

# Tech Dependency Continues in 2021



Adults 50+ continue to spend on tech devices and continue to rely on them in their daily lives

Compared to 2020, when the pandemic dramatically increased tech adoption, 2021 reports moderate ownership growth among adults 50-plus. That said, this audience continues to spend on tech items, big and small. In fact, spending remains significantly higher than pre-pandemic averages, up from \$394 in 2019 to \$821 in 2021.

But what might be most interesting are the tech behaviors either born of or accelerated by the pandemic. Many older adults have continued to rely on their tech devices to help them manage their lives and stay connected with others even though the world is far more open and accessible than it was a year ago.

## Ownership of tech devices continues to increase year over year

By the end of 2021, 97% of those 50-plus own one or more of the primary technology devices (smartphone, tablet, laptop/desktop computer, home assistant, or wearables) with significant year-over-year growth in ownership reported for all but smartphones. But the data also indicate ownership among those 50–59 may be hitting a plateau, while those 60–69 report steady growth in all primary devices.

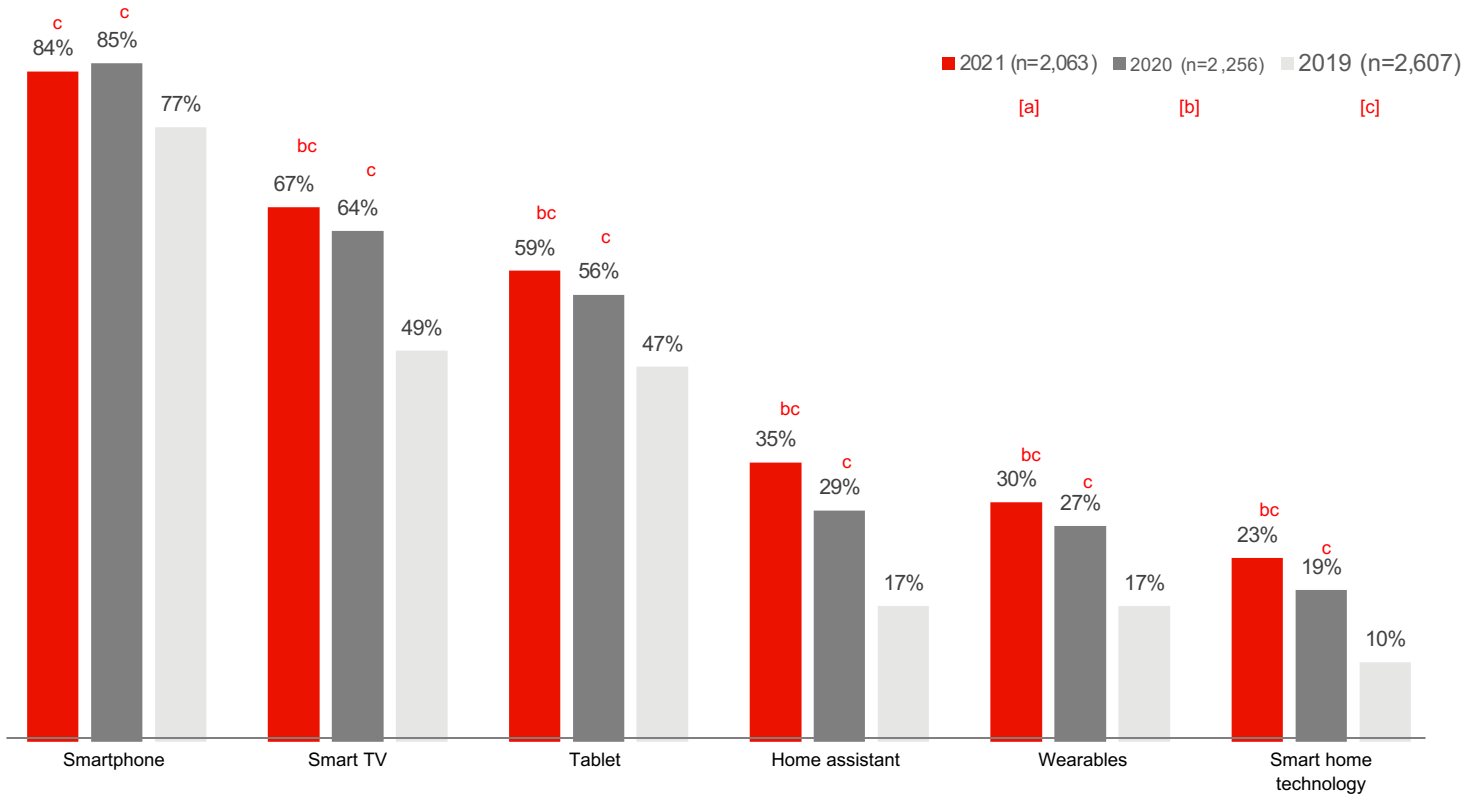
As the chart below shows, tech ownership growth in the second year of the pandemic is much greater than pre-pandemic levels but not as dramatic as in the first year (2020); however, this audience is clearly still engaged with technology. To that point, when presented with a list, 64% of adults 50-plus expressed interest in at least one type of upcoming technology advancement.

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**70% of  
Americans  
50+ bought at  
least one tech  
device in 2021**

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## Trended Device Ownership Among 50+



*abc letters indicate significant difference between years at a 95% confidence*

As for what is available today, older adults are continuing to expand their repertoire of tech devices they use to make their life easier. This is specifically true of those who live in a suburban location. Compared to those who live in an urban or rural area, suburbanites are significantly more likely to own many tech devices, including home assistants (38% vs. 30% and 32%, respectively), smart home tech/security (29% vs. 17% and 17%), and smart home cleaning devices (16% vs. 11% and 12%).



Privacy is still a concern, however. About 54% of those 50-plus who own a home assistant say they are not confident that what is given to or received by their device remains private. Perhaps that is why their use is rather limited. Currently, home assistants are most commonly used to play music (84%), answer a question (72%), check the weather or traffic (62%), or set a timer (54%). They are rarely used to control the thermostat (10%), access/manage a calendar (10%), serve as a virtual companion (10%), or run a routine of tasks to manage the day (6%).

But what might be more interesting is the significant difference in ownership of tech devices when comparing those 50-plus who have kids in the household with those who do not. Those households with kids are significantly more likely to own practically every tech item evaluated in the study compared with those households without kids.

## Kids in the Household Are Significant Drivers of Technology Adoption

	Kids in Household	
	Yes	No
	a	b
<b>Unweighted Base</b>	<b>241</b>	<b>1821</b>
Smartphone (e.g., iPhone, Android, Blackberry)	91% <sup>b</sup>	83%
Laptop computer or Netbook	77% <sup>b</sup>	65%
Tablet (e.g., iPad)	71% <sup>b</sup>	58%
Desktop computer	61% <sup>b</sup>	53%
Home assistant (e.g., Amazon Echo/Alexa, Google Home)	43% <sup>b</sup>	34%
Wearable device (e.g., Fitbit, Garmin, Apple Watch, Samsung Galaxy Watch)	40% <sup>b</sup>	29%
Bluetooth headset/earbuds (e.g., AirPods)	55% <sup>b</sup>	40%
E-reader (e.g., Kindle, Nook)	32% <sup>b</sup>	24%
Smart home technology/security (e.g., a smart thermostat, Nest, Ring, SimpliSafe)	32% <sup>b</sup>	22%
Regular cell phone (not including iPhone or other smartphones)	17%	24%
Gaming system (Xbox, PlayStation)	56% <sup>b</sup>	19%
Home audio equipment (e.g., Sonos)	27% <sup>b</sup>	19%
Smart home cleaning device (e.g., Roomba, self-cleaning litter box)	19% <sup>b</sup>	13%

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## Tech spending remains significantly higher than pre-pandemic levels

In 2020, the pandemic created an incredible surge in technology purchases as individuals and families found it necessary to buy a plethora of devices to stay connected to work, school, friends and family—and their sanity. They purchased everything from laptops to smart TVs. So, it is no surprise that in the second year of the pandemic, the spending would slow down somewhat, and it has. That said, tech spending is still at an all-time high, with those 50 and older spending more than twice as much in 2021 as they did in 2019 before the pandemic began (\$821 in 2021 vs. \$394 in 2019).

50+	50-59 (a)	60-69 (b)	70+ (c)
(n=2,019)	(n=764)	(n=671)	(n=467)
\$821	\$923 <sup>c</sup>	\$872 <sup>c</sup>	\$652

Smartphones were common purchases in 2021, but the lack of growth in ownership for this device suggests that many of the recent purchases are upgrades and replacement items. Compared to last year, purchases of big-ticket items such as smartphones and smart TVs decreased at a greater rate than less expensive items such as earbuds and tablets. And while growth in ownership of virtual reality technology is relatively slow (1% in 2019 up to 2% in 2021), growth may increase in the near future as the Web 3.0/metaverse will require augmented reality or virtual reality (VR) technology to enable the user to interact and immerse themselves in this new virtual reality world. That said, with those 50-plus slow to adopt new technology and with little interest shown in VR thus far, this audience may take longer to engage with it, although 12% are interested in augmented reality eyewear (smart glasses that play music, take photos, or overlay information/animation in real-time)—another type of technology that could encourage older adults to engage with the web of the future.

Purchasing of tech devices remains strong across all ages in 2021 and is projected to continue. Adults 50+ are projected to **spend \$108 billion on tech in 2030.**



As seen with ownership, tech spending is significantly higher among those 50-plus who have kids in the household compared to those who do not. More specifically, those with kids in the household spent almost twice as much on tech purchases in 2021 (\$1347) as those without kids in the household (\$769). But this is not the only demographic that correlates with tech spending this year. As expected, those in high-income households spent significantly more on tech than lower-income households (\$75,000 or more: \$1,110; \$40,000–\$75,000: \$745; less than \$40,000: \$574).

## Tech Purchases Year Over Year

	2021	2020	2019
	a	b	c
	50+	50+	50+
<b>Base</b>	<b>2,063</b>	<b>2,256</b>	<b>2,575</b>
Smartphone	30% <sup>c</sup>	35% <sup>ac</sup>	23%
Smartphone Accessories	30%		
Bluetooth headset/earbuds	23% <sup>c</sup>	22% <sup>b</sup>	10%
Smart TV	20% <sup>c</sup>	23% <sup>ac</sup>	11%
Laptop computer or Netbook	16% <sup>c</sup>	19% <sup>ac</sup>	9%
Tablet	15% <sup>c</sup>	15% <sup>c</sup>	10%
Wearable device	12% <sup>c</sup>	13% <sup>c</sup>	7%
Gaming system	5% <sup>c</sup>	4% <sup>c</sup>	2%
Home assistant	9% <sup>c</sup>	11% <sup>ac</sup>	7%
Smart home technology/security	8% <sup>c</sup>	10% <sup>ac</sup>	5%
Desktop computer	7% <sup>c</sup>	8% <sup>b</sup>	5%
Digital camera	4% <sup>c</sup>	5% <sup>c</sup>	3%
Smart home cleaning device	5%		
Home audio equipment	4% <sup>c</sup>	5% <sup>c</sup>	2%
E-reader	4% <sup>c</sup>	4% <sup>c</sup>	3%
Virtual reality (VR) device	2% <sup>bc</sup>	1%	1%
GPS tracker designed to monitor/share location	3%	3%	
Home health and safety device	2% <sup>c</sup>	2% <sup>c</sup>	1%
Digital connected fitness equipment	1%		
Other	2% <sup>c</sup>	4% <sup>ac</sup>	1%

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## Some tech behaviors formed during the pandemic appear to have become habits

Older adults continue to incorporate tech into their lives. The significant increases in the use of smartphones and tablets recorded in 2020 for such things as making online purchases, ordering groceries, banking, and engaging health services continued in 2021, as did the increased use of a multitude of apps.

Those 50-plus are very active on smartphones and appear to have become rather comfortable with how smartphones fit into their lives: The top 10 uses for smartphones tracked in 2020, during the height of the pandemic, remain the top 10 uses in 2021.

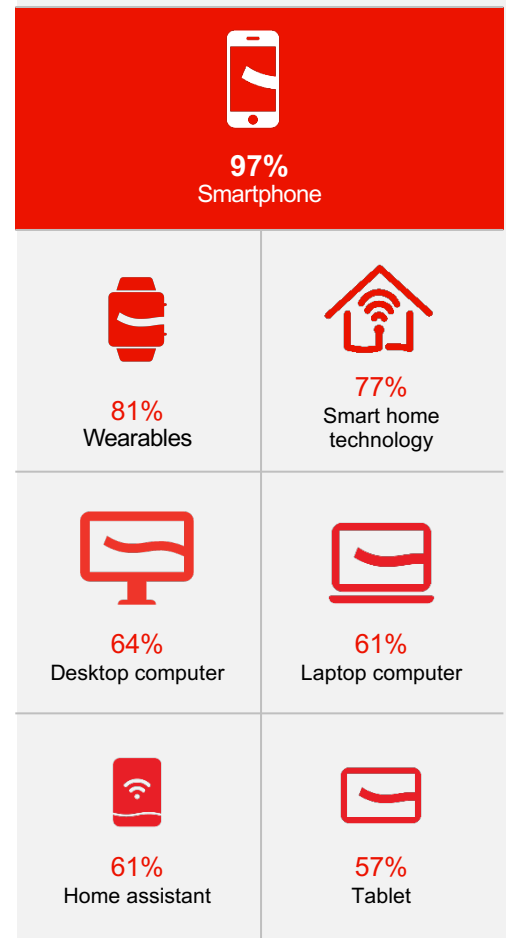
## Top 10 Smartphone Activities Year Over Year

	2021	2020
<b>Base: Total 50+ Respondents Who Own a Smartphone</b>	<b>1743</b>	<b>1924</b>
Send or receive instant messages, text messages, or emails	92%	91%
Get directions or traffic information	78%	78%
Visit websites or surf the Internet	73%	74%
Get news and other information	71%	73%
Download or purchase an 'app'	65%	69% <sup>a</sup>
Access a social networking site (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, or LinkedIn)	64%	66%
Perform banking or financial transactions	55%	53%
Make a purchase	54%	55%
Video chat with friends or family	52%	52%
Play a game	48%	49%

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In addition, older adults appear to have become relatively comfortable with video-related technology in 2021, as they continue to use it to chat with friends and family (52%), watch live social media videos (37%), and stream some of their favorite shows (21%). In fact, adults 50-plus most commonly leveraged technology to support a passion this past year by watching how-to (71%) and other videos (70%).

## Daily Usage Rates by Tech Device



## Implications

It is not surprising that growth in tech ownership would slow down in the second year of the pandemic, as so many individuals and families invested heavily in the variety of devices in 2020 as means of managing their lives through the crisis. But even so, tech ownership has begun to plateau, specifically among those 50–59. And while their use of certain technology, specifically their smartphones, has become more sophisticated, developers will need to continue to identify applications most relevant to this older audience to maintain the trajectory of the \$108 billion estimated in tech expenditures by the year 2030.

Since adults 70-plus are somewhat more comfortable with a tablet than a smartphone, it might be worth designing tablet applications with this older cohort in mind and providing them with the training tools necessary to help them acclimate quickly. Developers should also focus on building apps that help this older audience maintain their sense of independence.

Ultimately, however, to encourage older adults to own or use more technology, they must perceive the benefits. And with approximately 40% of those 50-plus believing technology is not designed with all ages in mind, developers have work to do. Designing age-inclusive products will require tech developers to keep older adults in mind throughout the process of product creation, from ideation to marketing. Ensuring that these new products are not only relevant but user-friendly will be the key to success.



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