

Improving Digital Literacy is a Shared Responsibility



A 2022 Tech Study reports on the digital literacy of the 50-plus audience

In 2021, AARP reported on the digital literacy of the 50-plus¹. At that time, while many (60%+) were confident in their use of various tech devices, they remained hesitant to call themselves “tech-savvy.” Little has changed in the past year. Although ownership of devices surged in the first year of the pandemic and continued to show growth in 2021, there has been relatively no change in how they use their many devices. The 50-plus are still leveraging just the basic functionality of most of their devices.

And though they express an appetite to continue to learn more about technology so they can leverage more, there appear to be significant barriers standing in their way.



43% say they would use technology more in their daily life if they knew how

¹ AARP 2021 Tech Trends and the 50-Plus, September 2021, <https://www.aarp.org/research/topics/technology/info-2021/2021-technology-trends-older-americans.html>

The use of tech devices by the 50-plus barely pushes beyond the basics

If digital literacy is simply defined as having the tech skills you need to live, learn, and work in a society where communication and access to information is increasingly through digital technologies like internet platforms, social media, and mobile devices, then at first blush, the 50-plus may appear digitally literate. But are they really?

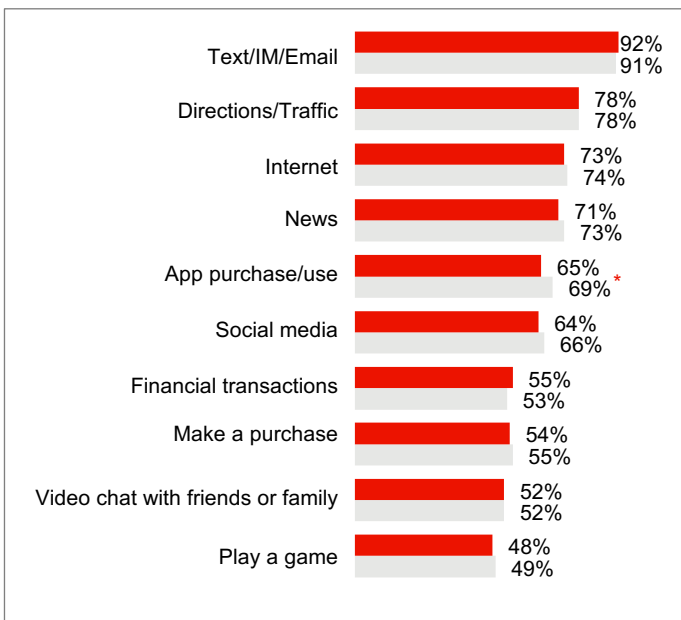
Practically all those 50-plus (97%) use their smartphone daily, but what the majority tend to use it for are some fairly basic needs. Texting, getting directions, and scrolling through social media barely scratch the surface of what these powerful computers can do when you compare them to their ability to manage home appliances, order groceries, and assist in job-related tasks. One year later, there continue to be stark differences and opportunities in the use of smartphones when comparing the basic, most common activities performed by many of 50-plus to the more sophisticated use of the technology also available to them.

Activities Performed on Smartphone in Past 3 Months

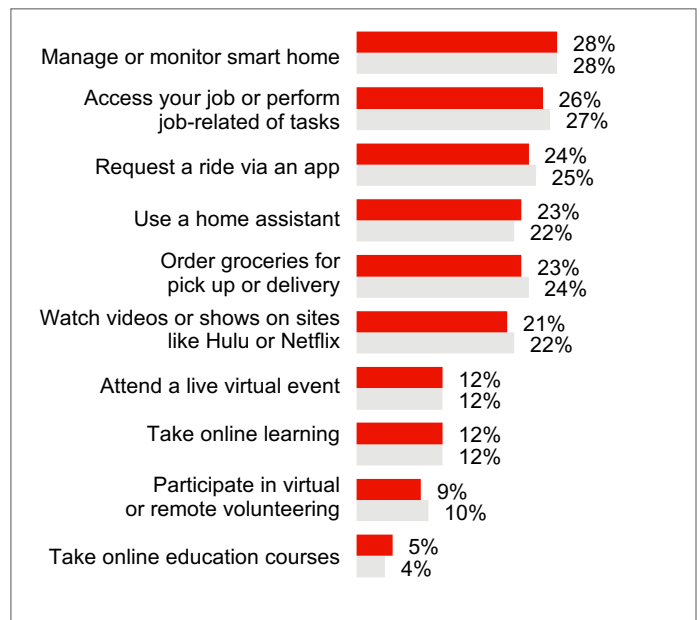
Among 50+ YOY 2020 and 2021

■ 2021 ■ 2020

Most Common



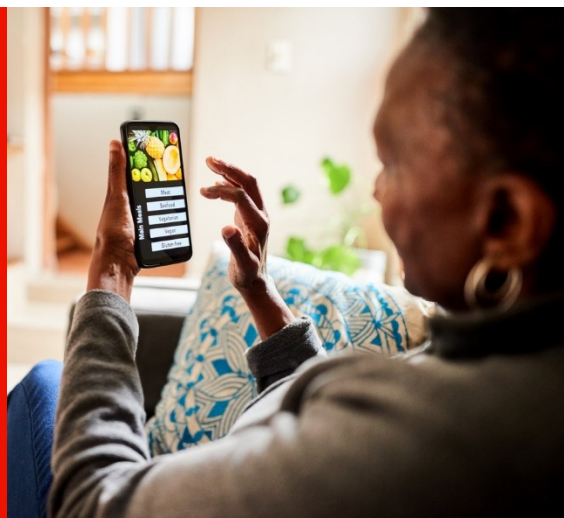
Least Common



* Indicates a significant difference at a 95% confidence level



Of the 34 different types of apps available today for the smartphone or tablet, those 50-plus engage with an average of 9 in a typical week compared to 11 for those 18–49.



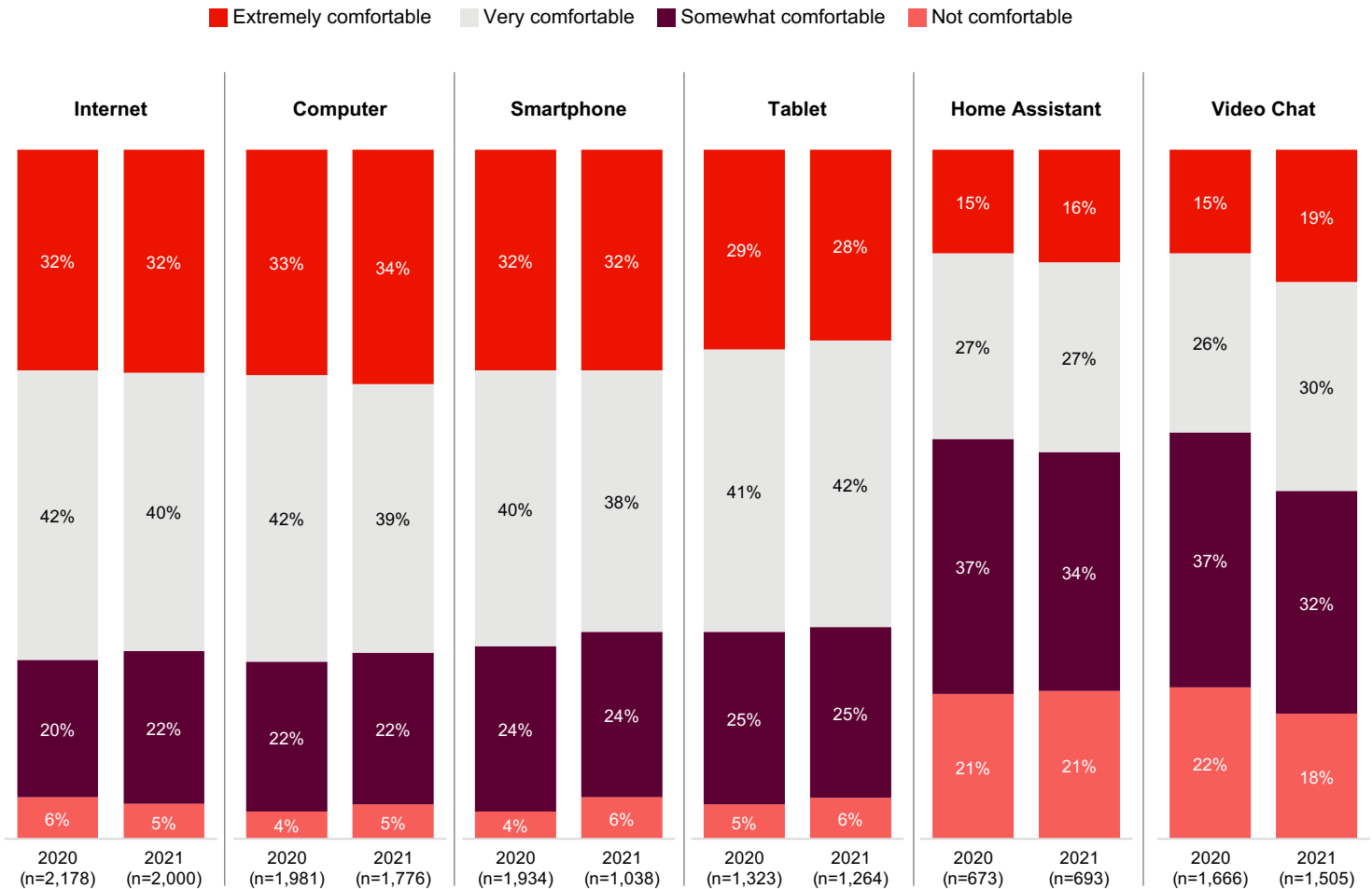
This hesitancy to use technology to its full potential goes beyond smartphones and tablets. Though only a small subset of this audience (35%) own a home assistant, ownership alone does not constitute a more sophisticated user. On the contrary, the most common uses of the home assistant mirror the basic nature of the smartphone with the most common uses being to play music (84%), ask a question (72%), check traffic or weather (62%), or set an alarm (54%).

The 50-plus continue to express an interest in expanding their digital literacy

What needs to be determined is if the limited use of technology is due to a lack of confidence, a lack of interest, or a lack of knowledge.

With the exception of home assistants and video chat, approximately 70% of those 50-plus say they are very or extremely comfortable using the various types of tech devices they own. And while their comfort level is somewhat stagnant when comparing 2020 to 2021, it still indicates a fairly strong sense of confidence in using these devices.

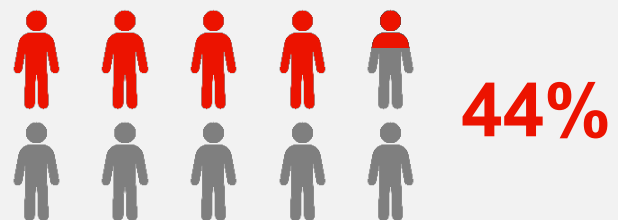
Level of Comfort with Tech



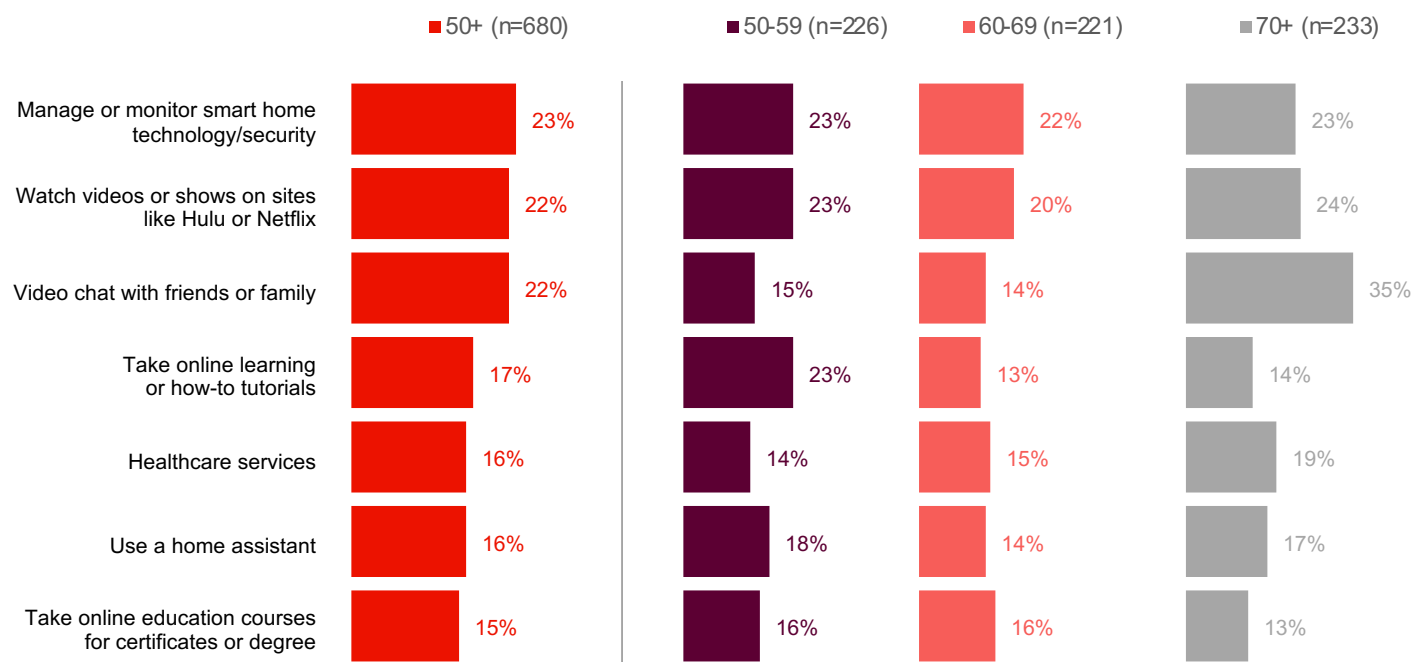
But what about interest? Although the 50-plus have, and continue to be, a “wait-and-see” type of consumer, over two in five express an interest in learning more ways in which technology can support their needs.

Among those who wish to use technology beyond the basics they currently enjoy, managing smart home technology, expanding their entertainment options, and finding new ways to connect with others top their list. And this desire to further embrace what technology has to offer does not differ by age. Those who are 70 years old or older express an equal, if not greater, interest in many of the tech capabilities evaluated.

Would Like a Better Grasp on Tech



Top Tech Activities Interested in Learning More About



More exploration is needed to fully understand digital literacy barriers

That leaves us with a lack of knowledge. Though the 50-plus express a fairly strong sense of comfort with the use of their current tech devices, the fact that those levels have not changed year over year may indicate a deeper issue. Perhaps it means this audience is being overlooked by designers, educators, and advertisers, keeping them somewhat in the dark regarding what they need to grow in their knowledge and use of today's technology.

Education is a likely first step in expanding one's knowledge. Based on the 2021 Tech Trends study, most older adults would like to improve their digital literacy skills and learn about tech through a trusted source such as working hands-on with a friend or family member.






How the 50+ Prefer to Learn About Tech¹

Ranked 1/2/3

| | | 50+ | 50-59 | 60-69 | 70+ |
|---|-----|-------|-------|-------|-----|
| Base: | | 2,256 | 808 | 798 | 650 |
| Hands-on with friends/family | 72% | | 69% | 72% | 75% |
| Self-taught with online tutorials | 59% | | 63% | 64% | 50% |
| Play with it until I get it to work | 51% | | 56% | 50% | 44% |
| To work with a support network/customer service | 34% | | 35% | 35% | 38% |
| Real-time online classes | 31% | | 35% | 32% | 26% |
| Community classes with people like me | 28% | | 26% | 26% | 35% |

But what if it is not about the user better understanding the technology, but the tech designers better understanding the audience, ensuring an inclusive design? There is evidence that the 50-plus do not feel that technology is built with all ages in mind (42%).

Five Key Knowledge Barriers to Tech Adoption

|  Design & User Experience |  Awareness & Interest |  Cost & Acquisition |  Installation & Adoption |  Trust & Privacy |
|---|---|---|--|--|
| Is it easy to use? | Why should I be interested in this technology? | Can I afford it? | How do I integrate it into my life? | Is my personal data secure? |
| Was it designed for people like me? | What new products exist? | How do I buy it? | Who can help me if I run into problems? | Any known privacy or identify theft issues? |
| Did they do testing with people like me? | Should I care? | How do I select the right product? | How difficult is it to set up? | What personal data does it collect? |

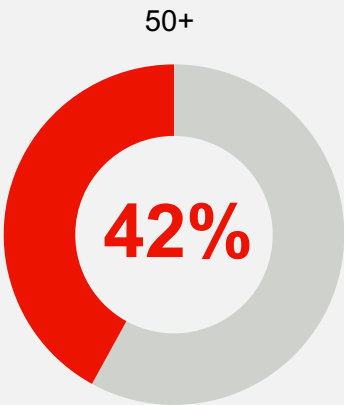
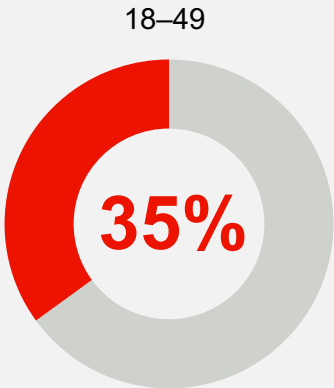


The tech industry can help by addressing these barriers and taking the time to listen to consumers and understand how today’s tech design is falling short. The 50-plus express frustration in the user experience citing they feel overlooked. They are not digital natives and therefore technology is not always intuitive, it is not simple enough, nor does it consider the limitations that an older person, or any person for that matter, may have regarding their visual, auditory, motor, speech, physical or cognitive abilities needed to use technology. The 50-plus also say changes and the need for constant updates can be a turnoff. And perhaps most important, they indicate the lack of training and/or instructions needed with any new technology. Although the 50-plus appear eager and willing to learn, many lack the resources necessary to do so.

In conclusion, it appears for most older adults, the lack of knowledge, rather than confidence or interest, is the greatest hindrance to their improvement in digital literacy.



Feel Technology is Not Designed with All Ages in Mind

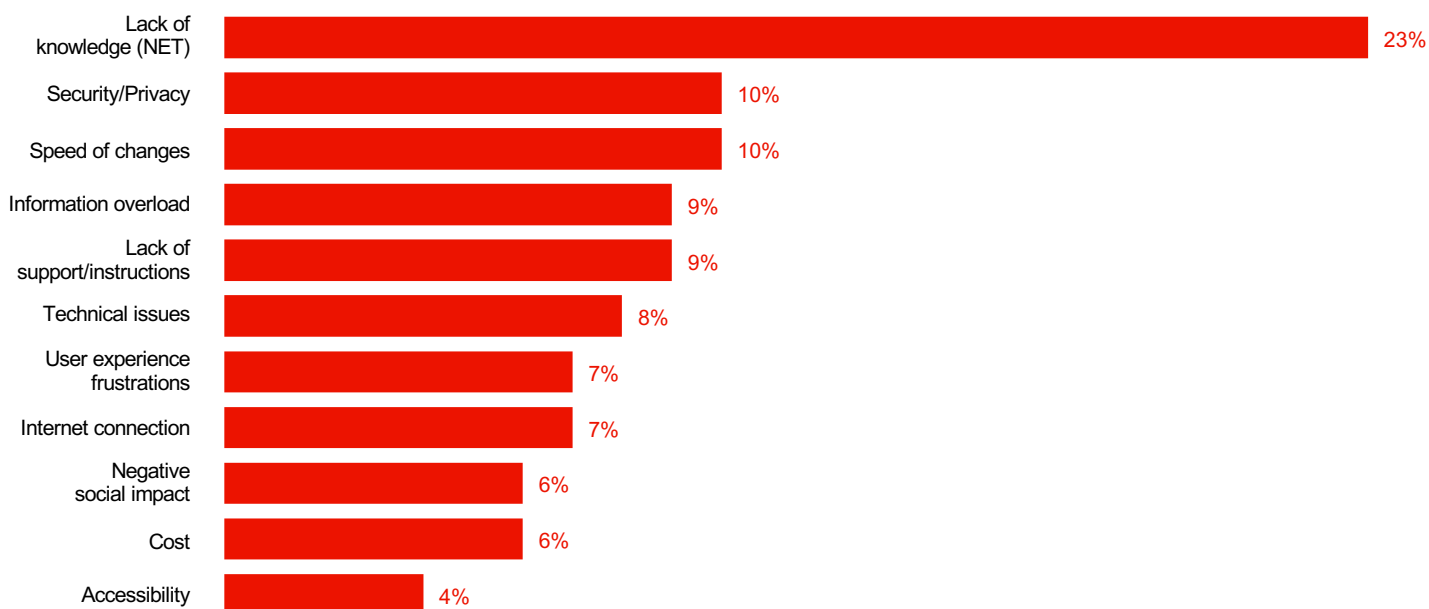


As previously identified by AARP, design and user experience is a key barrier to tech adoption. In the case of today’s technology and the 50-plus, it has not stopped most from acquiring tech devices, as they see value in being “tech-savvy,” but it certainly appears to have limited their use.



Lack of knowledge about today's technology is the most significant frustration among the 50-plus

2021 Tech Trends – Biggest Frustration with Tech¹



Implications

The 50-plus appear very engaged with today's technology with ownership levels close to that of the 18-49. But their usage patterns are significantly different. The older generations appear to be leveraging just the basic functionality of their devices making it hard to classify them as truly digitally literate.

But their limitations are not just of their own making. The tech industry has responsibility in this as well. Over 40% of the 50-plus do not believe tech today is being designed with all ages in mind. To ensure an age-inclusive design, the 50-plus consumer should be considered in all aspects of product design and development.

In addition, identifying the type of instructions, training, and resources that are needed to accompany new technology appears critical to full adoption. Those 50-plus did not grow up with technology such as smartphones and laptops and therefore, today's technology is not intuitive. They are eager to learn, but the instruction must be presented in a way that they feel empowered, not intimidated.



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