yet, aside from their inclusion as a demographic age range in studies of online activities (Fox and Madden 2005) and use of certain communication tools (instant messaging; Shiu and Lenhart 2004), limited research effort has thus far been directed toward a comprehensive understanding of online communication by the Baby Boomers³.

A better understanding of the current online communication trends and practices among Boomers will guide the development of future tools geared towards this user population. To this end, we conducted a survey of 210 Baby Boomers (Age mean = 51.4, Std. dev. = 5.46) within the United States to determine how they use technology in their social interactions with family, friends, and groups that they belong to. We examined their preferences surrounding these interactions and inquired into the expectations they hold for future systems. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of this study, and offer directions for future research.

Methodology

A survey was developed to gather information surrounding online communication and Baby Boomers. The survey included seventy-five questions, consisting of a combination of multiple-choice, rank order, likert, and free form types. The questions were organized into five basic sections. In the first, demographic information was asked of the participant, including gender, age, educational status, occupation, ethnicity, zip code of residence, and household income. The second section contained questions designed to establish the participant's current level of social interaction and their attitudes surrounding it. Specific online communication technologies used in social interaction (e.g. e-mail) were the focus of the third section of questions. Participants were polled on how frequently they used these specific technologies and the settings and nature of their use. In section four, participants were asked judge the importance of these technologies in their daily life. They were also given the opportunity to compare online communication technologies against each other and against more traditional forms of social interaction. In the final section we inquired into the expectations that Baby Boomers hold regarding the future availability and their likely use of particular online communication systems, including if they became a resident at an assisted living facility.

³ This problem stems from the tendency for the Baby Boomer population to be grouped either with younger generations (as in 30 – 49) or among older generations (as in 50+, 55+, 55-64).

The survey was web-based and made available between December 8th, 2005 and February 20th, 2006⁴. Survey participants were solicited through a variety of means. E-mail messages were sent to acquaintances of the researchers and to several e-mail lists maintained by a university. In an effort to stimulate snowballing of the survey, the e-mail asked participants to forward the survey along to their Baby Boomer friends and family. To supplement the e-mail campaign, the researchers petitioned the administrators of a number of Boomer-oriented online groups to post a link to the survey for their membership (e.g. AgingHipsters.com, the Alzheimer caregiver support group at Curearchives.com). Finally, messages were posted in applicable Usenet forums to notify members about the survey.

On the resulting data, a general descriptive analysis was conducted using SPSS. Bivariate correlation tests between variables of interest were evaluated using two-tailed Spearman's Rho calculations.

Participant demographics

After filtering out respondents outside of the target age range and residing elsewhere than the United States, a total of 210 valid survey responses remained. The average age of respondents was 51.35. Eighty-seven percent of respondents provided their gender, with females accounting for 70% of our sample. Though a large number of respondents resided within the general vicinity of the researchers, the sample of respondents included residing addresses from twenty-five states.

Nearly all of the respondents listed their ethnicity, with 206 of 210 respondents choosing from Asian (3), Black (11), Hispanic (4), Native American (2), White (180), or other (6). In this sample, 13% of respondents can be considered minorities, slightly less than the US Baby Boomer total of 17% (MetLife 2003). Likewise, a high number of respondents provided the highest level of education they completed. The 207 who answered this question reported themselves as either completing: some high school (1), high school graduate (16), some college (48), college graduate (47), or graduate coursework or a graduate degree (95). This sample represents a well-educated crowd with 69% having a college degree. Among all US Boomers, 89% have completed high school yet only 29% have a Bachelor's degree or above (MetLife 2003). Household income was offered by 206 of the respondents across four ranges: less than \$30,000 (9), \$30,000 - 49,999 (36), \$50,000 - 74,999 (42), and \$75,000 + (119). Responses indicate a more affluent sample than the general population of Baby Boomers. In 2003, the average before-tax household income of older Boomers, born between 1946 and 1955, was \$58,672. This increased for younger Boomers, born between 1956 and 1964, to \$68,028 (MetLife 2003).

A partial explanation for the differences between this sample and the general population of Baby Boomers may come from the medium of distribution. While gaps in computer and Internet access are rapidly shrinking, stratification does exist along race, income, and educational lines (Warschauer 2004). Overall, it was concluded that with the given data, the participant group adequately represented the common online Baby Boomer population in the United States.

Offline social interactions

An understanding of the participants' current levels of social interaction is essential for comprehending and contextualizing their behaviors once technology is involved. To obtain this understanding, we asked the participants general questions about their social interactions prior to the introduction of questions with an emphasis on technology.

⁴ According to Fox and Madden of the Pew Research Center, "Over three quarters of Baby Boomers go online and this number is rising" (2005). In this study we aim to understand the practices and preferences of online communication technology by this majority. Therefore, the use of a web-based survey was selected to dissuade participation by those lacking general familiarity with the Internet or otherwise lacking in mainstream computer know-how.

Users were polled on the importance of interacting with family and friends in their day-to-day life and if they considered their current level of communication to be satisfactory. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of Boomers agreed that interaction with friends and family was important in their day-to-day life (89% and 85% respectively). Slightly over half of the Boomers polled indicated a desire for more communication with family and friends than they have right now (52%). Of those remaining, 46% expressed wanting the same amount of communication with family and friends that they currently have.

While these numbers may seem nothing out of the ordinary, they do provide a tough benchmark to follow. As families disperse, frequent communication becomes more difficult. According to Jacob Climo in an article by the American Society for Aging, “Today in the United States an estimated 40 million ‘distant’ adult children and their elderly parents live too far apart to maintain frequent face-to-face contact and communications” (2001, p. 64). When asked how often the Boomers communicate with friends and family outside of their general vicinity (greater than an hour’s drive away), the majority stated communicating at least weekly (52% stating once a week or more). A challenge presents itself as the desire to maintain or increase the level of communication is met with decreasing means to facilitate the interaction. Limitations brought on by age-related mobility problems and increased chronic illnesses often limit social interaction with relatives and friends. In addition, distance from relatives is noted as a primary component of social isolation among the elderly (Hall and Havens 1999).

One method of dealing with social isolation is through involvement with groups, social organizations, or clubs. When asked to list those in which they participate, the Boomers in our study generated a sizable list. Listings ranged from cultural (“Baltimore Folk Music Society”, “Brazil Cultural Affairs group”) to sports-related (“basketball pickup gym group”, “4 ballroom dance clubs”) to advocacy (“Sierra Club”, “NRA”) with all manner of organizations in between. A large number of respondents (46) specified involvement with a religious association.

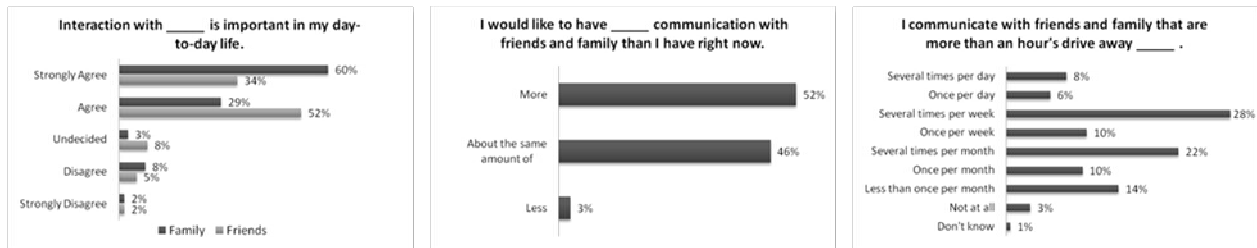


Figure 1: Measures of offline social interactions

Online social interactions

For those Boomers that specified involvement with groups, social organizations, or clubs, we asked if they communicated online with any of them on a regular basis. To this question, seven out of ten participants responded affirmatively to some form of regular online communication. More telling though is the type of online communication they engage in with these groups. Though they were only provided a small free form area in the survey to describe their communication, half of all participants explicitly stated the use of some form of e-mail (including bulk e-mail lists and listservs).

It was concluded that the Boomers are not only online regulars, with 86% of those polled going online several times a day and another 10% at least once a day, but they are prolific e-mailers. Ninety-eight percent of those surveyed use e-mail at least weekly, with 93% percent using e-mail daily (87% use e-mail at least several times a day). While avid users of e-mail, the Boomers were less inclined to chat or play online games. Only 24% of study participants used chat applications more often than once a month. Among this group, 63% never used a chat application. For the playing of oline games, 81% of polled Boomers played less than once a month including 74% that did not play at all. Full results to these questions are available in *Figure 2*.

Nearly 15% of the Boomers maintain a personal home page or blog. Often this is in connection with work, “It’s my teacher website, so I put our calendar and updates there. I also post links to places I want my students to visit,” yet many maintain websites or blogs for personal reasons,

“Everything from discussion of being disabled to recommending good books webpage (SO out of date) what my partner and I are interested in from figure skating to Sherlock Holmes and more.”

“I post mostly about my family on my personal web page. It helps my family and friends to keep up with everything we have going on.”

Another area that is emerging as a favorite among Boomers is online photo sharing applications. Online photo sharing applications, such as Flickr, Kodak Gallery, Snapfish, and Shutterfly, allow users the ability to upload, manage, and share their digital photographs. 47% of the Baby Boomers have visited a photo sharing website to view photos taken by others and 30% have shared photographs using one of these sites themselves. A more advanced feature of photo sharing sites, the ability to order physical prints of digital pictures, was used by 23% of those polled.

In line with the Pew study on Older Americans and the Internet, we found that Boomers are just about as likely to access the net from home as they are from work (Fox 2004). Adding to this, we found that Boomers are also accessing the Internet from public access points (such as libraries) and from retail locations (such as cafes, bookstores, airports, and hotels). Roughly 7% of our participants reported regularly connecting to these public and retail locations. Personal computers and laptops were by far the devices most often used to access the Internet. A few participants did specify regularly accessing the net from a mobile phone or PDA (7%).

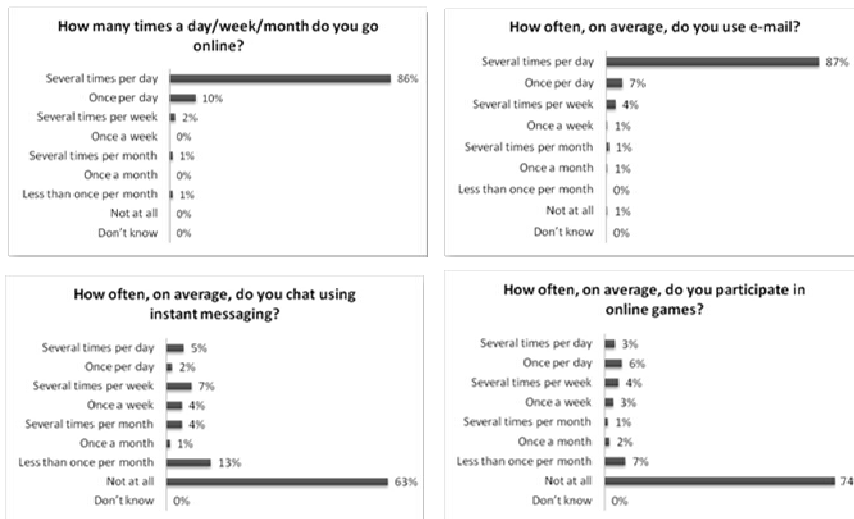


Figure 2: Measures of online social interactions

Social interaction use and preferences

In the next section of our survey, we sought to examine how computer supported methods of social interaction compare to more traditional methods in terms of use and preference. Four types of interaction were examined, two that are supported by online technologies (“via e-mail” and “through instant messaging”) and two that are considered conventional (“Face-to-face” and “over the telephone”). E-mail and instant messaging were chosen because they were

listed by Pew researchers as being highly used among the Baby Boomer age group (Fox and Madden 2005). The conventional methods were chosen because they are commonplace in both personal and work settings.

The Baby Boomers were first asked to list which methods they used to interact with 1. Family, 2. Friends, and 3. Groups, social organizations, and clubs. Most respondents indicated using several methods for interacting with each category of people (ex. using “face-to-face”, “via e-mail”, and “through instant messaging” to interact with friends). Collectively, we found the methods of “face-to-face”, “over the telephone”, and “via e-mail” were used by the majority of Boomers for communicating with all categories of people. Among the conventional interaction methods, 94% of Boomers interacted with their family “over the telephone” and 90% interacted “Face-to-face”. When interacting with friends these two methods were reversed, with “face-to-face” listed by slightly more Boomers (91%) than “over the telephone” (89%).

Among the online communication technologies (e-mail and instant messaging), the use of e-mail was reported as more prevalent than instant messaging in all categories. E-mail was listed by 85% of Boomers as a way that they communicate with groups, social organizations, and clubs, ranking it higher than “face-to-face” at 79% and “over the telephone” at 56%. Both e-mail and face-to-face interaction were reported by 91% of participants as a way that they interact with friends. In contrast, instant messaging was the least common method of social interaction among the different categories. A mere 16% reported using instant messaging to interact with family, a number likely influenced by the high prevalence of instant messaging among younger generations (Shiu and Lenhart 2004) and the desire of the Boomers to stay in contact with their children and grandchildren. What’s more, the use of instant messaging was practically non-existent as a method for interacting with groups, social organizations, or clubs, with only 1% of Boomers indicating that they used this method. A possible reason for this disparity could be related to the membership of these groups. As people tend to belong to groups with similarly aged members, the need to use instant messaging to bridge the generational gap is diminished.

A full listing of the different interaction methods and their use is available in *Table 1*.

Table 1: Boomers use of face-to-face discussions, telephone calls, e-mail, and instant messaging to interact with friends, family, and groups, social organizations, or clubs.

	Face-to-face	Over the telephone	Via e-mail	Through instant messaging	Respondent Total*
Family	90%	94%	86%	16%	182
Friends	91%	89%	91%	14%	179
Groups, social organizations, or clubs	79%	56%	85%	1%	147

* Answers were not required for these questions. Total respondents are all respondents that listed at least one interaction method for the respective group.

Though e-mail was an oft-used medium, it was not listed as the first choice when participants were asked to rank the methods of communication in order of preference. Instead, Boomers prefer conventional methods for their social interactions. Across categories, communicating face-to-face was ranked as the most preferred way to interact and communicating over the telephone was ranked as the second most preferred option. It is also notable that even though e-mail was never the favorite method, its preference scores increased in dealings with non-family. Of particular note is that for interacting with groups, social organizations, or clubs, e-mail nearly outranked face-to-face communication as the most preferred method.

As instant messaging is the least used of the interaction methods, one would not expect it to be high on the list of the most preferred methods. A better picture can be gained by examining whether those that used instant messaging preferred it to other methods. In this case, we found correlations that were weak or non-existent when examining relationships between the use of instant messaging and its selection as the most preferred method for interacting with

family ($P=.156$ sig<.037 $n=180$), with friends ($P=.108$ sig<.156 $n=174$), or with groups, social organizations, or clubs ($P = .183$ sig<.028 $n=144$).

The interaction method preferences of the Boomers for interactions with friends, family, and groups, social organizations, or clubs are displayed in *Figure 3*.

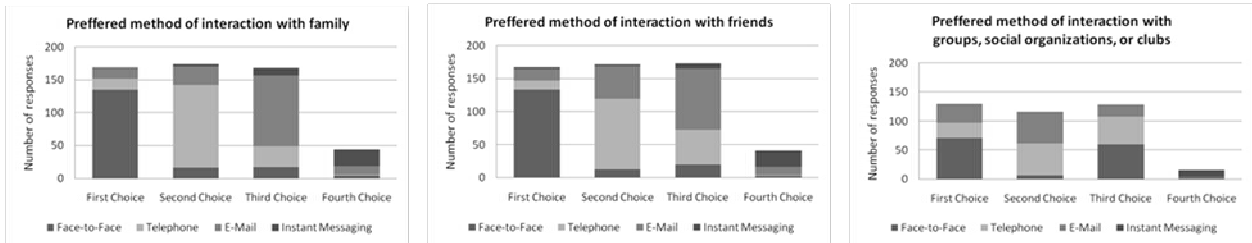


Figure 3: Interaction method preferences

Attitudes towards the use of online communication technology for social interaction

To further investigate the attitudes of Boomers on the topic of online communication, we posed several questions comparing conventional, non-Internet based modes of communication with those that rely on the Internet.

Attitudes towards e-mail as compared to more traditional modes of communication were mixed, even though most Boomers believe that the Internet and e-mail are important aspects of their daily lives (as shown in *Figure 4*).

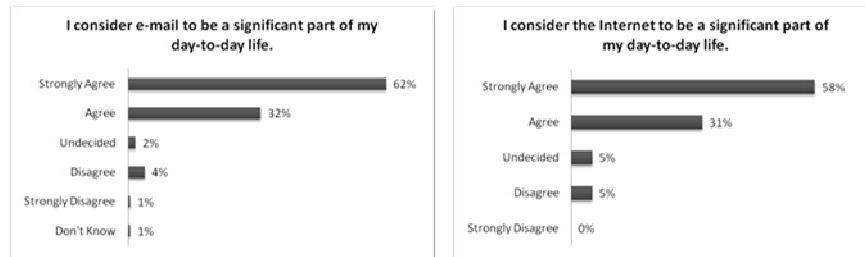


Figure 4: Significance of the Internet and e-mail in the daily lives of Boomers

The majority of participants deemed e-mail less personal than a face-to-face interaction. When asked if e-mail could be as personal as a phone call, nearly an equal number agreed as disagreed. Perhaps this is because those interactions that occur face-to-face or over a telephone are using a synchronous method of communication while e-mail is asynchronous. In comparison with another asynchronous form of communication, writing a letter, e-mail fared better. Sixty-six percent of Boomers either agreed or strongly agreed that writing an e-mail can be just as personal as writing a letter. Results of these comparisons are displayed in *Figure 5*.

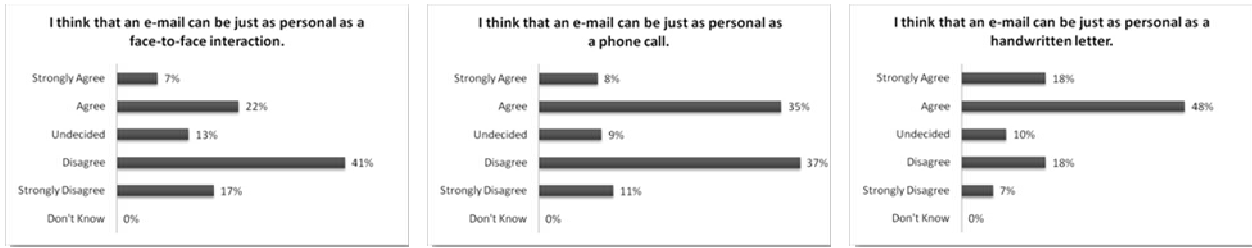


Figure 5: Baby Boomers' attitudes of e-mail vs. conventional communication

A wide range of perceptions was visible when comparing instant messaging with more traditional styles of communication. *Figure 6* provides the outcome of these comparisons. When compared against face-to-face interaction, most Boomers did not believe that instant messaging could be as personal. To a lesser degree, this opinion continued when instant messaging was compared with a phone call.

Few participants failed to express an opinion on questions comparing e-mail to conventional methods of communication (by indicating "Don't Know"). In contrast, for questions comparing instant messaging to conventional methods of communication, a fifth of respondents indicated not knowing whether instant messaging could be as personal. It is likely that the attitude toward instant messaging by the majority of Boomers is influenced by inexperience with the tool. Running a set of correlations between these questions and rates of instant messaging use revealed that those Boomers with a higher usage of instant messaging were slightly more apt to believe that it could be just as personal as face-to-face communication ($P=.244$ sig<.003 n=142), as a phone call ($P=.301$ sig<.000 n=140) and as writing a letter ($P=.194$ sig<.023 n=138).



Figure 6: Baby Boomers' attitudes of instant messaging vs. conventional communication

A roughly equal number of Boomers believe that interaction in an online group is equivalent to interaction in a conventional group. *Figure 7* depicts their perceptions toward online groups in terms of general participation and active involvement. Again, usage may be a leading indicator as to these attitudes. Among Boomers who belong to a group that primarily interacts online, more are likely to believe that participation in an online group can be as meaningful as a conventional group ($P=.301$ sig<.000 n=170) and that posting to an online bulletin board can be as effective as making a comment at a conventional group meeting ($P=.351$ sig<.001 n=144). No significant correlation was found in the attitudes of Boomers who only participated in groups, social organizations, or clubs that were offline or where there was only occasional online communication.

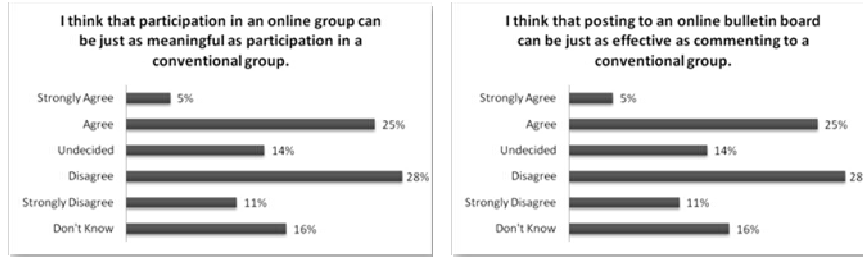


Figure 7: Baby Boomers' attitudes of online groups vs. conventional groups

Expectations of technology use as Seniors

Baby Boomers do not anticipate any slowdown in their use of social interaction technology. As seen in *Figure 8: Baby Boomers' anticipated change in the use of online communication technology over the next few years*, 97% expect their Internet use to at least remain at current levels, 97% expect their e-mail use to remain constant or increase, and only 6% anticipate a decline in their use of instant messaging or involvement with online groups.

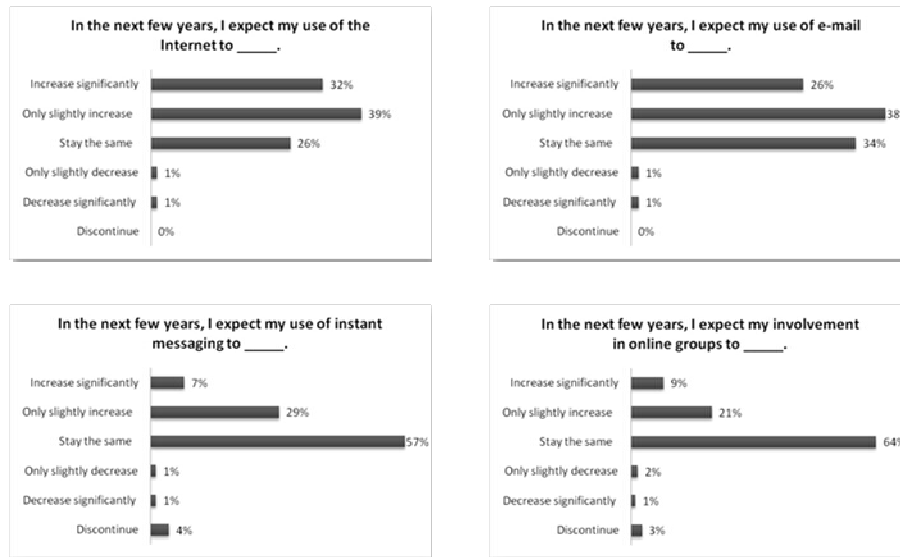


Figure 8: Baby Boomers' anticipated change in use of online communication technology over the next few years

A large number of respondents indicated that in the next few years they expect their use of instant messaging technology to stay the same. Considering the low usage of instant messaging by Boomers (only 43 of the 210 polled indicate they currently use instant messaging once a month or more) it is likely that, “stay the same “ means continuation of their non-use. What is notable is that 63 Boomers surveyed anticipated some form of increase in their use of instant messaging. Expectedly, there is a slight correlation between those who currently use instant messaging and those who anticipate an increase in their usage of this technology ($P=.294$ sig<.000 $n=172$), but what about the current non-users that expect to begin using instant messaging? It is likely that this is driven by the desire to stay connected with younger family and with friends who are more likely to interact using the technology (Shiu and Lenhart 2004).

Though overall, Baby Boomers prefer other modes of communication to instant messaging, they still expect it to be available in their retirement. When asked if they would expect to have access to instant messaging if they became a resident at an assisted living facility, 69% of Boomers responded yes. Curiously, in this situation nearly half indicated that they would expect to increase their use of instant messaging.

Even more than instant messaging, Boomers would expect access to the Internet (98%) and to e-mail (97%) if they became a resident at an assisted living facility. Should they become a resident of an assisted living facility, 70% of Boomers expect that they would increase the amount of time they spend online. A further 62% of Boomers expect increasing their use of e-mail under the same circumstance. Further detail is provided in *Figure 9*.

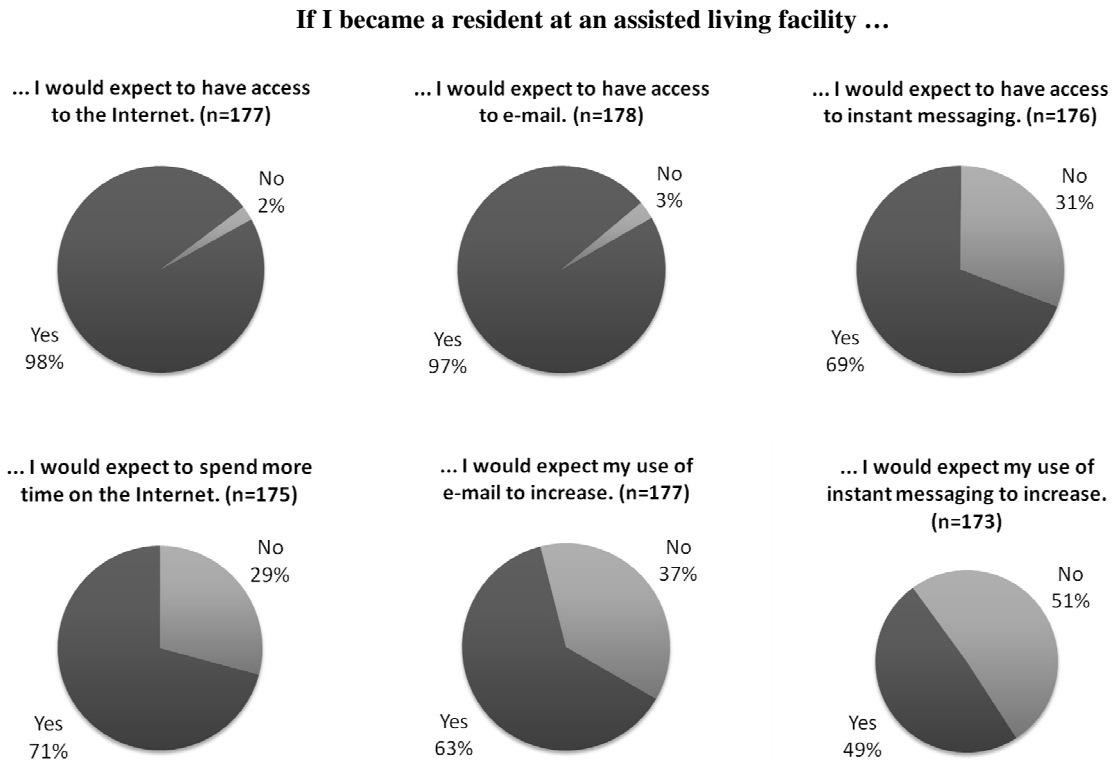


Figure 9: Baby Boomers' expectations of online communication technology as residents of assisted living facilities

Limitations

The Baby Boomer generation spans eighteen years. While we did not find any noteworthy correlations between age and the answers to our survey questions, age may be a predictor in larger more diverse samples. Likewise, though we did inquire into our participants' occupation, this information was collected free-form and was not used in our analysis. It is possible that occupation, or other characteristics that were not collected in the survey (such as retired vs. non-retired) might confound these results.

Implications

The results of this study draw attention to the use and perception of online communication technology in the interactions of Baby Boomers. Though their opinions are mixed as to how personal this technology can be, its frequency of use indicates that even in situations where traditional communication may be preferred, online communication proves sufficient to meet their need.

From this research, recommendations can be made to guide the development and implementation of online communication technology that is specific to the needs of the Baby Boomer population. For example:

E-mail should be the focus of online communication technology for Boomers

For Boomers, not all forms of online communication technology are considered equal. E-mail is their most frequently used application and the one they perceive as the best substitute to traditional communication. They check e-mail voraciously and foresee no decline in this behavior in the upcoming years. This finding has implications for the design of systems to support this next generation of Seniors. For the broadest reach, system designers should consider the use of e-mail to communicate messages most effectively to this group. Even in situations where an immediate communication style is desired, the asynchronous nature of e-mail is likely to fill this role more aptly than a synchronous online communication technology like instant messaging.

Groups should consider online communication to reach aging Boomers

Baby Boomers have difficulty comparing the value of online groups to conventional groups. Still, communication is prevalent in online groups, even though attitudes vary over their level of effectiveness. Future attitudes are likely to be influenced by ongoing exposure to the technology, pressure from connected friends and family, and the desire to maintain social connectedness when confronted with lessened mobility. Consequently, groups, social organizations, and clubs should make plans to begin or expand their support of online tools if they wish to ensure continued participation by aging Boomers.

Boomers will become consumers of assisted living facilities that support online communication technology

As they age, more Baby Boomers will rely on technology to support the continuation of daily activities that are hampered by age-related ailments. As said by one member of our study,

“Technology facilitates communication in my life. It makes it easy for me to stay connected with family and friends. Also it enables me to access information and people (online groups, as well as specialty items) that would be too remote without the Internet.”

These Boomers will be reluctant to abandon this communication channel, and overwhelmingly, they will expect assisted living facilities to have the infrastructure necessary to support their use of online communication technology. This finding goes in tandem with the typical Boomer’s expectation that they would spend more time online and using e-mail if they became a resident of an assisted living facility.

The benefits of sustained communication with a social network for Seniors in an assisted living facility are far reaching and range from aspects of safety and the ensuring of proper care (GAO 2000) to the reduction of affective states,

including depression and loneliness (Kaplan et al. 1987). More so, the use of online technology for social communication may provide a low-cost and effective alternative to traditional interventions that are often laborious and require considerable amounts of time (White et al. 1999).

Future research

In this study, we received a large response to several open-ended questions asking about specific uses of online communication technology. Future research will include a qualitative analysis of this data to expound upon some of the more interesting insights that arose from this project, such as the decision to use one technology over another.

We also see that Baby Boomers have distinct expectations for online communication technology, particularly if they were to enter an assisted living facility. Results from this exploratory study can help provide the groundwork for the development of formal guidelines based on these expectations that we can use to assess the preparedness of assisted living facilities.

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