

# Approaching Very Old People: Rely on Traditions and Don't Forget to Call

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## ABSTRACT

Recent findings show that individuals aged 55 and older use more and more online media and digital technologies; however, this may be biased as only those using these media and technologies may be reacting to the surveys documenting the proliferation of digital media. This might be particularly pronounced for older people affected by one or several divides, such as the urban-rural digital divide, economic divides, or the grey divide between young and old demographics. Here, we design a project to survey them—with the help of a citizen science approach in several small German cities. Results show fewer online and digital information sources and communication channels are used than expected, except for messengers. Interestingly, there is substantial heterogeneity within the older group, as adults aged 52 to 74 and those aged 74 to 85 differ in media use and preference.

## KEYWORDS

older adults, information search medium, communication behavior, rural areas

## TRACKS

Branding and Marketing Communication, Consumer Behavior and Marketing Research

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a noticeable trend of older adults increasingly adopting Internet usage (Hunsaker & Hargittai, 2018; Yu et al., 2016), as almost 70% of individuals aged 60 and older reported being Internet users (IfD Allensbach, 2023). Digital technologies provide opportunities for maintaining social connections, engaging in social activities, and participating more easily (Schehl et al., 2019; Vroman et al., 2015). As a result, they not only help reduce social isolation (Chopik, 2016; Khosravi et al., 2016) but also can enhance overall well-being among older adults (Chen & Persson, 2002; Cotten, 2017).

Notably, the utilization of the Internet and the preference for alternative forms of media exhibit considerable variance among the distinct age cohorts (Pantelaki et al., 2023). Differences between older people in their use of information and communication technologies (ICT) (Hänninen et al., 2021) and other digital media (Loos, 2012) are captured in the theoretical gerontological construct of aged heterogeneity. Additionally, several digital divides—differences in adoption, access, and more specific usage patterns and skills across regional or demographic boundaries—lead to a grey divide (Huxhold et al., 2020; Quan-Haase et al., 2018). Recent research by Macdonald and Hülür (2021) highlights that older individuals face significant challenges in keeping up with technological advancements, resulting in a preference for traditional media over new media.

In the marketing industry, a demographic denial about the older generation has been identified despite the growing number of older individuals. This phenomenon is characterized by the tendency of marketers and advertisers to focus on younger consumers while disregarding the needs and preferences of individuals aged 55 and older (e.g., Moschis, 2012; Schewe, 1988; Sheth & Sisodia, 2005). While some studies have investigated older individuals' Internet and social media habits, research on the marketing implications of traditional and digital media design and corresponding advertising strategies for this demographic still needs to be completed. However, a severe problem in better representing older consumers in marketing research is that only those having adopted digital technologies may also react to market research endeavors such as online surveys. As such, studies on older consumers aged 55 and older are typically inherently biased towards the media savvy.

The present study aims to investigate information transfer and communication to and among hard-to-reach older adults by developing effective strategies for approaching and engaging with this group. We, therefore, focus on individuals aged 52 and older living in rural, economically decayed areas in Eastern Germany. Targeting and surveying this group, affected by digital and economic divides, requires physically going from person to person. To reach this population, we developed a citizen science project (Jennett et al., 2014) that enlists locals as trustworthy multipliers. The project surveys the communication preferences of adults aged 52 and older through in-depth interviews and a questionnaire-based survey conducted in five stages. In particular, the study investigates how to approach these people in remote locations (for information) and what needs to be considered when communicating with this consumer group.

In doing so, this research offers the following contributions:

1. Citizen scientists helped survey individuals aged 52 to 85 in a rural area, overcoming digital and economic divides. A personal survey technique like a questionnaire worked better than structured interviews, requiring less training.
2. We demonstrate that individuals within the target group of "older people" differ significantly from one another, which depends on general life-determining factors such as occupation and place of residence, among others, and directly on age.

3. We reveal the features of media use for information and communication purposes within the cohort aged 52 and older, distinguishing between new and traditional media across rural and urban areas.
4. We support previous findings on Internet use and preferences for traditional media among older people but add insights on hard-to-reach people aged 74 and older in rural areas.

## **BACKGROUND**

Older people tend to use traditional media channels such as television, radio, newspapers, and magazines, while digital media channels such as the Internet, smartphones, and e-books are less popular among them. A German survey revealed that 98% of people aged 60 and older watch television regularly (Statista, 2021), whereas only 32% use the Internet several times daily (Statista, 2023). Even though Internet use among older people continues to increase (Hunsaker & Hargittai, 2018; Yu et al., 2016), and many studies exist on this subject (e.g., Hunsaker & Hargittai, 2018; Morris et al., 2007), 25% of U.S. adults aged 65 and older do not use the Internet (Perrin & Atske, 2021). Although older adults with higher educational status experience significantly higher online activity (Schehl et al., 2019), radio use is still part of everyday life for many older people (Krause, 2020).

Compared to younger generations, older people's online participation in social media is limited (Cotten et al., 2022; Durrant et al., 2017). Individuals aged 65 and older using social media are primarily concerned about data privacy (Quan-Haase & Elueze, 2018). Still, they also acknowledge benefits like staying in touch, sharing pictures, social surveillance, convenient communication, and satisfying curiosity (Jung et al., 2017). Value, usability, affordability, accessibility, technical support, social support, emotion, independence, experience, and confidence are decisive in implementing new media or technology for older people (C. Lee & Coughlin, 2015).

It is crucial to emphasize that the term "older people" cannot be considered homogenous as there is great diversity amongst this population—to adhere to established guidelines for effectively describing a particular cohort, this study has made a concerted effort to incorporate pertinent recommendations into its framework (e.g., Lundebjerg et al., 2017; Reframing Aging Initiative, 2022). People aged 55 and older can be divided into three groups: individuals aged 55 to 74, further divided around pension age into two age classes (55 to 64 and 65 to 74), and individuals aged 75 and older (Neugarten, 1974). From a marketing perspective, older people are referred to as senior marketing targets (60 to 79 years) and elderly marketing targets (80+ years) (Berthelot-Guiet, 2018). However, behavior is not solely based on chronological age but is also influenced by life states and transitions, as explained by Life course theory (LCT). LCT considers factors such as cohorts, trajectories, and turning points to explain behavior change, including technology and ICT adoption (Elder, 1985; Levesque, 2011). Different life trajectories lead to more heterogeneity in old life compared to younger demographics (Szmigin & Carrigan, 2001).

This aged heterogeneity reflects the variability in people's abilities with increasing age—typically after age 65 (Hänninen et al., 2021; Nelson & Dannefer, 1992; Sourbati & Loos, 2019). These differences are then increasingly apparent within the grey divide: older adults are less involved and skilled with digital media than younger adults (Huxhold et al., 2020; Quan-Haase et al., 2018). The grey divide is also a digital divide, which is a differentiation of adoption, access, and usage patterns of and skills in digital technologies and media (e.g., Choi & DiNitto, 2013; Cresci et al., 2010; Friemel, 2016; Pearce & Rice, 2013). A distinction is made between the first-level digital divide and second-level digital divide, the former highlighting

inequalities in Internet access (resulting from involuntary exclusion) and the latter discussing inequalities in Internet usage (resulting from personal preferences and needs) (Eynon & Helsper, 2011; Yu et al., 2016). Still, both are likely common, especially in rural communities where people urgently need the Internet to access important information (Hodge et al., 2017). Research about or across these divides is scarce in Marketing, where a 'demographic denial' persists as marketers focus on younger markets while neglecting older people (e.g., Moschis, 2012; Schewe, 1988; Sternthal & Bonezzi, 2009). Nevertheless, these individuals represent a significantly larger target group with greater purchasing power. While marketing research increasingly shifts focus to older individuals, these studies tend to focus on adapted products or creating fitting content, e.g., the design of advertisements with older people (M. M. Lee et al., 2007; Robinson et al., 2008; Zhang et al., 2006), but not on the media needed to bring content to them.

## METHOD

In rural areas, older people (especially aged 74 and older) live reclusively and are difficult to reach for surveys. To overcome this challenge, we involved local citizens as citizen scientists in a project in two small German towns from October 2022 to July 2023. Both are characterized by decades of economic and demographic structural change due to the German reunification process. Both towns have similar problems of an aging population with relatively poor access to or use of digital ICT. The recruited citizen scientists were locals identified through prior collaborations (qualified due to their age and commitment) to facilitate our access to the reclusive population for a more extensive study. Citizen Science is the active participation of citizens in scientific research projects to integrate as many different actors and perspectives as possible in knowledge production (Bonney et al., 2009). Ideally, these approaches increase the social acceptance of scientific knowledge and the research methods to attain it (Jennett et al., 2014; Oliveira et al., 2017). The combination and implementation of a marketing-oriented inquiry and a citizen science approach can be succinctly depicted through the intended and conducted project phases illustrated in Figure 1.

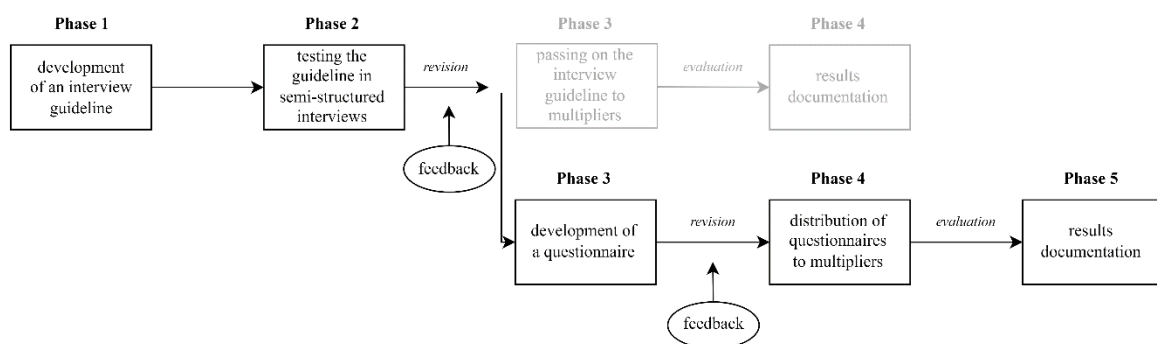


Figure 1: Individual phases of the citizen science study.

Initially, we developed a structured interview guideline and an onboarding protocol for citizen scientists as interviewers (Phase 1). The guideline focuses on three broad topic areas, including general information behavior (*How do you inform yourself and which media do you use?*), general communication behavior (*How do you communicate, and which media do you use?*), and questions about citizen-municipality-interaction. We tested this guideline in interviews with prospective citizen scientists (Phase 2) and planned to revise it after the initial interviews. However, during these first interviews in the second phase, it became apparent that the interview guide developed would be excessively time-consuming and operationally intricate for the multipliers aged over 52, whom we had recruited to implement and run interviews with

other adults their age. Therefore, we switched to a survey-based approach for subsequent phases (questions and superordinate topics are based on the research conducted by Kiel & Layton, 1981; Timmers & Glas, 2010; Wicks, 2004; Yuan et al., 2016). We then ran a development workshop (Phase 3) with nine participants to develop and adapt the survey. We jointly redefined the structure and questions of the questionnaire based on feedback. Questions and survey flow are demonstrated in Table 1. In Phase 4, we provided printed questionnaires to our engaged citizens and instructed them to approach potential respondents personally. Local social workers collected and digitized the surveys. In Phase 5, we invited citizen scientists to discuss results after descriptive analyses and result visualization.

Table 1: Questions and answer options of the questionnaire.

Questions	Answer Options
<b>Information Behavior of Citizens</b>	
Which media do you prefer to obtain information from?	newspapers and magazines (fee required); advertising leaflets (free of charge); TV; radio; official gazettes; community TV channel; word-of-mouth, Internet (search engines, social media, messenger)
Which (over-)topics do you inform yourself about?	Nutrition; politics; health; sports; healthcare; culture; communal/ regional aspects
Which of the following media and services do you use to obtain information?	traditional and new media, as well as messenger
<i>Questions regarding specific municipal information media (official gazette, city website, etc.)—omitted here on irrelevance</i>	
<b>Communication Channels and Devices</b>	
Which of the following media do you increasingly use for communication?	personal contacts; letters; email; landline phone; smartphone/mobile phone; tablet; social media; messenger; Internet (online conference programs, blogs)
Do you have any concerns about the use of certain media for communication?	enter medium and concerns
Which of the following media and services do you use for communication?	Traditional (letters; email; landline telephone; smartphone/cell phone; tablet; personal contacts), new media (social media), and messengers
<i>Questions regarding contact with the city—omitted here on irrelevance</i>	
<i>Information and Communication (project-specific)—omitted here on irrelevance</i>	
<b>Demographic Information</b>	
Please enter your age.	
Please select your gender.	male; female; diverse
Please enter your current place of residence.	
Please specify your district (e.g., city center, incorporated village).	
Please indicate your current housing situation.	living alone; with partner; in a shared apartment; within an assisted living facility; single-family home; multi-family home
Please indicate your current activity.	employed; not employed; pensioner
Do you do volunteer work?	Yes/No
If the answer to question 36 is yes, in which institution are you involved?	
Are you a member of an association?	Yes/No
If the answer to question 38 is yes, in which association are you a member?	

## FINDINGS

### Phase 1 and 2: In-depth Interviews

The in-depth interview asked seven participants about their information-seeking behaviors and communication styles. The participants were involved citizens with the potential to act as multipliers (during Phase 4, some of these individuals assumed this role), carefully chosen to

represent diverse age groups, occupational backgrounds, and communal establishments. Demographic data is detailed in Table 2.

Table 2: Details of the semi-structured interviews conducted in both cities.

	Age	Gender	Job/Function
Interview 1	60	Female	Manager of a Community Multigenerational Center
Interview 2	74	Female	Retired Journalist, Former Deputies of the Commune
Interview 3	54	Female	Assistance to the Management of the Municipal Cinema
Interview 4	62	Female	Employee in a Social and Welfare Association
Interview 5	81	Female	Pensioner, Active in Associations of the Municipality
Interview 6	59	Female	Employee of a Municipal Tourism and Marketing Office
Interview 7	55	Female	Librarian in the Municipal Library

The interviews revealed that traditional media sources like newspapers, TV, and radio are still relevant for obtaining information among people aged 55 and older. New media platforms such as social media and WhatsApp are gaining popularity for personal communication. Face-to-face conversations and phone calls are still preferred modes of communication. Personal interests, affiliation with the municipality, voluntary or honorary work, previous employment status, self-perceived age, and mobility influence access to information and communication for older adults. The interviewees criticized municipal information services and communication channels and suggested to provide workshops to enhance digital literacy. Some individuals recommended converting the interview guide into a questionnaire to save time and enable more widespread distribution among individuals aged 55 and older. For the second phase of this study, we opted to leverage the uniform feedback received from citizens who participated as co-researchers and decision-makers.

### Phase 3 and 4: Questionnaire

Between May and July 2023, 21 involved citizens surveyed people aged 52 and older as recruited multipliers. They distributed 160 questionnaires and collected a total of 60 completed questionnaires, 41 for city A and 19 completed questionnaires for city B. After data cleaning, 39 valid questionnaires ( $M_{age}=70.5$  years,  $SD_{age}=7.5$ , 69% female) are included in the evaluation for city A; meanwhile, no records had to be excluded during the data cleaning for city B ( $M_{age}=69.4$  years,  $SD_{age}=9.8$ , 84% female). Table 3 gives an overview of the sample.

Table 3: Overview of the sample of the questionnaire.

	City A	City B	$\Sigma$
Mean Age	70.5 (SD=7.5)	69.4 (SD=9.8)	70.2 (SD=8.4)
Youngest/Oldest Subject	55 / 85	52 / 85	52 / 85
Percentages of Female Probands	69%	84%	74%
Employed/Retired Probands	11 (28%)/ 28 (72%)	7 (37%)/ 12 (63%)	18 (31%)/ 40 (69%)
City Center or Outside the City	19 (49%)/ 20 (51%)	18 (95%)/ 1 (5%)	37 (64%)/ 21 (36%)
Number of People Living Alone	10 (25%)	10 (53%)	20 (35%)

For the analysis, we divided the results into two age groups: age group 1 (people aged 52 to 73) and age group 2 (people aged 74 to 85). Figure 2 on the left side shows that individuals aged 75 and older prefer traditional linear media, such as TV, newspapers, and radio. In contrast, social media and the Internet are used only by a minority. Conversely, age group 1 uses almost all media types, including digital media. Regarding communication, Figure 2 on the right side shows that people aged 52 to 73 prefer smartphone-based and personal means, while age group 2 communicates less but prefers landline telephones.

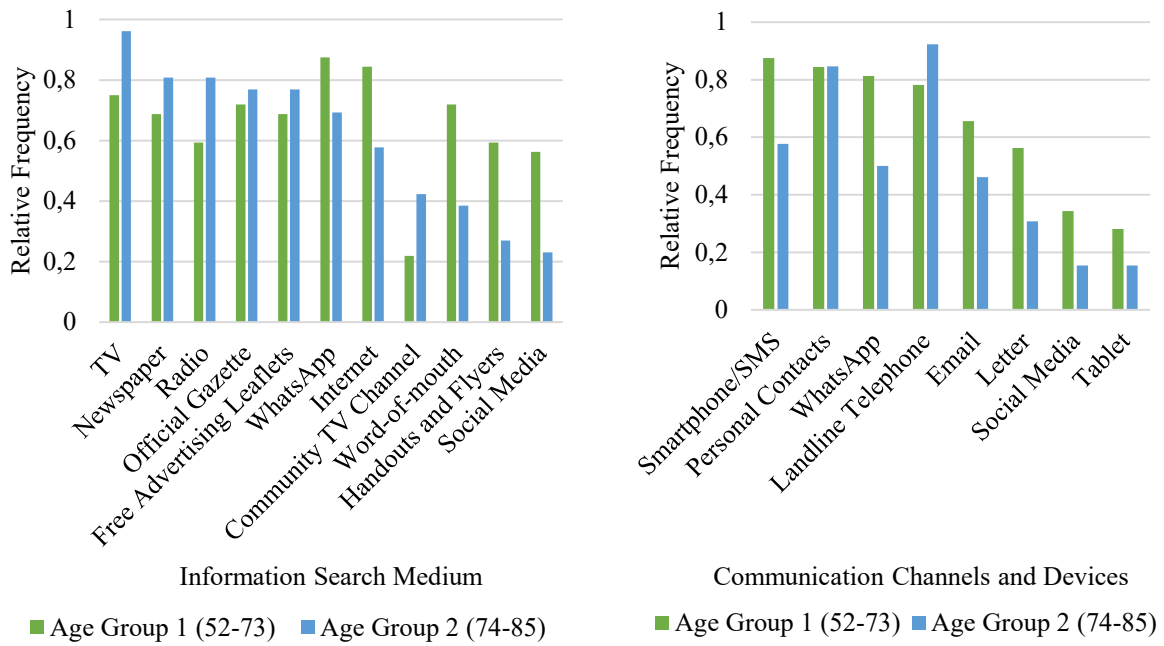


Figure 2: Relative frequencies of use of information sources and communication channels by age groups.

To provide trends in media use across ages, we estimate linear models for each medium over chronological age. Figure 3 displays the results with a significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) slope. Results show that the younger people (starting from the age of 52) are using non-traditional media outlets such as personal contacts ( $\beta = -.066, p = <.001$ ) and WhatsApp ( $\beta = -.048, p = .011$ ) for communication, while the older respondents still rely on traditional media outlets like television ( $\beta = .027, p = .053$ ) and radio ( $\beta = .029, p = .042$ ). Summarizing these results, we suggest that the younger the people are, the more they prefer interpersonal, active, and social media (in the actual social sense), while the older the adults get, the more they prefer passive media.

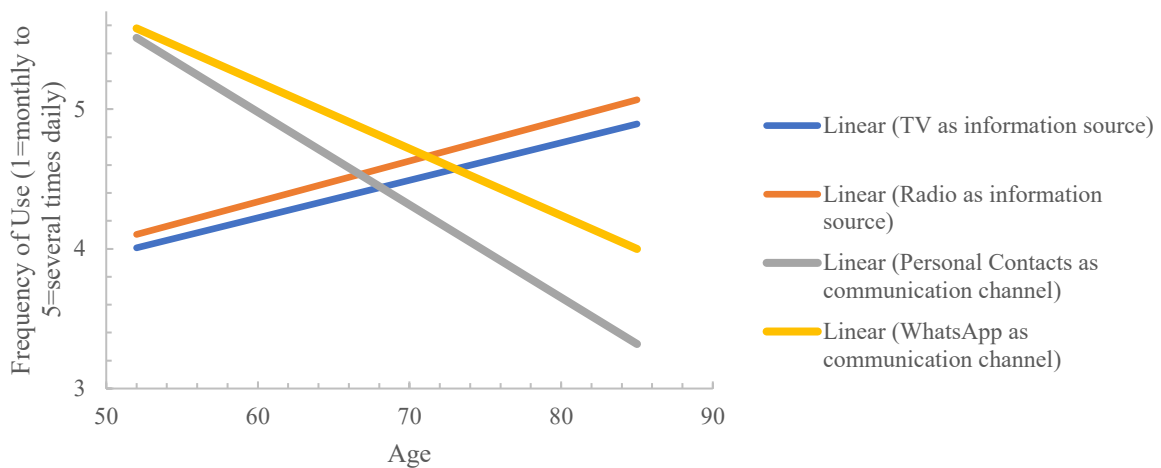


Figure 3: Frequency of use of various media depending on age.

Several group comparisons further highlight various divides in our sample: grey, urban-rural, loneliness, and economic divides. Table 4 summarizes the results. We did not find significant differences between the genders regarding usage preferences—neither for the information sources nor the communication channels.

Table 4: Results from t-tests between different groups.

	<73 vs. >74 years	City vs. rural	Alone vs. partner	Employed vs. retired
	Mean $\Delta$ (p)	Mean $\Delta$ (p)	Mean $\Delta$ (p)	Mean $\Delta$ (p)
<b>Information sources</b>				
newspapers	.251 (.354)	-.202 (.462)	-.417 (.139)	.015 (.959)
handouts and flyers	-1.135 (.036) *	.138 (.709)	.856 (.095) +	-.903 (.066) +
TV	-.448 (.050) *	.032 (.894)	-.216 (.383)	-.429 (.092) +
radio	-.386 (.130)	-.319 (.236)	.262 (.351)	-.671 (.010) *
oral address	-.370 (.392)	.774 (.054) +	-.500 (.232)	.045 (.912)
Internet	.089 (.792)	.215 (.530)	-.239 (.492)	.326 (.330)
<b>Communication channels</b>				
e-mail	.809 (.082) +	.023 (.960)	-.049 (.930)	.410 (.397)
landline telephone	.180 (.565)	.233 (.472)	-.276 (.400)	.204 (.547)
personal contacts	.867 (.003) **	.138 (.664)	-.409 (.194)	.967 (.002) **
WhatsApp	.615 (.064) +	.038 (.910)	-.743 (.021) **	.650 (.043) *

+ $p < .100$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .010$ .

## DISCUSSION

### Main Findings, Implications, and Further Research

Our recent study on citizen science survey of adults aged 52 and older has highlighted a persistent reliance on non-digital ICT among the older population. This tendency poses a significant challenge to commonly recommended approaches that tackle the issue of loneliness among older adults through digital participation, as reported in previous studies (S. Lee et al., 2023; Sarcar et al., 2018). Additionally, our study implies that marketers may need assistance in using digital media to address these adults and adapt their marketing strategies to the needs of this age group. Retirement age can be used as a guideline to address the target group effectively, as individuals who are still employed may have different information and communication needs than those who have already retired—especially baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) are equally familiar with traditional and digital media (Slootweg & Rowson, 2018). One reliable explanation is the LCT, which posits that major life events can lead to profound shifts in an individual's preferences and behavioral patterns (Elder, 1985). For instance, retirement could result in reduced exposure to digital media due to decreased engagement opportunities.

Our findings suggest that traditional media, such as television and radio, remain the most widely used sources of information among people aged 74 and older—supported by studies in Germany (Sultanova, 2022). Consequently, adapting appropriate advertising in these channels to target this group is crucial. Given that younger generations are increasingly moving away from linear media (e.g., Budzinski et al., 2021; Skoric & Poor, 2013), it is imperative to adapt marketing strategies to the needs of older generations. Future studies should focus more on adapting traditional media to this target group, as they are increasingly the only audience. Moreover, personal contacts (thus also word-of-mouth) and direct exchange via messenger services were investigated as communication channels. However, we show a drastic decrease in these media with increasing age, which suggests that people become increasingly isolated and passive from social life as they age.

In addition to this study's marketing implications, there is a pressing need to delve deeper into the multifaceted definitions of older adults (aged 55 and older). Given the multitude of terms and several definitions of different age groups, compiling, and standardizing these definitions within a universal framework is imperative to facilitate more comprehensive research in this domain.



## Limitations

Our study faced a major challenge in reaching and sampling reclusive older people aged 52 and older. To tackle this, we proposed a citizen science approach with locals, which led to a sample driven by pre-existing social connections. It is imperative to acknowledge the potential interviewer-related biases when using a method that can reach individuals who may not have been accessible through external means. Specifically, attention should be paid to selecting interviewees from similar social environments—a randomized survey could have yielded a greater number of results; however, it may have been subjected to similar biases such as information gaps (only committed citizens react) and non-response bias, particularly in reaching the withdrawn population. Though our demographic measures matched census data (to a lesser extent), our approach must be considered more than strictly statistically representative. It is important to be cautious against sampling techniques without an extensive personal approach. Our findings may be specific to the economic decline in Eastern Germany, which has led to several digital divides. Disparities may be less severe in other highly developed countries.

## CONCLUSION

This research study, conducted as part of a citizen science project, investigated the information and communication channels preferred by older adults (divided into two age cohorts: 52 to 73 and 74 to 85) in various small towns and communities in Germany. This demographic can be challenging to reach due to multiple digital divides. The citizen science approach was reconfigured, and several alternative methods were implemented to survey older people. The study's findings indicate that older adults (especially those over 74) tend to rely on traditional linear media, such as television and radio, while reluctant to adopt newer technologies like the Internet and social media. Furthermore, the study revealed that the willingness for personal communication decreases with age, which results in an elevated risk of social isolation. The implications of these findings for enhancing the accessibility of information to people aged 52 and older are discussed.

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