GENDER SPOTLIGHT

Technology Takeover

Men and women incorporate technology into their daily lives in different ways

COVID-19 has shrunk the real world, driving many to expand it digitally in as many ways as possible. Video chatting has replaced spending time with loved ones; wearable fitness trackers have replaced gym visits. Overall, both men and women have invested in and used technology more than ever before — and they are planning to continue this trend even after COVID-19 restrictions are lifted.

Most men and women own and use smartphones — far more than computers or tablets

Men were slightly more likely than older women to have purchased new technology products between September 2019 and September 2020, including smartphones (38% men, 33% women), headsets (25% men, 20% women) and laptops (23% men, 15% women), but they purchased smart TVs (24% men, 22% women) and tablets (17% men, 14% women) at about the same rate. Interestingly, despite similar purchasing habits, men spent roughly \$200 more than women on technology (\$1,254 men, \$1,051 women) during this period, a dramatic increase from a pre-pandemic study (July 2018–June 2019) where men spent an average of \$430 and women spent \$362.

A new study examines how men and women 50-plus use technology

Most 50-plus men and women own smartphones (86% men, 85% women), and more than two-thirds own laptops (69% men, 67%, women). Women are more likely than men to own a tablet (59% vs. 53%), wearable device (29% vs. 23%), and an e-reader (30% vs. 22%), while men are more likely than women to own a desktop computer (61% vs. 47%) and a smart TV (67% vs. 61%).

IDENTIFY AS “TECH SAVVY”

36%
One-third
of men

26%
One-quarter
of women

Women leverage technology to stay connected to friends and family more so than men, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic

Overall, not only do women use technology more than men to keep in touch with loved ones (85% vs. 79%), but they also use each technology more frequently. A majority of women contact friends and family members every day using text (69%) or social media platforms (52%), something men are less likely to do (53% vs. 36%). Social media makes posting, liking, and commenting on updates quick and easy, from almost anywhere. Email and video chats, however, remain popular, though they are more time-consuming and more personal forms of communication. Both men and women frequently email (73% men, 71% women) or video chat (28% men, 39% women) with loved ones on a weekly basis.

Use each type of technology more now and will continue about the same use

■ Men ■ Women

Top 10 Tech Purchases by Gender between September 2019 - September 2020

■ Men
■ Women

38%

33%

Smartphone

25%

20%

Headset

24%

22%

Smart TV

23%

15%

Laptop Computer

17%

14%

Tablet

14%

9%

Home Assistant

12%

14%

Wearable Device

12%

8%

Smart Home Tech or Security

9%

7%

Desktop Computer

7%

3%

Home Audio Equipment
(e.g., Sonos)

In many ways, COVID-19 has forced many who were perhaps unfamiliar or uncomfortable using various communication technologies to learn how to use and appreciate them. In fact, one-half of women (50%) and almost two in five men (37%) say they feel more positively now towards technology's ability to connect people than before COVID-19. However, women say they use all types of technology more now than before the pandemic, a habit most plan to continue, especially for attending live virtual events (55% men, 51% women).

Women use their smartphone to manage more aspects of life than men

Men and women use their smartphones for many activities, with women more likely than men to send text messages or email (94% women, 88% men), access social networks, like Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn (72% women, 59% men), conduct online banking (56% women, 47% men), and video chat with friends (58% women, 47% men). Women also play more games on their smartphones than men (55% women, 42% men) and more often get health and fitness information (49% women, 39% men), while men are more likely than women to monitor their smart home devices using their smartphone (31% men, 24% women).

Tablets appear to be ancillary to smartphones and computers. While they seem to be a "nice to have" for surfing the internet (65% men, 57% women) or getting the news (53% men, 45% women), older adults rarely use tablets for any task as often as both smartphones and computers.

Frequency of using tech to stay in touch with friends and family

Technology Ownership

Men
Women

Smartphone

Laptop Computer

Smart TV

Tablet

Desktop Computer

Home Assistant

Wearable Device

E-Reader

Smart Home Tech or Security

Women are more likely than men to play games on their tablets or access social media

GAMES

50%
women

37%
men

SOCIAL MEDIA

46%
women

39%
men

While men are more likely than women to use a tablet to surf the internet or get news and other information

INTERNET

65%
men

57%
women

NEWS/OTHER

53%
men

45%
women

Women are much more interested than men in using technology to improve their health and well-being

Perhaps because the pandemic has forced most gyms to close, about three in ten (29%) women age 50-plus now own a wearable fitness tracker, up from one in five (18%) a year prior, and about one-quarter (23%) of older men own one now, up from one in six (16%) a year prior.

While the same share of women and men use their smartphones to track their health and fitness (38% men, 37% women), women are more likely to use their smartphone to get health and fitness information (49% vs. 39%), and video chat with health care professionals (44% vs. 36%). In fact, one in five women (25%) would video chat with a medical professional, make medical appointments, order prescriptions, or get medical advice if they were more knowledgeable and comfortable with the necessary technology, compared to roughly one in six men (17%).

Streaming entertainment programming increased significantly among both men and women 50-plus

Between September 2019 and September 2020, the frequency with which adults 50-plus turned to all types of media to watch shows, movies, and television series substantially increased, no doubt driven by the need to stay entertained while staying home due to the pandemic. Streaming content for entertainment increased significantly, by 42 percentage points (17% to 59%), while those tuning in to network cable increased by 16 percentage points (58% to 74%). Men and women seem to prefer the same streaming platforms: Netflix (66% men, 68% women), Amazon Prime Video (55% men, 56% women), Hulu (27% men, 31% women), and Disney+ (21% men, 21% women).

On average, men are paying \$60 more each year than women for cable and streaming services

ANNUALLY

\$1,205
men

\$1,144
women

MONTHLY

\$100
men

\$95
women

Men and women are comfortable using most technologies and want to learn more about the ones they are not comfortable with

Among older adults, men are slightly more confident than women when using technology (66% vs. 60%), whether in general or specific devices. Men and women are comfortable using computers, smartphones, and tablets, but they are less comfortable using home assistants, like Google Home or Amazon Echo (21% men, 19% women). When asked which technology they would most likely use if they knew more about it and felt comfortable using it, the most common responses are home assistants (29% men, 22% women),

like Amazon Echo and Google Home, and smart-home technology (24% men, 27% women), like Nest, Ring, and SimpliSafe. To learn about new technologies, women (43%) and, to a slightly lesser extent, men (35%) most want hands-on instruction from a friend or family member. Men are also happy to teach themselves using online tutorials or videos (21% men vs. 16% women).

Confidence in using technology

Adults 50-plus most often mention cost and knowledge as top barriers to adopting new technology

While their comfort levels with technology may be the same, men and women have some gaps in knowledge about privacy policies and fair pricing. A majority of men know a “third party” in an online privacy policy typically refers to advertising agencies (56%), and they know that even when a website has a privacy policy, their data can still be used or sold without permission (50%), something fewer women know to be true (49% vs. 37%).

Older adults cite cost and knowledge as the top barriers to acquiring new technology. Three of 10 men (31%) and women (28%) say that the cost of technology is among their top two barriers. Those reluctant to purchase new technology that could help them engage with family and friends cite lack of knowledge as one of the biggest barriers, including not knowing what they need (21% men, 27% women), feeling it is too confusing to navigate (16% men, 16% women), not knowing how to set up a device correctly (14% men, 17% women), knowing what technology can do for them (15% men, 15% women), and even knowing that the technology exists (13% men, 13% women).

Women 50-plus (64%) are more likely than men 50-plus (57%) to consider the cost of high-speed internet a problem. Among those who see the cost as a problem, about one in five women (23%) and men (19%) consider it a major problem, while two in five women (41%) and men (38%) say it’s a minor problem.

Top barriers to adopting technology

Implications

Men could take a lesson from women and use technology to improve their health and fitness. Whether they invest in a wearable fitness tracker or simply download an app to their smartphone that tracks health and fitness, men are missing an easy and often free opportunity to better their health. Using these tools may help men become more comfortable using technology to support their health in other ways, like video conferencing with health care providers.

Given older adults' general comfort level with using familiar technology, they might be willing to adopt smart home and home assistant technologies with the right tutorial or help from a loved one. Producers and retailers of these products could likely increase sales if, alongside advertising features of the product, they used video tutorials illustrating ease of installation and use.

Both men and women have increased their use of smartphones to do online banking, shopping, and other traditionally in-person activities. Although the pandemic may be driving this increase, businesses could make it permanent after the COVID-19 restrictions are lifted if they would continue to engage older adults using the digital platforms and devices with which this cohort has become familiar.

For more information on the survey and methodology please contact:
Brittne Kakulla, bkakulla@aarp.org

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26419/res.00420.010>

2021 Tech Trends and the 50-Plus: Top 10 Biggest Trends. Washington, DC:
AARP Research, April 2021. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26419/res.00420.001>