

QUALITY-OF-LIFE AND RISK OF LONELINESS AMONG OLDER PEOPLE WITH VARYING DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY ENGAGEMENT

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Quality-of-life and risk of loneliness among older people with varying digital technology engagement^{1, 2}

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INTRODUCTION

Populations are ageing across many developed countries. Digitalisation of 21st century societies and recent experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic have brought the effects of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) on older people into sharper focus. Many countries have adopted policies to educate older people about digital technologies and to encourage the universal availability of high-speed broadband, partly with a view to closing digital divides. Designing such policies and justifying the economic resources spent on this area would be assisted by a better understanding of the how older people who use the internet benefit from it.

This paper uses data on a large sample of over-50s in Ireland to examine:

1. Whether individuals with access to high-speed broadband at home are more likely to report use of the internet and a range of online activities.
2. Whether quality-of-life and loneliness of older people in Ireland is higher or lower among those with internet access, higher frequency of internet use, and engagement with internet-based activities.

DATA AND METHODS

Survey data collected in 2018 by The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA), was linked to administrative data on high-speed broadband availability from *National Broadband Plan* infrastructure maps for 2017. The linked file brought together information on internet uses and wellbeing outcomes for over 3,500 people aged 50 plus across Ireland. The study examined whether quality-of-life and risk of loneliness were different for people with varying access to high-speed broadband, levels of internet usage and self-reported use of seven types of

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internet-based activities: e-mail, video calls, information search, financial transactions, social media, news information and gaming/apps. Statistical methods were used to control for other influences on quality-of-life and loneliness such as gender, age, marital status, educational attainment, employment status, physical activity, and other indicators of physical health, mental health, and social isolation.

RESULTS

The majority of the older adults, 82.5%, report having internet access in the home, while 63.4% have high speed broadband available in their residence. No internet access, be that at home or outside the home (e.g., relatives' or friends' homes, library, community centre or public Wi-Fi networks), is reported by 14.9% of participants. Many engage with the internet daily (60.1%), though 18.2% never use the internet or have no internet access. In terms of internet-based activities, the most common activity is engaging in information search (70.0%), followed by email (63.7%), and online financial transactions (52.3%).

The statistical analysis showed that high-speed broadband availability was associated with higher reported levels of home internet access, greater frequency of internet use and more engagement with internet activities. Quality-of-life was significantly higher among respondents who were daily users of the internet. Little association was found between internet use and loneliness for the group studied here. Quality-of-life was higher among users of internet-based communication applications such as email and video calls, and there was some evidence that loneliness may be less pronounced among users of these applications.

CONCLUSIONS

This study found that internet access, use, and internet-based activities are common among those aged over 50 in Ireland. However, the population coverage of high-speed broadband remains incomplete. Where older people have access to high-speed broadband, internet access is more prevalent, which is likely to encourage more frequent use of the internet as well as engagement with internet-based applications such as video communications. Quality-of-life is higher among older people who use the internet and several digital applications. While this study could not test whether internet use causes higher quality-of-life among older people, the findings are consistent with the view that digital engagement can enhance the lives of older people and thus may be supportive of policies and interventions to address potential 'grey' digital divides.

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