

Older people use mobile phones more in countries with more affordable rates: Study

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Older people in Spain and Israel use their smartphones more than those in Canada and Romania. The main reason is that Spaniards and Israelis can access more affordable mobile internet rates compared to other

telecommunications services. This is revealed by an international study, led by three researchers from the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC), which disproves the idea that growing older means using digital technologies less.

The study is based on a unique body of data collected simultaneously in six countries (Austria, Canada, Israel, Netherlands, Romania and Spain), which covers the digital habits of 3,125 [older people](#) over a four-year period. The results may help tackle [digital ageism](#), a form of social discrimination based on age.

"Older people, like those in other age groups, use their mobile phones for activities that give meaning to their day-to-day lives: communicating, getting information and playing," said Mireia Fernández-Ardèvol, a UOC faculty member and researcher with the CNSC group at the university's Internet Interdisciplinary Institute (IN3) and the study's lead author. "While each individual's situation determines their digital behavior, the pricing structure of the telecommunications market plays a very important role in the way older people use mobile phones."

The paper, "[Set in Stone? Mobile Practices Evolution in Later Life](#)", was published in *Media and Communication*, and is part of a [large-scale study](#), the first of its kind in the world, which analyzes whether the over sixties are swapping traditional means of communication for more innovative digital alternatives. Never before have so many people of this age been monitored, in six different countries and over such a long period. The data come from surveys carried out in three waves: in 2016, 2018 and 2020.

Fernández-Ardèvol, who authored the study together with fellow UOC researchers Andrea Rosales and Francisca Morey Cortès, stressed how valuable the data are when, for example, combating digital ageism: "Given the lack of data on the use of digital media by the over-75s, any

research that includes the older population with no upper age limit, as is the case here, helps both public policies and private sector decisions."

Spain: Smartphones outnumber computers

The study divided older people into three categories: those who make limited use of mobile phones, mainly to make [phone calls](#) and send SMS messages, or to take photographs; advanced users, who use a wide range of features on the device, from WhatsApp to maps, or radio and email, and those who are in between. The more advanced users are, the more frequently they use their smartphones.

The results also reveal significant differences depending on location: in Canada and Romania, countries with very different characteristics, older people use mobile phones less, while in Spain and Israel they use them much more. The Netherlands and Austria are in between. And the key to it all seems to be price.

"In Spain, the most popular data package is a flat rate which is relatively economical in terms of average purchasing power. This has made smartphones the main way to access the internet. They are much more popular than computers, particularly among older people," said Fernández-Ardèvol.

"Moreover, text messages are usually excluded from flat rates, so they are no longer used for interpersonal communication. This has made WhatsApp much more popular than it is in central Europe, and it has been an incentive to give smartphones to people who, initially, had no interest in using the internet on their mobile," she added.

Breaking down stereotypes

The three thousand participants in the study answered the surveys three times in four years, which has made it possible to analyze their evolution as [mobile phone](#) users. Half of the respondents' habits remained the same over the years, while the other half's changed; some used their smartphones more and others less, while others fluctuated.

"This is a very significant result. It serves to illustrate how some stereotypes regarding older people are not borne out in real life. For example, many people would tend to think that as we get older, our use of [digital technologies](#) will decrease. The results, however, show that digital practices are dynamic, changing. The changes respond to personal circumstances and interests and, like any change, can involve an increase or decrease in digital practices, something that also happens in other age groups," Fernández-Ardèvol said.

Gender gap

There is definitely a gender gap. Among the most advanced users of mobile phones, there is a higher proportion of men. "The main cause is the social-digital divide, which is most pronounced in the case of older people. Older women have had less exposure to the internet throughout their lives, as they have either worked at home, taking care of the family, or have been in jobs where the workforce is generally less qualified."

"In addition, the educational level of [older women](#) is lower than that of older men since they suffered marked gender discrimination in access to education. All in all, less exposure to technology and lower qualifications mean that older women are disadvantaged in the digital world," she said.

More information: Mireia Fernández-Ardèvol et al, Set in Stone? Mobile Practices Evolution in Later Life, *Media and Communication* (2023). [DOI: 10.17645/mac.v11i3.6701](https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v11i3.6701)

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