

Internet use and contacts with children among older Europeans

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Abstract

Contacts with children represent one of the most important sources of support for older individuals. The extent to which the use of internet facilitates contacts with children both those living geographically close and those living far away is not well understood. By using panel data from the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) I investigate to what extent use of the internet is related to the frequency of contacts with children, especially those living at a distance. Asymmetric fixed-effects models show a significant positive relationship between starting using the Internet and increased frequency of contacts with children living far away. Stopping using the Internet is not significantly associated with contact frequency. These results point to the importance of digital contacts to strengthen intergenerational relationships and are especially relevant in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and of increased geographical mobility of the younger generations which makes increasingly likely for older people to have at least some children living at a distance.

Keywords: Contacts with children; Internet use; Older adults.

The demographic forces behind population ageing (i.e., fertility and mortality) have a strong impact on intergenerational relations: people are living longer with smaller family networks than in the past. For example, childlessness has increased and number of children has reduced over different cohorts. Intergenerational relations have been largely demonstrated to be crucial for older people's physical and mental health and shrinking kin networks imply that it will be more and more important to maintain social contacts with the available kin. It is yet to be understood to what extent the use of digital technologies helps older people in this respect.

Despite the process of digitalisation being not new, only recently we reached a stage that creates unprecedented opportunities and challenges for social relations. The World Wide Web became accessible to the public only in 1994 and Social Networking Sites (SNS) have been introduced only in the last 20 years (e.g., Facebook in 2004), offering unprecedented new forms of connecting with known and unknown persons, living wherever. Also, only recently the Internet has become used by a large part of the older population in developed countries, although internet use still strongly varies with age ("age digital divide"), ranging in the EU-28 from above 95% for individuals younger than 44 to 79% and 61% in the age ranges 55-64 and 65-74, respectively. As expected, internet use is even lower among people aged 75+, and reaches a minimum of 5% among people aged 90+. So, the myth of older people excluded from the broadband society has to be refused, but a heterogeneous access and use of digital technologies persists.

In this paper I focus on the role of internet use for contacts with children among older Europeans. More specifically, using panel data from the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) I investigate to what extent using the Internet is related to the frequency of contacts with children, especially those living at a distance. SHARE is a longitudinal panel survey of individuals aged 50+ in 27 European countries and Israel. It is conducted biannually since 2004 (wave 3 and in part wave 7 only collected life histories). Although measures of ICT use were not collected in the first four waves and are not detailed, SHARE offers information on contacts with each child separately, together with additional relevant data, e.g. on contacts and geographical distance to each child.

By using asymmetric fixed-effects panel models, I found a significant positive relationship between starting using the internet and increased frequency of contacts with children. Statistically insignificant associations have been found, instead, for contacts with children living close by and when stopping using the Internet has been considered. Sensitivity analyses show robustness of findings to different choices of the threshold to define geographical closeness. I did not find significant interactions by age, gender and education in the relationships between internet use and contacts with children, although the probability to start using the internet itself substantially varies across socio-demographic sub-groups of the population.

These results point to the importance of digital contacts to strengthen intergenerational solidarity (what it has been termed “digital solidarity”) and are especially relevant in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic that has reduced opportunities for face-to-face contacts.