

Q&A: How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect older adults' technology use?

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The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic changed how nearly everyone mediated their social interactions through technology. Some moved happy hours into video chats. Others delved deeper into social media, or

took a step back from it. Millions of people worked or learned through computers.

University of Washington researchers took particular interest in how this tech shift affected older adults' social relationships. The team interviewed 16 older adults in Washington and Oregon, ages 65 to 80, about how their technology use with their [social support networks](#) changed during the pandemic. Researchers found that these adults used technology both in their roles as recipients of support—such as a family member checking in on them—as well as providers of support—such as sending money to [family members](#) through apps like Zelle or PayPal.

The team published [its findings](#) April 26 in Proceedings of the ACM Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing.

UW News spoke with lead author Shengzhi Wang, a UW doctoral student in human centered design and engineering, about the paper's findings.

Why did you study this?

Shengzhi Wang: The rapid adoption of technology we've seen in recent years has typically left older adults slightly behind. There is what's called a "gray divide," where older adults tend to be a bit later in adopting technologies like smartphones, tablets and smartwatches compared to younger demographics. But in recent years, we've seen quite a bit more adoption among older adults, and the pandemic spurred that on. Essentially, it forced a lot of people to start using these technologies out of necessity.

This paper looks at how technology affects the way older adults communicate with their social circle: people like family, friends,

acquaintances or others that are a bit farther off in their networks, maybe their postal worker or people that they come across in the store once in a while. We were looking at what role technology plays in that circle.

What surprised you about the findings?

SW: The participants in our study were mostly able to overcome a lot of the technological and accessibility barriers that we've seen in past studies—for example, text that's too small. Those kinds of issues are definitely still around, but we found that these barriers didn't significantly affect the participants' willingness to use or adopt some of these services and technology.

We also found how much older adults were not only receivers of support but providers of it, whether that was emotional or financial or physical support. They were providing it for fellow older adults, as well as family members and friends.

Could you explain why understanding the dual role of supporter and supported is important when considering technology and how it's designed?

SW: Technologies we typically think of older adults using are for providing them with support. For example, you might have smart cameras for families to keep an eye on older adults or other things that let people check in on whether the older adult in their life is doing well. Those technologies definitely have their role. But we found that older adults tend to also have other needs when it comes to using technologies, especially in how they can provide support to others. Those uses aren't highlighted as much by technology designers and the people who are communicating about how technologies can be used.

What's an example of a technology that maybe isn't being used as much for that, but that already exists?

SW: In the study, we highlight technologies that try to replace in-person support experiences, such as an older adult having a coffee meeting with their friends. If you try to replace that with a Zoom meeting, which happened often, at least in the beginning of the pandemic, the closeness that they felt with their friends was extremely lacking. One participant described it as feeling like watching TV from afar. It was just not a great use of videoconferencing. The common belief was that this technology can replace in-person experiences, and that was definitely not how it worked out.

On the other hand, a lot of older adults really enjoyed telehealth for accessing mental health services. And that's basically the same technology. But they came in with the right expectations, and the technology provided something that they couldn't access in person. We also found people liking technology that supports in-person meetings and in-person activities, rather than trying to replace them. We saw a lot of people using text messaging or short video chats to plan in-person activities. In this case, we're not looking at technology and in-person as two completely separate things. When they work well together, they work really well together.

How could tech better serve older adults in their social connections?

SW: We highlight the need to codesign. Researchers and designers need to bring older adults into the design process of technology and take into account their individual circumstances, their social connections and how those affect technology use when they're both providing and receiving support.

This two-way communication is also important within families. We saw in some interviews that family members were really pushing older adults to start using some of these technologies, like [social media](#) or one way surveillance via smart cameras. From the family members' points of view, the older adults are missing out on some of the benefits of social media, like seeing photos or posts from families and friends or being provided with more safety. But sometimes older adults prefer in-person experiences, and they don't always like the privacy component of some technologies, for example. Technology should move away from enabling disempowering relationships or experiences for older adults.

What should the public know about this research?

SW: That [older adults](#) provide and receive social support is the most important piece. If you're thinking of buying [technology](#) for an older family member, you should really think about how it can play a part in that person's life. It might be a hindrance if it doesn't provide what they need. So it's really important to start that conversation early and respect their preferences.

Additional co-authors included Adoniah Carmeline, a regional design researcher at Daraz, who completed this work as a UW master's student; Beth Kolko and Sean Munson, both UW professors of human centered design and engineering. This work was supported by the National Science Foundation.

More information: Shengzhi Wang et al, Understanding the Role of Technology in Older Adults' Changing Social Support Networks, *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* (2024). [DOI: 10.1145/3641027](#)

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