

Retirement community residents are becoming better connected

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Introduction

Retirement community residents are becoming better connected in line with seniors (aged 65+) overall. Retirement communities comprise retirement villages, rental retirement villages plus Land Lease Communities (LLC) which are also called manufactured home parks or residential parks.

Analysis of ABS census data since 2006 shows an increasing proportion of retirement community residents and seniors have an internet connection. The use of computers and the internet for shopping by seniors has been studied formally [1,2,3], however given their increasing connectivity this is a dynamic area deserving of more research.

This research came about following a conversation with a retirement village operator where they commented "a day doesn't go by when there isn't a Coles or Woolworths delivery van in our village". The operator further explained that residents were ordering their groceries online rather than travel to the local shops. An underlying assumption of state and local government planners is that residents in retirement communities need to be able to walk to shopping facilities (assuming they couldn't drive) limiting the number of potential development sites. A growing acceptance of online ordering coupled with home delivery reduces this assumption. While having an internet connection doesn't imply someone is ordering their groceries online, such an activity is not possible without an internet connection.

Data and Methods

This analysis matches ABS Census data for 2006, 2011 and 2016 [4,5,6] with retirement communities in the Port Macquarie Hastings (Port) and Wagga Wagga (Wagga) municipalities. These two municipalities were chosen for their similarities and differences. They are both regional centres with established civic, retail and medical facilities, both have had a growth rate of seniors greater than New South Wales. Port has a coastal location and high proportion of seniors compared to New South Wales. Wagga Wagga has an inland location with a lower proportion of seniors than New South Wales. This lower proportion can in part be attributed to the established Charles Sturt University campus.

The retirement communities were identified using desk research, augmented with fieldwork. In Port 26 retirement communities were identified comprising 16 retirement villages (2 under development), 1 rental retirement village and 9 LLCs. In Wagga 10 retirement communities were identified comprising 7 retirement villages and 3 rental retirement villages. Each retirement community was matched with the respective ABS small area dataset for each census; for 2006 this was Collection District (CD) and for 2011 and 2016 this was Statistical Area Level 1 (SA1). For each ABS census the Place of Enumeration data series records dwelling location which allows residents in retirement communities to be analysed separately from seniors living elsewhere.

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This analysis excluded communities which the ABS did not record a retirement community (either retirement village or LLC) plus CD and SA1 districts which had more than one community. This research notes that ABS census data collectors in the field have become considerably better at identifying retirement communities since 2006. In 2016 18 communities in Port and 7 in Wagga were matched.

This analysis summarises whether the dwelling has an internet connection and shows this as a percentage of respondents to this ABS question. The ABS records information on internet connection, however the questions between each census were slightly different. In 2006 the ABS asked whether the internet could be accessed from that dwelling and if so what type of connection (broadband, dial-up, other). In 2011 the ABS asked whether the dwelling had an internet connection and what was the most frequently used type (broadband, dial-up, other). In 2016 the ABS asked whether any member of the household access the internet from the dwelling but did not ask the type of connection.

Results and Discussion

The percentage of retirement community residents and seniors who have an internet connection for both Port and Wagga are contained in Table 1 and Table 2. For each community, its type, the suburb, the operator type (for profit (FP) or not for profit (NFP)) and the commencement date (where available) is included.

Where data was available for the different census dates (particularly 2011 & 2016) all retirement communities, bar one, showed an increasing proportion of residents with an internet connection. This was in line with an increasing proportion of seniors in the municipality also with an internet connection.

Table 1 Port Macquarie Hastings, percentage of respondents with an internet connection

Port Macquarie Hastings	2006	2011	2016
Laurieton Retirement Village, FP operator, commenced circa 1987	-	39%	45%
Laurieton Retirement Village, NFP operator, commenced circa 1982	-	29%	42%
Port Macquarie Retirement Village, FP operator, commenced circa 1994	-	34%	44%
Port Macquarie Retirement Village, NFP operator, commenced circa 2004	13%	77%	85%
Port Macquarie Retirement Village, NFP operator, commenced circa 1980	-	33%	40%
Port Macquarie Retirement Village, NFP operator, commenced circa 1985	-	30%	57%
Port Macquarie Retirement Village, FP operator, commenced circa 1985	-	28%	43%
Port Macquarie Retirement Village, NFP operator, commenced circa 1988	-	53%	44%
Port Macquarie Retirement Village, FP operator, commenced circa 2007	-	-	84%
Port Macquarie Retirement Village, NFP operator, commenced circa 1984	-	35%	63%
Port Macquarie Retirement Village, FP operator, commenced circa 1985	-	61%	80%
Wauchope Retirement Village, NFP operator, commenced circa 1989	-	29%	48%
West Haven Retirement Village, FP operator, commenced circa 1987	-	47%	62%
Port Macquarie Rental Village, FP operator, commenced circa 2004	-	-	34%
Lake Cathie LLC, FP operator, commenced circa 2013	-	-	96%
Lakewood LLC, FP operator, commenced circa 2014	-	-	95%
Port Macquarie LLC, FP operator, commenced circa 1993	0%	60%	75%
Port Macquarie LLC, FP operator, commenced circa 2007	-	-	63%
Municipal – residents aged 65+	34%	56%	72%

Note: CD and SA1 numbers are available on request

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Table 2 Wagga Wagga, percentage of respondents with an internet connection

Wagga Wagga	2006	2011	2016
Estella Retirement Village, FP operator, commenced circa 1988	-	50%	67%
Glenfield Park Retirement Village, FP operator, commenced circa 1991	-	20%	35%
Lake Albert Retirement Village, FP operator	-	70%	79%
Wagga Wagga Retirement Village, NFP operator	-	30%	40%
Wagga Wagga Retirement Village, NFP operator	-	21%	44%
Wagga Wagga Retirement Village, NFP operator, commenced circa 2006	-	72%	78%
Mount Austin Rental Village, NFP operator	-	0%	21%
Municipal – residents aged 65+	30%	49%	66%

Note: CD and SA1 numbers are available on request

It is not possible to generalise that retirement community residents are more or less connected than seniors living elsewhere. A higher proportion of residents in some retirement communities had internet connection whereas other communities had a lower proportion of connected residents compared to municipal levels. Having an internet connection doesn't mean that residents and/or seniors are using the internet (regularly or irregularly).

There was considerable variation between retirement communities with regard to the proportion of residents with internet connections. With some of these it is possible to generalise, however with others further research is required.

More recently completed retirement communities were more likely to have higher proportions of residents who were connected. Notably the two LLC's which commenced in 2013 and 2014 where in 2016 over 90% of residents were internet connected. However the opposite doesn't necessarily hold as a number of communities with earlier establishment dates also had higher proportions of residents who were connected. There may be further factors in addition to the date of commencement influencing residents' level of internet connectedness.

It is difficult to argue that there is any correlation between the operator type, FP or NFP, with regard to internet connection. Both operator types had higher and lower levels of internet connection in their communities.

While the rental retirement villages were not recorded by the ABS until the 2016 Census, both had a lower proportion of residents accessing the internet in comparison to other retirement communities and seniors in either municipality. Whether this is a feature of rental retirement villages or some aspect of the residents requires further analysis.

Further analysis considered the entry price of retirement communities however this was not readily available for all communities. It was noted that communities with higher entry prices, around the level of average house prices in the municipality, had a higher portion of residents who had an internet connection. This appears to be a proxy for levels of wealth and possibly education. Previous research has noted the correlation between wealth and computer/internet usage [2,7]. One argument put forward to explain this was the additional cost imposed in purchasing a computer and paying for an internet connection. Free Wi-Fi was not noted in the marketing documents for any of the communities.

This research did not look at what people were using the internet for, however previous studies have noted that staying in touch with friends and relatives was the most prevalent use [1,3] and that computer use increased social connectedness [7]. Using the internet for shopping was noted [1,3], however it is acknowledged that some of these studies are becoming somewhat dated and that this is an area of research that deserves further examination.

Conclusion

The increasing proportion of internet connectedness among retirement community residents and seniors has implications for operators and researchers. For operators this indicates that marketing through a website is becoming increasingly important. While this may be dependent upon the socio-economic demographics of potential residents, marketing electronically is increasing in importance. For researchers of retirement community residents this indicates that approaching particular groups is most effectively done using the internet. However there are particular subgroups, in this case rental retirement villages, which may be more effectively approached through more traditional forms of communication.

While this research did not consider what seniors are using the internet for, it is safe to assume that in addition to Skyping the grandchildren and communicating by email, online banking and shopping would also be popular activities. This is of relevance for state-based planning guidelines for development of retirement communities, which specify proximity to retail and banking facilities. Greater internet connectivity by seniors removes this requirement for physical proximity given how much fun it is to queue in a bank.

In undertaking the field work for this research, the presence of cafes either in the retirement community or in close proximity was noted. It appears that seniors are far more willing to walk for a coffee than they are to purchase their groceries.

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