

An elderly man with glasses and a young boy are looking at a laptop screen together. The man is wearing a blue and white checkered shirt over a white t-shirt. The boy is wearing a blue and white checkered shirt. They are both smiling and looking at the screen. The background is a brick wall.

Insights on connectedness and technology use among older Australians



Shaping
Connections



What we are about

Shaping Connections is a research program co-created by RMIT University's School of Economics, Finance and Marketing, and University of the Third Age (U3A). The program seeks to better understand how technology use supports connectedness and enhances social inclusion and participation.

To learn more, please visit www.shapingconnections.org





Why is social exclusion a problem?

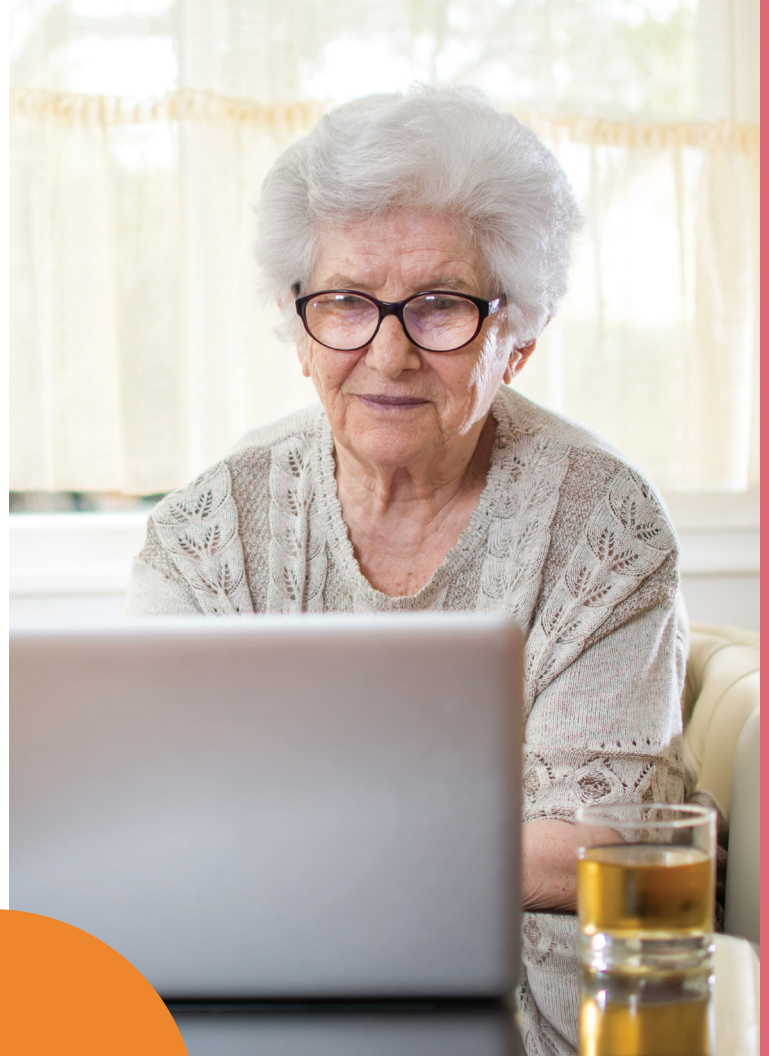
Research shows that 44% of people aged over 65 years' experience social exclusion, which is twice the rate of exclusion for other age groups. Further, at least 10% of senior Australians suffer from loneliness or social isolation, a number that has failed to drop over the last two decades.

Consequently, increased social inclusion for older Australians is a central goal of the Australian government. Our focus is on social connectedness to address this inclusion goal. Connectedness enhances older adult's wellbeing and has a positive effect on their physical and mental health.

Connectedness can be facilitated by technology.

Technology can be a double-edged sword for connectedness.

Technology can connect. But technology can also isolate.





Our approach

We follow a collaborative network approach to investigating the role of technology in promoting social connectedness to improve inclusion among older adults. This approach involves understanding how collaborative networks shape not only the adoption of technology but its use in attending the social and instrumental needs of participants of such networks.

Senior Australians are willing to learn and add new digital skills that enable them to live how they want. Seniors also look for intimate, supportive and rewarding relationships with their families and recognise that new technologies can help facilitate this. Barriers exist, but they can be overcome.

To tackle these barriers, we have embarked on a journey to co-create strategies for constructive engagement with technological solutions to promote connectedness to achieve social inclusion among older Australians.





For older Australians, connecting through technology means supporting existing relationships. This differs from a younger demographic who also use social media and other platforms for self-presentation and to make new connections.



What is connectedness?

Connected has several meanings for older Australians.

1. Getting information and keeping up-to-date
2. Keep in touch with family and friends
3. Coordinating activities and events
4. Participating in and belonging to communities
5. Having access to products, services and experiences

A person is sitting and using a laptop. The laptop screen shows a video call with a smiling woman. The entire image has a red overlay.

“

Connecting means connecting with family, but also more than that. It is also connecting with our community, participating in learning, and more social activities. [...] that's staying connected with the world!

Bev, 76



“

I was driving for hours, away on a trip, and my phone didn't work. And I panicked, thinking: If I break down, I've got no connection whatsoever.

Marina, 72

A photograph of a woman and a young girl sitting together. The woman, wearing glasses and a light-colored t-shirt, is looking down at a smartphone held by the girl. The girl is also looking at the phone. The woman is holding an open book in her lap. The background is blurred. The entire image has a warm, orange-toned overlay.

“

Grandchildren. They come visit you and what's happens? No one talks!"

Lilian, 75

Barriers to connectedness

There are still some barriers for older Australians when it comes to using technology to enable social connectedness.

1. Fear of online bullying and scams
2. The belief that digital technology does more harm than good
3. Lack of resources and skills



“

**I moved my mouse, and the screen went blank!
What happened? What have I done?**

Kathy, 80

“

**If the text message scares the living crap out of you,
it's a scam. That's what I'm trying to tell everyone who
participates in my class.**

Peter C, 77

A photograph of an elderly man with a long white beard and glasses, sitting at a desk and using a laptop. He is holding a cup in his right hand and typing on the keyboard with his left. The image has a warm, yellowish-orange tint.

“

He told me, ‘I sent you an email two days ago, and you haven’t opened it’. I said, ‘I’ll open it when I feel like it [...] Yeah, that’s right. I am not looking at my emails every half hour!

Trevor, 76

Integrated Rhythms

When it comes to technology, older Australians have their own rhythms for learning and using them.

1. Most seniors believe connection through technology is unavoidable, but they want it on their own terms.
2. Most prefer to “learn what you need as you go.”
3. Seniors prefer platforms and applications that enable them to control the pace and content of learning and use.

A photograph of three women sitting at a desk with a computer. The woman on the right is older, with short, wavy grey hair, wearing a dark jacket and a blue scarf. She is looking at the computer screen. The woman in the middle is younger, with blonde hair, wearing a patterned top, and is smiling while looking at the screen. The woman on the left is partially visible, also looking at the screen. The entire image has a warm orange tint.

“

I was never really fast about getting on board with computers at the start, and now I feel as though I'm just left behind. And so I just rock along like everybody else and learn what you need as you go.

Anne, 71

“

YouTube is good because you can run a YouTube, and as you're running it, you can stop it, do what you've got to do, and then come back and run it a bit more, and do the next part of it.

Peter C, 77



**Agents of
socialisation:
Family,
Semi-formal
educational
systems & the
internet**

Socialisation agents are specific sources of information that transmit norms, attitudes, motivations, and behaviours to learners. When older Australians learn about new technology, family, semi-formal educational systems and the internet are prominent socialisation agents.





Family

Family plays a vital role in how seniors navigate the technology landscape. However, there is still some frustration expressed between older Australians and their adult children.

Some seniors experience grandchildren as more tolerant and understanding of their learning need.



“

My grandchild is far more tolerant than what my grown-up adult children are. Whether it's a child thing, a young adult child, I don't know.

Marina, 72



“

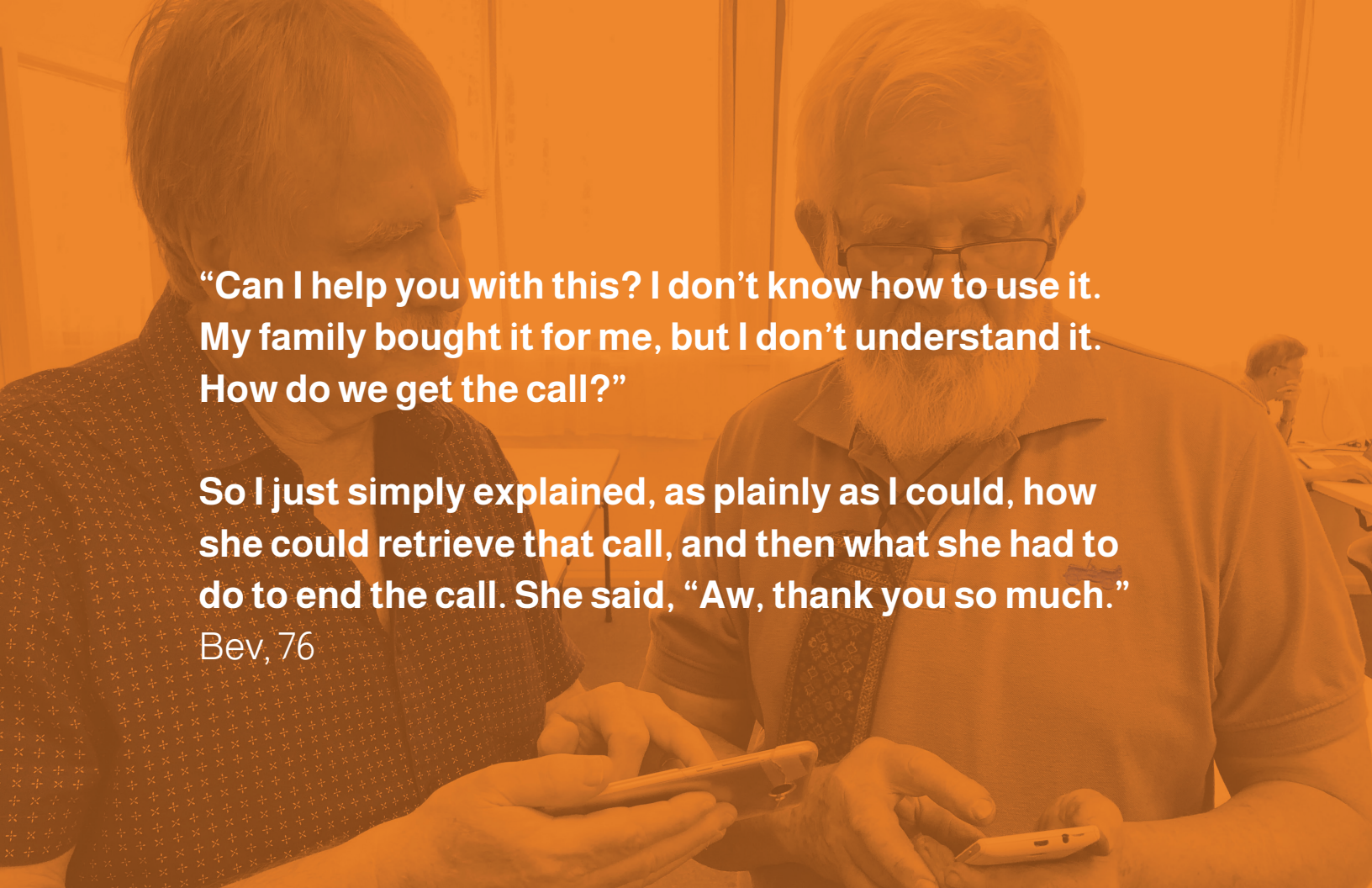
I'll ask my son something about the phone, or the iPad, and [he'll] pick it up [and say] 'this is what you do, this is what you do', you know, not showing me, just telling me. And I'm really not learning how to do it.

Anne, 71

“

**The older they get, the worse they get.
The less tolerant.**

Kathy, 80 and Norma, 78



**“Can I help you with this? I don’t know how to use it.
My family bought it for me, but I don’t understand it.
How do we get the call?”**

**So I just simply explained, as plainly as I could, how
she could retrieve that call, and then what she had to
do to end the call. She said, “Aw, thank you so much.”**

Bev, 76

Semi-formal educational systems

Semi-formal education settings play a critical role as socialisation agents, especially in settings such as U3A computer classes for seniors. In these settings, seniors interact with peers with similar lived experiences. Their peers are more prone to use the same pace and mode of socialisation, which makes these settings effective. Seniors would interchangeably take the role as agent and learner in social interactions.



“

Adult education. The facilities are out there. You can find things [like] that, I wanna learn something so I'll go and find the venue for that.

Lillian, 75



“

Sometimes you have people in your class who look a bit more knowledgeable than yourself, and then they'll say, 'this is how it's done', and then we might go home and then do more research. Somebody in the class we'll always have a little bit of more knowledge.

Kathy, 80



The internet

The internet works in tandem with the other socialisation agents. It supplements and extends existing knowledge and skills. It can help get results quicker.

Many older Australians consult Google or watch videos on YouTube to learn how to use new features in apps or programs.

“

The first thing I do is google. Because I hate asking family.

Nina, 61

“

If you go and buy something like a digital camera, you can do YouTube. You don't have to read the manual. YouTube will show you exactly how it works and everything else. You have fewer problems that way.

Peter C, 77



Next steps

Our research indicates that collaborative networks have great potential to benefit those who participate in them. The continuity of this project includes:

- understanding learning and use in real-life situations,
- leveraging the support of agents of socialisation,
- designing pathways for social connectedness
- and establishing opportunities for value co-creation.

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