

Aging in a Digital Society: What Population Data Can and Cannot Tell Us About Cognitive Aging, Digital Inequality, and Self-Perceptions of Aging

Aging has always been socially patterned; what is new is that many of the resources that shape it—including information, health care, and social connection—increasingly operate through digital channels. The research asks what this shift means for how people age cognitively, how they come to see their own aging, and who benefits or is left behind along the way. The underlying premise of this work is that inequalities in how people age are not inevitable but are shaped by unequal social and structural conditions and are therefore potentially modifiable.

Drawing on large-scale U.S. longitudinal and population-based data, this will organise the presentation around three interconnected questions: How does digital engagement relate to cognitive aging, and how is cognitive aging shaped by broader social and structural conditions across the life course? As access gaps narrow, where do digital inequalities persist—in meaningful use, in the benefits people gain from technology, and across social groups? And how do self-perceptions of aging develop, and how are they connected to digital engagement and broader experiences of aging, including ageism?

Together, these questions show what population data can tell us about aging in a digital society. What they cannot fully capture is how older adults engage with digital technology beyond broad activity categories, or how they experience and interpret aging in everyday life. The next phase of the research therefore keeps population-based research at its core for identifying patterns and disparities, while adding community-engaged research to improve measurement, better understand mechanisms, and ultimately co-develop and test interventions.