

More can be done to give older adults avenues to learn new technology skills

New research by SMU Centre for Research on Successful Ageing also finds that improving digital literacy among older adults increases social wellbeing and acts as guardrails against online scams

Singapore, 31 May 2023 (Wednesday) – Singapore stands as the world’s fourth most digitally competitive country¹, with 99 per cent of its households having Internet access. Yet the nation’s older adults remain outpaced by younger generations in terms of digital ownership, usage, and literacy. This was established in a new study titled "[Digital Literacy Among Older Adults](#)" by [Singapore Management University](#) to examine how digitally connected and proficient older adult Singaporeans are, within the context of its impact on successful ageing².

Conducted by the [Centre for Research on Successful Ageing \(ROSA\)](#) at SMU, researchers polled 6,548 Singaporeans between the ages of 57 to 76 (inclusive) in November 2022, drawing data from the [Singapore Life Panel® \(SLP\)](#). With the SLP, ROSA undertakes one of the largest high-frequency surveys in the world, collecting data on a monthly basis to understand ageing trends in Singapore. In a first, ROSA has leveraged its vast database to identify the help needed by Singapore's seniors to learn technology, especially at a time where generative AI is making sweeping changes to everyday living.

“Within the context of successful ageing in Singapore, ROSA is committed to a holistic understanding of the elements that shape the well-being of older adults. There is more to the digital divide than meets the eye. With this study, we aim to better support older adults in building their digital literacy, identify opportunities for them to stay socially connected and ultimately, safeguard their overall well-being,” said Professor [Paulin Straughan, Director, ROSA](#).

According to the study, educational efforts to encourage the use of technology among older adults should target improving perceptions of the use of technology, as well as equip older adults with the skills needed to protect themselves from scams and phishing attempts.

The study also found that older adults who are more isolated and lacking in social support and digital skills may lack the necessary social resources to rely on in learning how to use new technologies. More can be done to provide such older adults with opportunities to learn new technological skills.

This study was made possible through the generosity of The Ngee Ann Kongsi and the support of the Ministry of Education. Full details of the study can be accessed [here](#).

Key findings and practical implications for society:

- 1. Singapore’s older adults hold structural and attitudinal barriers towards the use of technology**

¹ [IMD World Digital Competitiveness Ranking \(IMD World Competitiveness Center, 2022\)](#). Singapore ranks 4th globally, after Denmark, USA, and Sweden.

² The [Singapore Ministry of Health’s 2023 Action Plan for Successful Ageing](#) represents a renewed pledge to carry out the goals set forth in the original 2015 action plan. It centres on three interrelated themes – care, contribution, and connectedness – otherwise known as the 3Cs. In this co-created, refreshed action plan, digital connectedness represents a key driver and facilitator of successful aging in Singapore.

- Smartphone ownership (92 per cent) ranks highest among respondents, followed by computer/laptop (43 per cent) and tablet (34 per cent) ownership.
 - 56 per cent own two or more digital devices; 38 per cent who own one and 6 per cent who own none.
 - Respondents who owned two or more devices were significantly more likely to feel that using smartphones could help them accomplish more, compared to respondents who owned fewer devices. This suggests that perceptions of the usefulness of technology may be an important factor shaping digital literacy.
- 2. Older adults use technologies predominantly for leisure activities instead of functional purposes, possibly due to concerns over safety**
- A majority of respondents (at least 75 per cent) have used leisure applications on their devices, such as browsing social media or watching videos online.
 - On the other hand, the use of applications for more functional purposes like managing bank accounts or accessing telehealth services is less popular, with only 11 per cent of respondents using telehealth services for instance.
 - Respondents who felt confident that they could protect themselves from scams were more likely to use functional applications like online or mobile banking. 61 per cent at least slightly agreed that they were confident in protecting themselves from scams and phishing attempts used mobile banking applications, compared to 31 per cent who did not agree.
- 3. The social environment can be an important factor shaping the adoption of technology**
- 94 per cent agreed that they can seek help from someone should they face difficulties using their digital device.
 - On average, respondents were more confident about learning how to use new technologies with assistance from others, as opposed to on their own.
 - Respondents primarily seek help from their children (93 per cent), friends (80 per cent), and co-workers (67 per cent) when they want to learn how to use a new digital device or application.

Policy recommendations:

1. Lower-income older adults remain a vulnerable group in terms of digital ownership, which has been defined as an important factor associated with mental well-being. This group may benefit from greater support in identifying and applying for existing public schemes such as DigitalAccess@Home, Public Rental Scheme, and ComCare Assistance that provide households with subsidized broadband and digital devices (Tham, 2023). In addition, more digital devices can be made available for public loan in neighbourhood settings, such as libraries, community centres and residents' committees.
2. Older adults who are more isolated and lacking in social support and digital skills may lack the necessary social resources to rely on in learning how to use new technologies. More can be done to provide such older adults with opportunities to learn new technological skills. Existing initiatives by the government in this regard such as the *Seniors Go Digital* programme are helpful, but should also be supported by ground-up initiatives including programmes run by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) like the

Retired & Senior Volunteer Programme (RSVP). Neighbourhood communities should also be encouraged to step in and reach out to isolated older adults to help them learn new technologies.

3. Educational efforts to encourage the use of technology among older adults should target improving perceptions of the use of technology, as well as equip older adults with the skills needed to protect themselves from scams and phishing attempts.

Click [here](#) for ROSA's latest research.

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About the Centre for Research on Successful Ageing (ROSA)

ROSA is a multidisciplinary research centre based in SMU. It was established with an MOE Tier 3 social sciences research grant, as well as the generous support of The Ngee Ann Kongsi. Research at ROSA seeks to define and measure a holistic construct of well-being and to identify the factors that impact Singaporeans' well-being as they progress through the later phases of life. Through close collaboration with government and other partner agencies, ROSA also aims to translate research insights into policy innovations that advance the well-being of older adults holistically and promote successful ageing in Singapore. ROSA brings together a diverse team of leading international and local researchers in ageing and age-related issues from various disciplines. Through empirical evidence derived from a longitudinal methodological approach, the multidisciplinary and multi-institutional research team advances propositions that promote successful ageing in Singapore. <https://rosa.smu.edu.sg/>

About Singapore Management University

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