



A Booming Online Presence: Examining Older Adult Online Activity for Intergenerational Program Recruitment

Recruiting older adults through technology is increasingly relevant, especially as intergenerational programming grows.¹ The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic only underscore the necessity of learning about the social media and internet usage trends of older adults. Assessing the patterns of how older adults engage with online social media will help improve recruitment efforts to engage this audience.

Outdated Stereotypes

Older adults can increasingly be reached by electronic media.² Adults in their 50's, 60's, and older are adopting social technologies and closing the gap in rates of internet use between older and younger generations. Traditional differences between the digital presence of "young" and "old" are only becoming more outdated.³ For instance, out of internet users aged 65 and older, 70% use the internet on a typical day.⁴

Whereas initial spikes in online activity for younger groups have returned to pre-pandemic levels, engagement continues to grow among older groups.⁵ Seven (7) out of 10 individuals age 62+ report that once they are no longer concerned with the pandemic, they intend to spend at least the same amount of time online, if not more.⁵

To be effective, programming that seeks to include older adults needs to lean in to reaching this audience where they are: online.

Who's Online?

Research on the "digital divide" (inequitable access to digital technology and its associated benefits) is prone to collapsing older adults into a single category of internet users.⁶ However, an intersectional approach to examining who is online among older populations reveals diversity among adults in their internet access and skill level.

The COVID-19 pandemic pushed older adults to use social media more than ever before.³ While those in the highest age brackets (80's, 90's, 100's) maintain a limited online presence despite these increases, online content consumption and creation from people in their 50's, 60's, and 70's rose significantly during the pandemic and has only continued to rise.¹⁰ Among older adults who are online, 82% use a smartphone daily.¹⁰ Despite upward trends overall, there is a great deal of variance among older adults in internet access, skill, and usage.

Compared to the 70% of US adults age 65+ who use the internet in a typical day:

- 17% of low-income and disabled adults in this same age group have internet access.⁷
- Black older adults are 25% less likely to begin using the internet than white older adults.⁸
- Hispanic Americans age 75+ report the lowest rate of technology use among same-age peers.⁹

Findings on digital inequality demonstrate correlations between a person's societal privilege and their ability to tap into online resources.⁵ The higher someone's relative social position, the more likely they are to be able to engage in further capital-building internet activities.

Adults age 55+ who are internet users have a mean annual income \$12,000 higher than those older adults who are not online.⁵ Social strata differences convert most strongly into digital skill and online usage differences. The digital divide mirrors other inequities: factors such as race, education level, and socioeconomic status are all predictors of internet access, adoption, and skill level.^{10,11}

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Which Platforms Attract This Audience

Socialization is a key motivation for the adoption of social media among older adults.⁹

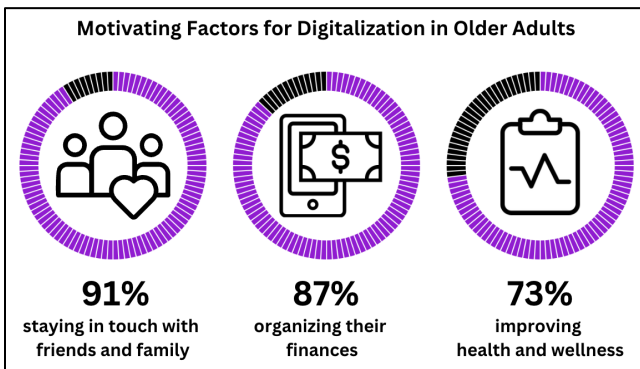
The most popular social media platforms among older adults include Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Pinterest.¹² Facebook (62%) and YouTube (66%) are by far the most adopted of these platforms among older adults and can play a crucial role in their social and psychological wellbeing.^{12,13}

Additionally, 24% percent of Craigslist users age 55+, with more than 40% of users age 45+ of age, as of 2022.¹³ With an average monthly site traffic rate of approximately 250 million users, that equates to an audience of roughly 60 million adults age 55+ every month.¹⁴



Typical Online Activities

Despite older adults being stereotyped as passive internet consumers, older adults are contributors to both content consumption and creation.¹⁵ The oldest age group of internet users tends to leverage the internet mostly for email and web browser information searching (83% and 79% respectively).¹⁶ Those under age 75 typically use the internet for a combination of practical tasks such as online banking as well as for social and leisure activities.¹⁶ This group goes online for reasons ranging from staying in touch with friends and family (91%) to organizing their finances (87%) to improving their health and wellness (73%).⁵



Given a key motivator for internet use is socialization, online social media is increasingly important for helping older adults renew, maintain, and develop social connectivity.¹⁷ Online activities such as blogging and long-form posting may provide meaningful engagement during retirement for some and enable online bridging via community building and social interaction, resulting in decreased depression and loneliness among older adults.¹⁵

The Added Context of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic spurred increased tech and social media use among older adults. As of 2021, 4 out of 5 of those age 50+ rely on technology to help mitigate loneliness and social isolation.¹⁸ The pandemic increased both the adoption of new technology types and the amount of screen time older adults spend online, with the majority of adults spending between 1-6 hours online daily.¹⁹ Compared to younger audiences who already used social media prior to pandemic, younger age cohorts did not see as drastic use increases as older age groups.²⁰ One study reports *the rate of telehealth use among those age 70+ (21.1%) to be nearly five times higher than it was before the pandemic.*²¹

Additionally, the overwhelming majority of older adults who adopted new technologies during the pandemic continue to use them.²² Given limiting factors related to the digital divide such as device access and usability, those who were less equipped to successfully adopt online and social media technologies were thus unable to benefit from online connectivity. Closing the digital divide and access gap among older adults includes ensuring that this population has equitable device and internet access.²¹

Key COVID-19 Impacts:

- 4 out of 5 of individuals age 50+ rely on technology to help mitigate loneliness and social isolation¹⁸
- the majority of adults spend between 1-6 hours online daily¹⁹
- the rate of telehealth use among those age 70+ (21%) to be nearly five times higher than it was before the pandemic²¹

Conclusion

This brief explored details of the online presence of older adults in various age brackets to help better understand their social media usage. An additional brief explores our recruitment of older adults through a combination of online and in-person methods.²³

The number of older adults who have an active online presence is higher now than ever before as older adults rapidly adopt social media to reduce social isolation. Getting to know this audience further as they adopt new technologies will help increase inclusion of this population in electronic communications and outreach.

Fully embracing older adult digitalization requires attention to *inclusivity and accessibility* of online materials. Countering ageist stereotypes that reinforce the idea that older adults have not moved online is necessary to reaching this demographic. As the population ages the number of older adults who are using electronic and social media will only continue to grow. Recruitment and engagement strategies which strategically incorporate online tactics will help reach a substantial population of older adults.



Citation: Merz, A., Kruchten, R., & Gonzales, E. (November, 2022). [A Booming Online Presence: Examining Older Adult Online Activity for Intergenerational Program Recruitment](#). The Center on Health and Aging Innovation at NYU. <http://hdl.handle.net/2451/64019>.

This brief was supported by The James Weldon Johnson Professorship at NYU, The Eisner Foundation, and anonymous donors.

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