Exploring Older Adults' Perceptions of Digital Legacy: An Interview Study

Simon Wermie
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Canada
wermies@myumanitoba.ca

Celine Latulipe
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Canada
celine.latulipe@umanitoba.ca

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing → Empirical studies in HCI**; Digital Legacy.

Keywords

Older Adults, Digital Legacy, Death, Prototype, Interview Study

ACM Reference Format:
Simon Wermie and Celine Latulipe. 2026. Exploring Older Adults' Perceptions of Digital Legacy: An Interview Study. In *Proceedings of Poster at Graphics Interface 2026 (GI '26).* ACM, New York, NY, USA, 3 pages. https://doi.org/10.1145/nnnnnnn.nnnnnnn

1 Introduction

Death is one of the few universal aspects of the human experience. Across societies and generations, people have sought ways to preserve the parts of their lives most meaningful to themselves and their descendants. Traditionally, these legacies were embodied in material, biological or relational forms: genetics, letters, photographs, heirlooms, lessons and spoken stories passed through generations [10]. However, over the last two decades, our lives have become increasingly digitized, scattered across the decentralized web [1]. This mass digitization raises a pressing question: can we design software that meaningfully supports the human desire to accurately preserve our digital legacy? For older adults, who are actively considering their legacy, this problem becomes particularly important [8, 9]. **Digital directives aim to address this need.** Inspired by medical directives [5], which articulate a person's wishes for healthcare at the end of life, digital directives set out a clear plan for managing one's digital footprint near and at the end of life. The prototype digital directives planning system will be an interactive, browser-based experience that ultimately outputs a physical document which can be printed, stored, or shared with the digital heirs of an individual planning their legacy.

This poster presents our initial work toward designing a digital directive system with older adults. We conducted exploratory interviews with older adults across Canada to understand their needs, preferences, and current practices related to digital legacy planning. We found that most participants did not have formal plans in place, although many expressed interest in creating one. Our findings also revealed additional considerations related to older adults' current digital legacy practices, including how they think about access, preservation, deletion, and the role of trusted digital heirs.

Older adults occupy a unique position as digital legacy planners. They are more likely to be actively considering end-of-life issues [8, 9], yet some may face barriers to adopting new technologies or fully utilizing the technology they already use [6]. Despite representing a large and heterogeneous portion of the population, older adults remain underrepresented in digital legacy design research [8, 9]. By directly engaging with older adults in the development of prototype technologies, we hope to develop legacy planning tools that reflect older adults' experiences, needs, and values.

In the development of digital legacy planning tools, it is also important to consider *digital heirs*: individuals who manage a person's digital artifacts after death or incapacitation. Digital heirs often face practical challenges when attempting to manage a loved one's digital legacy [7]. Prior work suggests that digital heirs may struggle to enact a loved one's wishes because those wishes are rarely well articulated, if at all. Additional considerations arise around who should manage specific materials, as individuals may prefer that certain aspects of their digital footprint remain inaccessible to some or all digital heirs [9]. This may include purchase histories, medical records, journals, documents, or other sensitive content.

2 Methodology

We conducted interviews with older adults across Canada (n=15, ages 55+), recruited through social media, on-campus posters, and older adult-focused mailing lists. Interviews were conducted over Zoom or in person, lasted between 30 and 90 minutes, and participants were compensated $20 for their time. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. We are currently conducting a formal content analysis, following an initial review of the transcripts.

One of our primary research questions is: *What needs and preferences do older adults have for digital legacy planning?* While this question has been explored in prior contexts [4, 8, 9], it has not been examined at this scale in a recent Canadian context. This is especially important given growing concerns surrounding LLM-based generative artificial intelligence, data privacy, and increasing distrust in "Big Tech" companies' ability to protect personal information [3]. Our work therefore examines both how older adults currently approach digital legacy planning and what they would like to happen to their data after death. Any digital legacy planning system must accommodate users' existing planning practices while also accounting for their goals, values, and preferences regarding post-mortem data management.

Poster at Graphics Interface 2026 (GI '26), Waterloo, ON, Canada

ACM ISBN 978-x-xxxx-xxxx-x/YYYY/MM
https://doi.org/10.1145/nnnnnnn.nnnnnnn

Another goal of this exploratory study is to examine whether digital directives would be a viable system to prototype and develop in future work. We presented participants with an example healthcare (advanced care) directive[2], and asked them to consider whether a similar system would be useful in a digital legacy planning context.

3 Findings

Our findings suggest that older adults are interested in using a digital directive system and feel that such a system would address needs not currently met by existing technologies. However, participants also raised several suggestions related to both the design and logistics of the software. The most common suggestion was that the system should be designed with older adults in mind. Several participants expressed general frustration that many existing systems are confusing or are not designed for people whose experiences with technology differ from those of system developers. Participants were also curious about whether the system could integrate with existing digital legacy tools. Platforms, such as Facebook and Google, already include legacy contact features that allow users to appoint someone to manage their account after death. Only four participants in our study had set up a legacy contact on at least one platform, and wondered how a digital directive system might support or complement these existing features. Some participants also suggested that the system could educate users about digital legacy planning on these platforms, in addition to supporting the planning process itself.

Regarding current planning practices, four participants used password lists. These were typically paper documents or Excel sheets containing usernames and passwords for various (sometimes hundreds) accounts. Among participants who had set up a legacy contact or maintained a password list, few had made explicit decisions about what should happen to the data contained within those accounts. This extended to other participants as well. Many said they wanted their data deleted after death, but had not communicated these wishes to a digital heir.

Participants often considered their data a form of property, but were concerned that the wrong people might gain access to it, or that the right people might be unable to access it. When asked whether privacy in relation to digital heirs was important, several participants described complex family dynamics that would need to be accounted for. For example, one participant explained that they were estranged from their children but still wanted their grandchildren to know them after death through their digital remains. In most cases, participants identified one trusted person who would manage their digital legacy, including the dissemination, deletion, or archiving of digital information. Most of our participants did not feel they had anything to hide from this trusted person and were comfortable with them handling all of their data. However, it may be that people who have something to hide are less likely to participate in a digital legacy study.

We also asked participants what should happen to different types of digital data after death. We categorized their responses into four actions. The poster highlights platforms where more than half of participants selected a particular action, also shown in Table 1.

Shopping accounts and digital media accounts were generally viewed as unimportant and suitable for deletion, whereas cloud storage and medical records were more often seen as worth passing on to a digital heir or archiving. Participants described cloud storage as a potential record of lived experience that heirs may value, while medical records were viewed as potentially useful to descendants and biological family members. One unexpected finding was that most participants wanted their email deleted, though not immediately, citing that heirs may need to settle remaining affairs. These results may also be useful for developers of digital legacy planning systems within platforms, as they highlight features such systems could include, such as delayed deletion, archiving prompts or heir access controls.

Table 1: Preferred actions upon death by platform type. Undecided responses not included.

Platform type	Delete	Delayed deletion	Pass to heir/archive	Does not use
Shopping, e.g., Amazon	**13**	1	0	1
Social media, e.g., Facebook	7	3	3	2
Cloud storage, e.g., iCloud	6	1	**8**	0
Email, e.g., Gmail	3	**9**	3	0
GenAI, e.g., ChatGPT	6	0	1	6
Digital media, e.g., Netflix	**8**	1	1	4
Medical records, e.g., labs	2	4	**9**	0

4 Future Work

Our interviews revealed several unmet needs and considerations for digital legacy planning systems for older adults, including the ability to integrate legacy features across multiple platforms and specify what should happen to different categories of data after death. These findings provide early evidence that digital directives are a promising approach to digital legacy planning for older adults. Building on this work, we plan to conduct a long-term participatory design process with older adults from across Canada to develop a digital directive system that reflects their current practices, preferences, and values.

References

[1] Will Brackenbury, Andrew McNutt, Kyle Chard, Aaron Elmore, and Blase Ur. 2021. KondoCloud: Improving Information Management in Cloud Storage via Recommendations Based on File Similarity. In *The 34th Annual ACM Symposium on User Interface Software and Technology (UIST '21)*. Association for Computing Machinery, New York, NY, USA, 69–83. https://doi.org/10.1145/3472749.3474736

[2] Dying With Dignity Canada. 2026-01-22. Preparing a Digital Legacy. https://www.dyingwithdignity.ca/education-resources/preparing-a-digital-legacy/

[3] Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada. 2025. 2024-2025 Public Opinion Research on Privacy Issues. https://www.priv.gc.ca/en/opc-actions-and-decisions/research/explore-privacy-research/2025/por_ca_2024-25/#fig07

[4] Janet X. Chen, Francesco Vitale, and Joanna McGrenere. 2021. What Happens After Death? Using a Design Workbook to Understand User Expectations for Preparing their Data. In *Proceedings of the 2021 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '21)*. Association for Computing Machinery, New York, NY, USA, 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1145/3411764.3445359

[5] Luis Kutner. 1969. Due Process of Euthanasia: The Living Will, A Proposal. *INDIANA LAW JOURNAL* 44, 4 (1969). https://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/ilj/vol44/iss4/2

[6] Ittay Mannheim, Ella Schwartz, Wanyu Xi, Sandra C. Buttigieg, Mary McDonnell-Naughton, Eveline J. M. Wouters, and Yvonne van Zaalen. 2019. Inclusion of Older Adults in the Research and Design of Digital Technology. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 16, 19 (Oct. 2019), 3718. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16193718

[7] Michael Massimi, William Odom, Richard Banks, and David Kirk. 2011. Matters of life and death: locating the end of life in lifespan-oriented hci research. In

Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '11). Association for Computing Machinery, New York, NY, USA, 987–996. https://doi.org/10.1145/1978942.1979090

[8] Ramprabu Thangaraj, Jed R. Brubaker, Nathan Malkin, and Alisha Pradhan. 2025. "That's something that as a senior person you have to consider now": Unpacking Older Adults' Preferences for End-of-Life Data Planning. In *Proceedings of the 2025 ACM Designing Interactive Systems Conference (DIS '25)*. Association for Computing Machinery, New York, NY, USA, 663–675. https://doi.org/10.1145/3715336.3735821

[9] Lisa Thomas and Pam Briggs. 2014. An older adult perspective on digital legacy. In *Proceedings of the 8th Nordic Conference on Human-Computer Interaction: Fun, Fast, Foundational (NordiCHI '14)*. Association for Computing Machinery, New York, NY, USA, 237–246. https://doi.org/10.1145/2639189.2639485

[10] David R. Unruh. 1983. Death and Personal History: Strategies of Identity Preservation. *Social Problems* 30, 3 (1983), 340–351. https://doi.org/10.2307/800358