

Unlocking The Digital Doors: Exploring The Barriers To Digital Media Adoption In The Elderly Women Of India

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Introduction

Digital media is now an intrinsic part of our daily lives. It's hard to find anyone who isn't reliant on it in some way or the other. This technology has not only brought the world closer together virtually but also provided a platform for self-expression and convenience. With just a click, tasks that once took hours can now be completed in moments. Navigating life's challenges has become much easier with digital tools at our fingertips. However, in India, digital literacy remains a significant hurdle, particularly among the elderly and, more specifically, elderly women. It is still rare to see women over sixty confidently using smartphones or laptops. Even among those with advanced academic qualifications, there is a noticeable gap in technological fluency. This issue transcends formal education, as many well-educated elderly women struggle with technology. Understanding what prevents them from embracing digital media is crucial for fostering greater inclusion and empowerment.

At present, there are approximately 820 million internet users in India. Unexpectedly, the internet penetration grows at the rate of around 8% year on year. Men account for 54% of internet users while in the case of women the figure is 46%. Gender divide, in this perspective has narrowed down with the passage of time but it is still quite apparent. (Roy 2024)

As far as digital inclusion is concerned, elderly community, specifically women are way behind in India. While 59% of senior women do not own smartphones, 60% have never used any digital device. The number is not just stunning, it is highly disappointing at a time when Digital India concept is gaining enormous popularity. What is more disappointing is, only 13% women believe they need to be technology savvy and feel the need for digital learning. (The Hindu Bureau, 2023)

As per the annual report of HelpAge India, the number of senior citizens in India is expected to be equal to its under eighteen population by 2050. In such a situation, digital literacy for the elderly community is of utmost importance. But the rate of it is quite disappointing. Nationally, internet adoption among the elderly population is remarkably low, with only 4% of seniors using the internet. This trend remains consistent across both Tier-1 and Tier-2 cities, indicating no significant urban-rural divide in internet usage among seniors. However, a gender disparity exists: internet usage among elderly men stands at 5%, compared to just 3% among elderly women. (Ipsos Research Private Limited, 2018)

Understanding the reasons behind the gender disparity in internet use among the elderly is highly challenging. Limited research has been conducted on this issue, leaving many questions unanswered. Older adults have lived much of their lives without digital technology, making the transition to using the internet a significant hurdle. Despite these challenges, internet adoption is slowly increasing within this age group. However, a noticeable gap persists, with elderly women trailing behind their male counterparts in technology adoption. This paper aims to explore the factors contributing to why women are less likely to embrace digital technology in their senior years.

Literature Review

Yusif, S., Soar, J., & Hafeez-Baig's (2016) systematic review in the *International Journal of Medical Informatics* examines the barriers older adults face in adopting assistive technologies. The study acknowledges the growing importance of these technologies in enhancing the quality of life and independence of the elderly. Despite their potential benefits, the adoption rates among older people remain low, prompting an investigation into the underlying causes.

The review identifies several key barriers to adoption. Primarily, it highlights the lack of awareness and understanding of assistive technologies among the elderly. Many older adults are unfamiliar with the existence or purpose of these tools, leading to a lack of interest or perceived irrelevance. Additionally, the study points out the significant impact of physical and cognitive impairments, which can hinder the ability to use and benefit from such technologies effectively.

Another critical barrier is the complexity of technology. Older adults often find modern assistive devices challenging to use due to complicated interfaces and a lack of user-friendly design. The review also emphasizes the role of socio-

economic factors, where the high cost of assistive technologies can be prohibitive for many elderly individuals. Limited financial resources and insufficient insurance coverage further exacerbate this issue.

The study also discusses the influence of social support and training. Older adults who receive adequate training and support from family, caregivers, or healthcare providers are more likely to adopt and use assistive technologies successfully. Conversely, a lack of such support can significantly impede adoption.

In a nut shell, Yusif, Soar, and Hafeez-Baig's review sheds light on the multifaceted barriers that prevent older adults from embracing assistive technologies. Addressing these barriers requires a comprehensive approach that includes raising awareness, simplifying technology, improving affordability, and providing robust support and training systems. By tackling these issues, the adoption rates of assistive technologies among the elderly can be significantly improved, enhancing their independence and quality of life.

Harris, M. T., Blocker, K. A., and Rogers, W. A. (2022) explore the factors influencing older adults' use of smart technology in their study published in *Frontiers in Computer Science*. The research identifies both facilitators and barriers impacting technology adoption among the elderly. Key facilitators include perceived benefits such as improved communication, increased safety, and enhanced convenience in daily activities. Additionally, support from family and friends, along with user-friendly design and customization options, significantly encourage technology use.

Conversely, the study highlights several barriers. Many older adults face challenges due to complex interfaces, lack of confidence in using technology, and concerns about privacy and security. Physical limitations and cognitive impairments also hinder effective usage. Moreover, limited access to technical support and inadequate training further discourage adoption.

The findings suggest that enhancing smart technology adoption among older adults requires addressing these barriers by simplifying interfaces, ensuring robust support systems, and emphasizing the tangible benefits of these technologies. Such efforts can promote greater inclusion and improve the quality of life for the elderly.

Gu, Y., Suh, A., and Liu, L. (2015) delve into the motivations and obstacles influencing seniors' adoption of social network services (SNS) in their study. The research identifies key motivators, such as the desire to stay connected with family and friends, combat loneliness, and maintain social engagement. Seniors are also driven by the opportunity to share experiences and keep up with modern communication trends.

However, the study reveals significant obstacles hindering SNS adoption among the elderly. These include a lack of digital literacy and familiarity with technology, making SNS platforms seem intimidating or confusing. Privacy and security concerns also play a crucial role, as many seniors fear data breaches or misuse of personal information. Additionally, the complexity of SNS interfaces and the perceived irrelevance of online socializing contribute to their reluctance.

Addressing these barriers through simplified platforms, better privacy measures, and targeted educational initiatives can facilitate greater adoption of SNS among seniors, enhancing their social connectivity and well-being.

Charness, N., and Boot, W. R. (2009) explore the dynamics of aging and information technology (IT) use in their article in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*. The study highlights both the potential benefits and significant barriers older adults face regarding IT adoption.

IT offers substantial advantages for the elderly, such as enhanced communication, access to health information, and opportunities for mental stimulation and lifelong learning. These technologies can help maintain independence, improve quality of life, and bridge social isolation.

However, several obstacles limit the widespread adoption of IT by seniors. Physical and cognitive declines associated with aging, like reduced motor skills and memory impairments, make it challenging to interact with technology. Additionally, seniors often encounter difficulties with complex and non-intuitive user interfaces. There is also a prevalent lack of confidence and fear of failure among older adults when engaging with new technologies. Financial constraints and limited access to training or support further compound these issues.

Charness and Boot emphasize the need for age-friendly design, better support systems, and inclusive educational efforts to harness IT's potential benefits for the elderly, thereby fostering their engagement and improving their overall well-being.

Alzahrani, T., Hunt, M., and Whiddett, D. (2021) investigate the factors influencing the adoption of smart home technologies among older adults from the perspectives of three stakeholder groups in their study published in the *International Journal of Healthcare Information Systems and Informatics*. The research identifies both barriers and facilitators impacting the use of these technologies.

Key obstacles include concerns over privacy and security, limited technological literacy among older adults, and the perceived complexity of smart home systems. Financial constraints and the high cost of installation and maintenance also hinder adoption. Additionally, resistance to change and a lack of awareness about the potential benefits pose significant challenges.

On the other hand, factors such as improved safety and security, enhanced convenience in daily living, and the potential for social connectedness and independence motivate older adults to adopt smart home technologies. Support from family members, caregivers, and healthcare professionals also plays a crucial role in facilitating adoption.

Addressing these barriers and leveraging facilitators are essential for promoting the uptake of smart home technologies among older adults, thereby enhancing their quality of life and overall well-being.

Choudrie, J., Pheeraphuttrangkoon, S., and Davari, S. (2020) conducted a quantitative study published in *Information Systems Frontiers* examining the adoption and use of mobile phones among older adults, focusing on the digital divide.

The research investigates factors influencing adoption rates and the extent of mobile phone usage among this demographic.

Older adults face barriers such as limited digital literacy, affordability concerns, and discomfort with technology. These factors contribute to lower adoption rates compared to younger age groups. However, positive predictors of mobile phone adoption include perceived usefulness, ease of use, and social influence. Support from family members and friends also plays a significant role in encouraging older adults to adopt mobile technology.

The study identifies several key findings: older adults face barriers such as limited digital literacy, affordability concerns, and discomfort with technology. These factors contribute to lower adoption rates compared to younger age groups. However, positive predictors of mobile phone adoption include perceived usefulness, ease of use, and social influence. Support from family members and friends also plays a significant role in encouraging older adults to adopt mobile technology.

Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing strategies to bridge the digital divide among older adults, ensuring they can access and benefit from mobile technologies that can enhance communication, safety, and connectivity in their daily lives.

Objectives

- To learn about the attitude of elderly women towards digital media
- To know about their level of proficiency in the use of technology
- To discover the challenges they face in adopting the new technologies

Methodology

A qualitative method was followed for the study. Twenty five women of the age group of sixty to seventy five who usually do not use internet were interviewed personally with a semi structured questionnaire. The respondents were chosen by purposive sampling. All the women were urban and well educated. Seven of them were retired working professionals and the rest were homemakers. Thematic analysis was done to the gathered data for the final conclusion.

Findings and Discussion

Most of the respondents gave a common reason for not using digital technology and that was they don't feel the need. Learning to use smartphone is not very easy. It is used simply as a device of connectivity or the way a normal phone is used by most of the respondents. The other functions remain unexplored.

WhatsApp seems to be the most popular platform among the community as it offers quite user-friendly tools for connectivity. As far as desktop or laptop use is concerned, only seven respondents said, they know how to use though they don't use regularly. The reasons behind not using are many. First of all, it is not as handy as a phone. It requires some additional time and preparation for accessing the device. Desktops are not personal in most of the cases and the women are always the last ones in the queue to get a chance to use. Only three women owned personal laptops. But, using it remains a rare occasion. Two women gave the same reason for not using laptop regularly, they use phones while taking rest in the afternoon and it is not feasible to use laptop lying on the bed. It is tiring to use any device of big size that time as it demands a sitting posture. For the other woman, the reason was simply lack of interest. She was gifted the device by her daughter. Whenever the daughter is around, she uses the laptop, the rest of the time, it remains locked in the cupboard.

A seventy two years old retired school Principal who stays alone in a huge duplex in a reputed housing society of Jamshedpur said, she only uses WhatsApp to keep in touch with her family and friends. She is not much active on social media, seldom does she use YouTube to listen to music when she feels tired. Her Facebook account is still yet to have any post. She hardly checks. Despite being highly qualified, she doesn't check her mails regularly. She prefers gardening more as a time killing activity. Being a powerful single lady in the locality, she enjoys the status of a universal mother figure. She is the "Aunt" of the whole housing society and takes part in various social activities. As the secretary of the city based "Mahila Samiti" and an active devotee of Ramakrishna Mission, seldom does she get time to use social networking sites. Most of her time is spent in visiting the nearby villages and helping the BPL people. She strongly believes social media can become an addiction if not used carefully. Her belief that internet addiction disorder is continuously increasing among "Generation Z" and it is dangerous for the society contributes a lot in her staying away from internet.

A sixty eight years old house wife, whose late husband worked as a teacher with a government school said it is a costly affair. Though she possesses her husband's phone, she hesitates to ask her children for mobile recharge. Two other women, one being a retired IAS officer's wife and the other a retired teacher don't have access to smart phones. Both are almost bed ridden. The former is on wheel chair and the other one needs someone's support to walk, though, her legs are not completely dysfunctional. Family members fear, smartphone use will affect their eyesight adversely. The former one uses her cordless landline phone to talk to her relatives, the later uses her normal phone. While asked, did they use smartphone earlier? Both of them replied, they never owned but shared their husbands' or children's.

A sixty four years old lawyer who once practiced in Calcutta High Court and also was actively involved in the local political affairs as a member of a political party, said, she prefers to stay away from social media because of mental peace. Some aggressive posts in favour of some specific ideologies which she doesn't support upsets her. Sometimes her impulsive reactions in the form of comments create problems. "Some people cross the line of dignity while replying to

the comments. Sometimes comments become quite personal and highly offensive. This disturbs my mental peace” She uttered with frustration and anger. Another sixty five years old woman who worked for a reputed jewellery retail chain of West Bengal as a store manager said she has reduced her screen time and nowadays hardly log on to social networking platforms because she feels, sometimes social media affects personal relationships very badly. “If you comment on one friend’s status for appreciation the others many times don’t like it. They feel neglected. Sometimes if you become humorous and say something sarcastically in a comment, you become a hot topic of discussion among your friend circles. Some people come to advice you about how to talk in public. Sometimes your status make some people envious. It is very irritating. I have faced enough complications throughout my life, now wish to live the remaining days peacefully.” She said opening about her bitter experiences regarding social media use.

One sixty six years retired employee of Tata Motors who stays with her family said she hardly uses social media because she doesn’t want her grandchildren to imitate her. Her granddaughter is twelve years old and grandson is seven. “I mingle with them like a friend. Their mother has specified their mobile phone using hours. If I keep using my phone, they will get a chance to say, Dadi also uses. I don’t want that to happen.” She was quite straight forward in her views. Four other women who stay with family said they don’t have time for internet browsing. They don’t have their email id nor do they have any familiarity with Google search console. They own smartphones, use WhatsApp but only for the sake of connectivity with relatives and extended family.

For most of the elderly women, digital media is a luxury. Using smartphone or other device is much beyond their comfort zone. They use it only when required. Unlike the younger generations, they are yet to grow any kind of dependence of social media.

Conclusion

One of the primary reasons older women tend to be less tech-savvy is their longstanding dependence on family members. Traditionally, women have relied on men—fathers, husbands, or sons—even when financially independent. This reliance stems partly from a mental comfort zone inherited from previous generations, and it manifests in their approach to digital media. Many homemakers, who are often less exposed to the outside world, may not feel a pressing need to engage with technology. When it comes to using electronic devices, they often avoid doing so unless absolutely necessary, despite owning personal gadgets like smartphones or laptops. Their tendency to stay within domestic confines can hinder them from adapting to modern technologies. Another significant factor is the moral concerns surrounding digital media. Among older women, especially those who are educated and retired from prestigious careers, the ethics of social media use is often a contentious issue. Many prefer dedicating their time to social or community activities rather than online pursuits. Additionally, older women, who are often more sensitive and emotional, tend to avoid activities that might disturb their mental peace. Health conditions also play a role, as they can limit an individual’s ability to use digital devices. However, it’s important to note that senior women are not entirely unfamiliar with digital media. They understand its advantages and disadvantages, but their adoption of technology tends to be slower due to their long-standing distance from it.

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