

Computers provide connections for older adults

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The rapid evolution of computers makes it challenging for computer savvy users to keep up, but what about older Americans? How useful are computers to the aging population? As the rate of technology change accelerates, there is a need to understand how older adults use technology and what factors influence their adoption of new technology.

A team of researchers from Georgia Tech and Florida State University are investigating the perceptions [older adults](#) have of the usefulness of computers as a [communication tool](#). This study, being presented at the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society Annual Meeting, examined the degree to which [demographic variables](#), technology and computer experience, and the perceived importance of an activity for older adults' quality of life influenced the older adults' perceived importance of the computer for [communication](#) activities.

Wendy Rogers, Georgia Tech School of Psychology professor and principal investigator on the NIH-funded project, explained, "This research will broaden our understanding of technology acceptance for older adults. Our findings will help guide the design of future systems as well the development of better instruction and training for current computer systems."

Although some findings were anticipated based on previous work, the research did uncover some unexpected results that may lead to future research.

“One of the more surprising findings was that within this sample of older adults, the oldest individuals found a computer more useful for communication activities,” said John Burnett, a graduate student on the research team. “There could be several reasons for this finding, and it deserves more research.”

According to Burnett, “It could be that older computer users are less mobile and therefore more likely to find certain types of communication tools more important to them.”

Researchers believe that this type of research is important because it has implications for how products are developed and how the United States designs for an [aging population](#).

“It is not that older adults are afraid of technology, but maybe that technology is not designed in a way this is useful to or usable by older adults. It could also be that older adults are not aware of some of the potential benefits of these communication technologies,” Burnett said.

The research showed that those surveyed preferred certain types of computer communication. Email and emailing photos were the most important communication tool for those older adults surveyed, whereas video conferencing and social networking were not as important.

The research revealed that older adults generally strongly preferred specific computer-based communication technologies. For designers, this would suggest a need for making technologies more usable for older adults. For example, including video conferencing or forums that are difficult to use or poorly understood by the user may only increase the complexity of a computer, making its use less likely.

Burnett suggests, “A comprehensive assessment of user needs and preferences for activities can assist designers in developing computer-

based communication technologies that older adults perceive as being more useful.”

Provided by Georgia Institute of Technology

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