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Older Adults and Social Media

Social networking use among those ages 50 and older nearly doubled over the past year

Mary Madden, Senior Research Specialist

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Pew Research Center
1615 L St., NW – Suite 700
Washington, D.C. 20036
202-419-4500 | pewinternet.org

Main Findings

Social networking use among internet users ages 50 and older has nearly doubled—from 22% to 42% over the past year.

While social media use has grown dramatically across all age groups, older users have been especially enthusiastic over the past year about embracing new networking tools. Although email continues to be the primary way that older users maintain contact with friends, families and colleagues, many users now rely on social network platforms to help manage their daily communications—sharing links, photos, videos, news and status updates with a growing network of contacts.

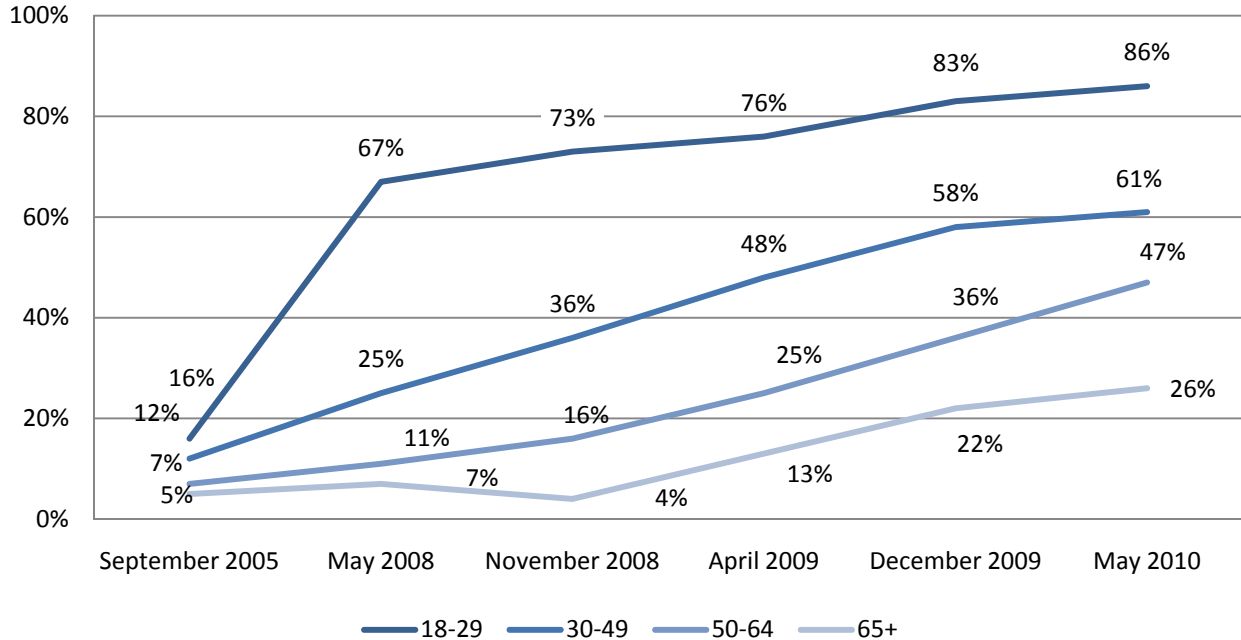
Half (47%) of internet users ages 50-64 and one in four (26%) users age 65 and older now use social networking sites.

Half of online adults ages 50-64 and one in four wired seniors now count themselves among the Facebooking and LinkedIn masses. That's up from just 25% of online adults ages 50-64 and 13% of those ages 65 and older who reported social networking use one year ago in a survey conducted in April 2009.

Young adult internet users ages 18-29 continue to be the heaviest users of social networking sites like Facebook and LinkedIn, with 86% saying they use the sites. However, over the past year, their growth paled in comparison with the gains made by older users. Between April 2009 and May 2010, internet users ages 50-64 who said they use a social networking site like MySpace, Facebook or LinkedIn grew 88% and those ages 65 and older grew 100% in their adoption of the sites, compared with a growth rate of 13% for those ages 18-29.

Social networking use continues to grow among older users

The percentage of adult internet users who use social networking sites in each age group



Source: Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project Surveys, September 2005 -May, 2010. All surveys are of adults 18 and older.

One in ten (11%) online adults ages 50-64 and one in twenty (5%) online adults ages 65 and older now say they use Twitter or another service to share updates about themselves or see updates about others.

The use of Twitter and other services to share status updates has also grown among older users—most notably among those ages 50-64. While just 5% of users ages 50-64 had used Twitter or another status update service in 2009, 11% now say they use these tools. On a typical day, 6% of online adults ages 50-64 make Twitter a part of their routine, up from the 1% who did so in 2009.

By comparison, social networking sites have gained a much larger foothold in the lives of older Americans over time. One in five (20%) adults ages 50-64 say they use social networking sites on a typical day, up from 10% one year ago. Likewise, 13% of online adults ages 65 and older log on to social networking sites, compared with just 4% who did so in 2009.

Email and online news are still more appealing to older users, but social media sites attract many repeat visitors.

While email may be falling out of favor with today’s teenagers, older adults still rely on it heavily as an essential tool for their daily communications. Overall, 92% of those ages 50-64 and 89% of those ages 65 and older send or read email and more than half of each group exchanges email messages on a typical day. Online news gathering also ranks highly in the daily media habits of older adults; 76% of internet users ages 50-64 get news online, and 42% do so on a typical day.¹ Among internet users ages 65 and older, 62% look for news online and 34% do so on a typical day.

Social media properties—including networking and status update sites—are newer additions to the daily digital diet of older adults. Yet, the “stickiness” of the sites is notable. To look at the data another way, among the pool of adults ages 50 and older who use social networking sites, 44% used them on the day prior to their being contacted for our survey.

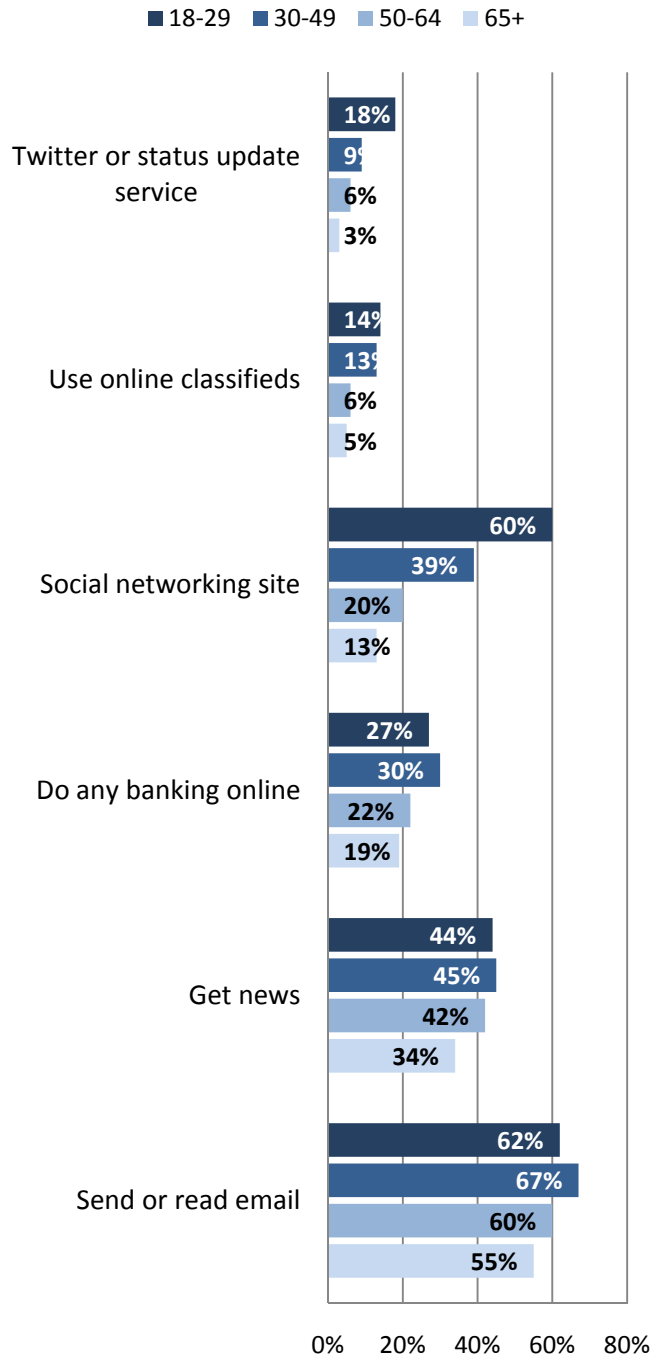
The pool of Twitter and status update users ages 50 and older is too small to segment, but the behavior of this limited early adopter group does suggest a similar tendency towards regular use of the sites.

By comparison, less than half of online banking users ages 50 and older visited the sites on a typical day and less than one in five older users of online classified sites reported use of the sites “yesterday.”

¹ In Pew Internet surveys, internet users are asked about their activities in several ways. One question is whether they were online and performed an activity “yesterday” – that is, the day before the respondent was contacted for the survey. We often say that the answers to the “yesterday” question illustrate a “typical day” online.

A Typical Day: Where social media use fits in

The percentage of adult internet users who do each activity in each age group



Source: Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project, April 29-May 30, 2010 Tracking Survey. N=2,252 adults 18 and older.

Implications: Why social media might be catching on for older adults

As our recent research has shown, [the oldest adults in the U.S. \(age 65+\) are among the least likely to have high-speed access](#). (Just 31% have broadband at home). They are also the least likely to see the lack of having broadband as a [disadvantage](#).

However, even though older adults may be among the most resistant to broadband, there is evidence that once these users get a taste of high-speed access, they often come to rely on the internet as an everyday utility in their lives. While the rates of broadband adoption among the oldest users are low, the frequency of use among those who do have high-speed access is relatively close to the usage levels of younger users.

Looking at adults ages 65 and older who have high-speed internet connections at home, 72% say they use the internet on a typical day. That compares with 77% of broadband users ages 50-64, 84% of those ages 30-49 and 86% of those ages 18-29.

Social media use is somewhat more prevalent among older users who have high-speed connections at home. Among broadband users ages 50-64, 52% now use social networking sites and 24% do so on a typical day. Among adults age 65 and older who have broadband at home, 28% now use social networking sites and 15% do so on a typical day. Among many other activities, having high-speed access has also been associated with a greater tendency to blog and share other forms of creative content online.²

So why might social media be increasingly attractive to older adults?

First, [our research shows](#) that social networking users are much more likely to reconnect with people from their past, and these renewed connections can provide a powerful support network when people near retirement or embark on a new career.

In our September 2009 survey, about half of all social networking users ages 50 and older said they had been contacted by someone from their past who found them online. Overall, 64% of social networking users have searched for information about someone from their past, compared with 30% of non-users.

Second, older adults are more likely to be living with a [chronic disease](#), and those living with these diseases are more likely to reach out for support online.

There are two activities which stand out among people living with chronic disease: blogging and participating in online health discussions. When other demographic factors are held constant, having a chronic disease significantly increases an internet user's likelihood to say they work on a blog or contribute to an online discussion, a listserv, or other forum that helps people with personal issues or health problems.

² See Horrigan, John. "The Broadband Difference," Pew Internet & American Life Project, June 23, 2002. <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2002/The-Broadband-Difference-How-online-behavior-changes-with-highspeed-Internet-connections.aspx>

And finally, social media bridges generational gaps. While the results can sometimes be messy, these social spaces pool together users from very different parts of people’s lives and provide the opportunity to share skills across generational divides.

There are few other spaces—online or offline—where tweens, teens, sandwich generation members, grandparents, friends and neighbors regularly intersect and communicate across the same network. Photos, videos and updates shared on a daily basis can provide a valuable connection to faraway family and friends who are tied together in a variety of ways. The children and grandchildren of older adults are documenting many aspects of their lives through social media, and these are also becoming popular spaces for professional networking, continuing education, and political participation.

Various organizations that work with older adults—such as [AARP](#), [Older Adults Technology Services](#) (OATS) and [Project GOAL](#)—have been actively promoting social media resources that are relevant to mature users. In March, the FCC’s National Broadband Plan specifically requested additional funding from Congress to invest in digital literacy training programs for older Americans. One idea proposed under the plan was to support a [“National Digital Literacy Corps”](#) that trains volunteers to teach digital skills to those who are least connected in their communities—including pairing tech-savvy digital natives with seniors. With 86% of internet users ages 18-29 using social networking sites and 60% doing so on a typical day, it is not hard to imagine that some of these young mentors would be eager to share their skills in profile management with older users.

Social media trends by age, 2009-2010

% of online adults who use SNS or Twitter, 2009-2010

	2009	2010	Percentage point change, 2009-2010	Percent change, 2009-2010
Social Networking Use				
All adults	46%	61%	15	33%
Age				
18-29	76	86	10	13%
30-49	48	61	13	27%
50-64	25	47	22	88%
65+	13	26	13	100%
Twitter/Status Update Use				
All adults	11%	17%	6	55%
Age				
18-29	20	27	7	35%
30-49	11	16	5	45%
50-64	5	11	6	120%
65+	3	5	2	*

Source: Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project, March 26 – April 19, 2009 Tracking Survey (N=2,253 adults 18 and older), and April 29 – May 30, 2010 Tracking Survey (N=2,252 adults 18 and older). The asterisk * indicates that change is not statistically significant.

Methodology

This report is based on the findings of a daily tracking survey on Americans' use of the internet. The results in this report are primarily based on data from telephone interviews conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International between April 29 and May 30, 2010, among a sample of 2,252 adults, age 18 and older. Interviews were conducted in English. For results based on the total sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects is plus or minus 2.4 percentage points. For results based on internet users (n=1,756), the margin of sampling error is plus or minus 2.7 percentage points. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting telephone surveys may introduce some error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

A combination of landline and cellular random digit dial (RDD) samples was used to represent all adults in the continental United States who have access to either a landline or cellular telephone. Both samples were provided by Survey Sampling International, LLC (SSI) according to PSRAI specifications. Numbers for the landline sample were selected with probabilities in proportion to their share of listed telephone households from active blocks (area code + exchange + two-digit block number) that contained three or more residential directory listings. The cellular sample was not list-assisted, but was drawn through a systematic sampling from dedicated wireless 100-blocks and shared service 100-blocks with no directory-listed landline numbers.

New sample was released daily and was kept in the field for at least five days. The sample was released in replicates, which are representative subsamples of the larger population. This ensures that complete call procedures were followed for the entire sample. At least 7 attempts were made to complete an interview at a sampled telephone number. The calls were staggered over times of day and days of the week to maximize the chances of making contact with a potential respondent. Each number received at least one daytime call in an attempt to find someone available. For the landline sample, half of the time interviewers first asked to speak with the youngest adult male currently at home. If no male was at home at the time of the call, interviewers asked to speak with the youngest adult female. For the other half of the contacts interviewers first asked to speak with the youngest adult female currently at home. If no female was available, interviewers asked to speak with the youngest adult male at home. For the cellular sample, interviews were conducted with the person who answered the phone. Interviewers verified that the person was an adult and in a safe place before administering the survey. Cellular sample respondents were offered a post-paid cash incentive for their participation. All interviews completed on any given day were considered to be the final sample for that day.

Non-response in telephone interviews produces some known biases in survey-derived estimates because participation tends to vary for different subgroups of the population, and these subgroups are likely to vary also on questions of substantive interest. In order to compensate for these known biases,

the sample data are weighted in analysis. The demographic weighting parameters are derived from a special analysis of the most recently available Census Bureau’s March 2009 Annual Social and Economic Supplement. This analysis produces population parameters for the demographic characteristics of adults age 18 or older. These parameters are then compared with the sample characteristics to construct sample weights. The weights are derived using an iterative technique that simultaneously balances the distribution of all weighting parameters.

Following is the full disposition of all sampled telephone numbers:

Table 1: Sample Disposition		
Landline	Cell	
20,895	12,699	Total Numbers Dialed
1,160	251	Non-residential
982	18	Computer/Fax
12	---	Cell phone
8,886	4,906	Other not working
1,675	176	Additional projected not working
8,180	7,348	Working numbers
39.1%	57.9%	Working Rate
558	59	No Answer / Busy
870	2,054	Voice Mail
68	13	Other Non-Contact
6,684	5,222	Contacted numbers
81.7%	71.1%	Contact Rate
521	740	Callback
4,305	3016	Refusal
1,858	1,466	Cooperating numbers
27.8%	28.1%	Cooperation Rate
284	235	Language Barrier
---	460	Child's cell phone
1,574	771	Eligible numbers
84.7%	52.6%	Eligibility Rate
66	27	Break-off
1,508	744	Completes
95.8%	96.5%	Completion Rate
21.8%	19.3%	Response Rate

The disposition reports all of the sampled telephone numbers ever dialed from the original telephone number samples. The response rate estimates the fraction of all eligible respondents in the sample that were ultimately interviewed. At PSRAI it is calculated by taking the product of three component rates:

- **Contact rate** – the proportion of working numbers where a request for interview was made
- **Cooperation rate** – the proportion of contacted numbers where a consent for interview was at least initially obtained, versus those refused
- **Completion rate** – the proportion of initially cooperating and eligible interviews that were completed

Thus the response rate for the landline sample was 21.8 percent. The response rate for the cellular sample was 19.3 percent.