

From High Connectivity to Social Isolation

Communication Practices of Older Adults in the Digital Age

Goal

To understand the attitudes of the elderly towards using technology in the digital age, when keeping in touch with family members.

Challenge

How do interaction patterns affect the maintenance of communication with loved ones?

Research Method

In-depth interviews and home tours with 12 participants, ages 55-83. Analysis was done using open coding.

Findings

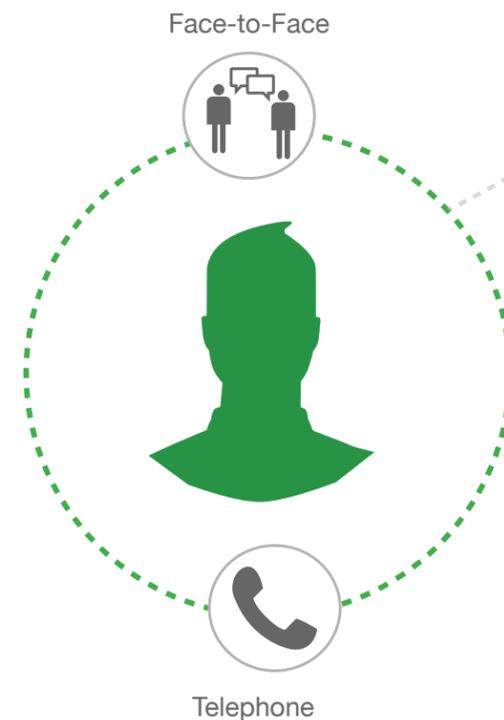
The degree and methods of communication for older adults depended on their relationship with their family members, and their openness towards technology. Some preferred simple communication mechanisms and used only the telephone and meeting face-to-face, while others tailored their communication methods to their family's preferences. At times this involved a learning curve in order to use the technology.

Implications

The level of digital connectivity does not necessarily affect the degree of communication older adults have with their families. We came across low-tech communicators who maintain constant interaction with their loved ones, while some high-tech communicators were still isolated from their loved ones despite their high level of connectivity. This suggests the range of needs that exist for older adults in keeping connected with others.

The Low-Tech Communicator

"I don't own a cell phone. No, I can't. Even cell phone I can't because I don't know how to use this. My son said I can buy for you, I say no, I don't want, I'm happier... simple, simple."



Although low-tech communicators do not use extensive technologies to stay in touch, they tend to maintain communication by remaining social through traditional means such as face-to-face interaction or the telephone. This pattern may also require adaptability and reciprocity on their family's end.

The High-Tech Communicator

"My youngest daughter, Facebook email is the best way to communicate with her and then my son, regular email works best with him or phone, and then my oldest biological daughter, it's a toss-up. She's not that good at responding so sometimes it'll take a couple of emails."



High-tech communicators are able to adapt to the communication patterns of their family members and have more technology at their disposal. This allows for instances of unstructured communication, where they interact whenever they see fit. This constant connectivity can also mean more effort on their part to maintain communication, which may or may not be reciprocated.