

THE CONVERSATION

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Technology is alienating people – and it's not just those who are older

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Carolyn Wilson-Nash

Lecturer, Marketing and Retail, Stirling Management School, University of Stirling

Julie Tinson

Professor of Marketing, University of Stirling



Many types of people feel disengaged with technology. Shutterstock

We take it for granted that technology brings people closer together and improves our access to essential products and services. If you can't imagine life without your smartphone, it's easy to forget that people who can't or don't want to engage with the latest technology are being left behind.

For example, there have recently been reports that cashless payment systems for car parking in the UK are seeing older drivers unfairly hit with fines. This has led to calls for the government to intervene.

Age is one of the biggest predictors of digital exclusion. Only 47% of those aged 75 and over use the internet regularly. And out of the 4 million who have never used the internet in the UK, only 300,000 people are under 55.

But older people are not the only ones who feel shut out by new technology. For example, research shows vulnerable people, such as those with disabilities, are also disengaging with e-services and being “locked out” of society.

The digital transition

From train tickets to vaccine passports, there is a growing expectation that consumers should embrace technology to participate in everyday life. This is a global phenomenon. Out in front, Sweden predicts its economy will be fully cashless by March 2023.

Shops increasingly use QR codes, virtual reality window displays and self-service checkouts. Many of these systems require a smart device, and momentum is building for QR codes to be integrated into digital price tags as they can give customers extra information such as nutritional content of food. Changing paper labels is a labour intensive process.

Technology pervades all aspects of consumer life. Going on holiday, enjoying the cinema or theatre, and joining sport and social clubs all make people feel part of society. But many popular artists now use online queues to sell tickets to their shows. Social groups use WhatsApp and Facebook to keep their members updated.

When it comes to booking a holiday, there is a decreasing number of in-person travel agents. This limits the social support to make the best choice, which is particularly important for those with specific needs such as people with health issues. And once travelling, aircrew expect flight boarding passes and COVID passports to be available on smartphones.

Essential services such as healthcare, which can already be difficult for older and other people to navigate, are also moving online. Patients are increasingly expected to use the GP website or email to request to see a doctor. Ordering prescriptions online is encouraged.



Most of the people who have never used the internet are over 55. Shutterstock

Not just older people

Not everyone can afford an internet connection or smart technology. Some regions, particularly rural ones, struggle for phone signal. The UK phone network's plans for a digital switchover by 2025, which would render traditional landlines redundant, could cut off people who rely on their landlines.

Concerns about privacy can also stop people using technology. Data collection and security breaches impact people's confidence in organisations. A 2020 survey into consumers' trust in businesses showed no industry reached a trust rating of 50% for data protection. The majority of respondents (87%) said they would not do business with a company if they had concerns about its security practices.

Some people view "forced" digitisation as a symbol of consumer culture and will limit their technology use. Followers of the simple living movement, which gained momentum in the 1980s, try to minimise their use of technology. Many people take a "less is more" approach to technology simply because they feel it offers a more meaningful existence.

One of the most common reasons for digital exclusion, however, is poverty. When the pandemic hit in March 2020, 51% of households earning between £6,000 to £10,000 had home internet access, compared with 99% of households with an income over £40,000.

Limited access to tablets, smartphones and laptops can result in feelings of isolation. Many older consumers have developed strategies to manage and overcome the digital challenges presented by these devices. But those unable to engage with technology remain excluded if their family and friends don't live close by.

Smart change

The solution is not simply to give devices to those without smart technology. While there is a need to provide affordable internet access and technology, and offer support in learning new skills, we need to recognise diversity in society.

Services should provide non-digital options that embrace equality. For example, cash systems should not be abolished. There might be a demand for services to become digital, but service providers need to be aware of the people who will be isolated by this transition.

Retailers, local councils, health providers and businesses in tourism, entertainment and leisure should try to understand more about the diversity of their consumers. They need to develop services that cater for the needs of all people, especially those without access to technology.

We live in a diverse world and diverse consumers need choice. After all, access to and inclusion in society is a human right.