



BMHP5019 – Introduction to Independent Research Skills

Title

**A Scoping Review of Digital Exclusion among Older Adults Accessing UK Healthcare:
Identifying Themes Using Aveyard's Simplified Thematic Analysis**

Student id 2324745

student name Naushaba yaqoob raja

LecturerName Zakiyyah Ahmed

Module name BMHP5019

Executive Summary

Digital healthcare has gained more and more significance in the healthcare system of the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, a large number of the older population are still de-digitised, which constricts their access to healthcare information, scheduling, distance-based consultations and other online services. The purpose of this research was to examine the key themes in the literature on the subject of digital exclusion among older adults who use healthcare services in the UK.

A scoping review method was used to review applicable peer-reviewed studies. A systematic search of academic databases was performed, and five studies were included in the study according to preset eligibility criteria. The data were analysed based on thematic analysis by identifying emerging trends and problems in the literature.

There were four central themes of the review. These were digital literacy and technology skills, barriers to access to healthcare, trust and confidence in digital healthcare and digital inclusion interventions. The results indicated that poor digital skills, low self-confidence, poor access to technology and privacy fears are some of the barriers to participation by older adults in digital healthcare services.

The evaluation concludes that there is a high level of digital exclusion among older adults and that this neglect could be the cause of inequalities in healthcare. The recommendations are the enhancement of digital services, creation of more digital skill training, financial policy reinforcement on digital inclusion programs, and more research on the effective methods of intervention to be used in the UK.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the Topic

The role of digital healthcare in the healthcare system of the United Kingdom is growing. Digital technologies are now employed to make appointments, manage medical records, communicate with professionals, access test results, and provide remote consultations in many services. These innovations are capable of enhancing efficiency and access. However, not all groups are benefiting equally. The most common barriers that older adults encounter are associated with internet access, internet literacy, self-efficacy, and use of technology. With the increased digitalisation in healthcare, the elderly can be disconnected in the provision of vital services. According to Age UK (2024), a significant number of older adults are still digitally excluded, which poses risks of lower access to healthcare. Farre et al. (2023) also emphasised the effects of digital healthcare, which can strengthen existing health inequalities in cases where the issue of exclusion is not tackled.

1.2 Rationale for the Review

Digital exclusion matters in health and social care since it influences the accessibility of services by the older generation. Those who are digitally unskilled or lack internet access or confidence might not get along with online healthcare systems and remote access services. This may minimise access to healthcare information, appointments and support. Badr, Motulsky and Denis (2024) postulated that digital health technologies could benefit access yet also can contribute to inequalities among vulnerable populations. Policymakers and healthcare providers in the UK have been keen on this matter. According to Good Things Foundation (2024), one of the causes of health inequalities is digital exclusion. Internet penetration among older adults is also lower in national statistics, as the country still experiences a digital divide (ONS, 2024). Thus, existing evidence should be reviewed to become aware of dominant themes on the topic of digital exclusion among older adults who receive UK healthcare.

1.3 Review Question and Objectives

The scoping review focuses on existing evidence on the presence of digital exclusion among older adults utilising healthcare services in the United Kingdom.

Review Question

What are the main themes in the literature around digital exclusion of older adults accessing UK health services?

Objectives

- To pinpoint the key impediments to digital healthcare access amongst the older demographic.
- To understand the purported consequences of digital exclusion to healthcare access and outcomes.
- To find recommendations and strategies which underpin digital inclusion in healthcare services.

1.4 Structure of the Report

There are six sections of this report. Following the introduction, the chapter discussing the background looks at the topics of digital healthcare, health disparities, and digital exclusion in older adults in the UK. The scoping review strategy, search strategy, study selection and thematic analysis are outlined in the methodology section. The findings section summarises the results of the chosen peer-reviewed studies. The identified themes are discussed with regard to their implications for practice. Lastly, it gives recommendations in the report which are based on policy, practice and future research.

2. Background

2.1 Digital Transformation in UK Healthcare

Digital transformation of the healthcare system in the United Kingdom has undergone an extreme change over recent years. Digital technologies are becoming more and more widely spread by the National Health Service (NHS) in the areas of making care more accessible, efficient, and service-providing. Appointment booking systems online, electronic health records, prescription computer programs, patient portals and remote appointments are making headway as part of the current healthcare delivery. According to NHS England (2023), digital healthcare is capable of enhancing patient engagement, Self-management, and access to healthcare services. The growth of digital health technologies increased in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, where remote healthcare

services were critical to continuity of care. Nevertheless, the digital healthcare revolution has brought about fears related to fair access as well. According to Badr, Motulsky and Denis (2024), despite beneficial implications of digital health technologies, these approaches may also instigate or sustain inequalities in vulnerable groups. Therefore, equitable involvement in digital healthcare has become a valuable issue on the agenda of healthcare givers and policymakers.

2.2 Digital Exclusion and the Grey Digital Divide

Digital exclusion is the inability to use or easily enjoy the benefits of digital technologies due to obstacles associated with internet access, digital literacy, cost or trust. This is a major problem, especially among older adults, leading to what has been referred to as the grey digital divide. Such a gap exemplifies disparities in online participation between younger and older generations. According to Mohan et al. (2024), technological knowledge, financial resources, and poor access to digital infrastructure are factors that contribute to digital exclusion among older adults. In addition to access barriers, a significant number of older individuals cannot develop confidence in using digital devices and online services. Western et al. (2025) also add that digital exclusion is a factor that increases disparities in digital health due to limited access to healthcare technologies. With the further digitalisation of healthcare services, the grey digital divide is topical to access to and inclusion in healthcare.

2.3 Older Adults and Healthcare Access

The elderly are one of the most frequent consumers of care because of the increased incidence of chronic disease, prolonged healthcare issues and ageing health problems. Therefore, access to healthcare services due to fairness is very significant for this population. Nevertheless, the trend of relying more on digital healthcare platforms can pose even more barriers to certain aged people. According to a study conducted by Kalicki et al. (2021), older people frequently experience challenges in accessing telehealth due to a lack of digital literacy, insufficient internet use and technological barriers. These obstacles may diminish the use of healthcare services and present the potential for poor healthcare outcomes. Equally, Frishammar et al. (2023) were able to establish a number of barriers that influence the uptake of digital health platforms among older adults; these barriers include usability issues, low confidence and perceived complexity of technology. These results imply that digital healthcare innovations could inadvertently limit access to healthcare

unless the requirements and abilities of older adults are properly taken into account when contracting services and designing them.

2.4 Health Inequalities and Older Adults

The term health inequalities delineates preventable and unjust disparities in health outcomes and healthcare access between varied population groups. Digital exclusion has increasingly been recognised as an important factor contributing to these inequalities. Elderly people without access to digital technologies might have decreased access to health information, remote consultations and digital support services. The study by Wu, Xue and Ma (2025) identified that there is a strong connection between digital involvement and access to healthcare services, with digital disparities linked to health outcomes among older people. Similarly, Xue et al. (2026) showed that digital exclusion may lead to detrimental consequences for healthcare outreach and unequal service utilisation. Despite the opportunities that lie in digital technologies to enhance healthcare delivery, the access disparity can further exacerbate the social and health differences that exist. Thus, the issue of digital exclusion should be addressed to promote health equity and provide older adults with equal access to healthcare.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design: Scoping Review

The paper assumed a scoping review design in examining existing evidence on the concept of digital exclusion among older adults using the UK healthcare system. A scoping review was deemed suitable because the subject area is extensive and it concerns the identification of major concepts, evidence sources and knowledge gaps as opposed to assessing a particular intervention. Scoping reviews can be especially effective to map the existing literature and to synthesise evidence from different types of studies. According to Peters et al. (2020), scoping reviews are a systematic method of investigating issues of high complexity and new fields of research. Likewise, Pollock et al. (2024) stress that scoping reviews facilitate knowledge fragmentation with evidence mapping and thematic synthesis to the instance when such knowledge lacks thoroughness.

3.2 Development of the Review Protocol

To promote transparency and uniformity in the review process, a review protocol was created. The literature search was conducted, and the protocol determined the review question, objectives, search strategy, eligibility criteria and methods of analysis. Peters et al. (2022) suggest protocol development as a significant aspect of high-quality scoping reviews. Similarly, McMeekin et al. (2020) note that systematic methodological frameworks are valuable in assisting in reliable synthesis of evidence.

3.3 Search Strategy

The relevant pieces of peer-reviewed literature were found through the systematic search strategy. Academic databases that are widely utilised in health and social care research were searched. The keywords used were developed according to the review question and were combined with the help of the Boolean operators. Kuo, Trinkley and Rabin (2022) highlight that evidence reviews are more rigorous and reproducible when authors have clear search strategies.

Database	Search Terms	Results
PubMed	“digital exclusion” AND “older adults” AND healthcare	31
CINAHL	“digital health” AND older people AND access	27
Google Scholar	digital exclusion older adults UK healthcare	84
ASSIA	digital divide AND healthcare access AND elderly	18
Total		160

Table 1: Search Strategy

Source: Self-made

3.4 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The eligibility criteria were designed so that the studies that were included in the review are relevant. The inclusion criteria included the purpose of the review and were based on evidence regarding older adults, digital exclusion, and healthcare access.

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Peer-reviewed journal articles	Non-peer-reviewed sources
Published between 2015–2026	Studies published before 2015
English language studies	Non-English studies
Older adults and digital healthcare	Studies unrelated to healthcare

Relevant to digital exclusion	Studies unrelated to digital exclusion
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Table 2: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Source: Self-made

3.5 Study Selection Process

Database search identified studies were filtered by title, abstract and full-text review. Relevant papers satisfying the inclusion criteria were then analysed, and irrelevant papers were excluded. The process of selecting the studies used PRISMA-ScR reporting to enhance the transparency and completeness during the review process (Eschiti and Siaki, 2026).

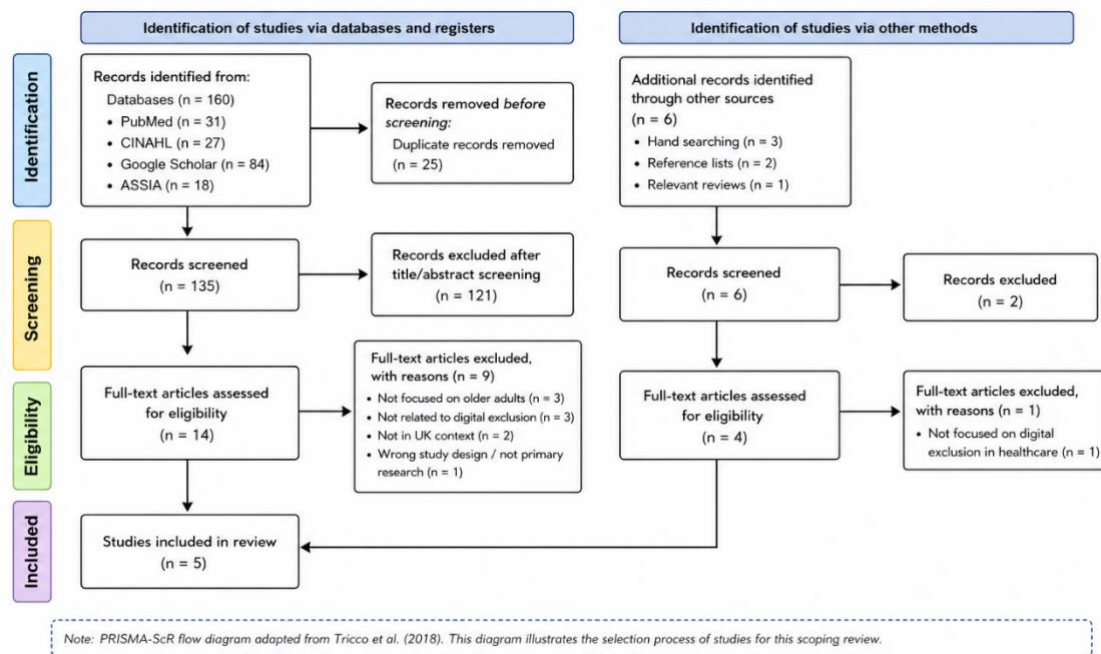


Figure 1: PRISMA-ScR Flow Diagram

Source: Self-made

3.6 Data Extraction Process

Each of the included studies was systematically and structurally extracted to obtain the data. Data concerning study objectives, approaches, subjects, environments and salient findings were documented to facilitate cross-study comparison. Aveyard (2023) proposes using structured data extraction in order to make better organisation and evidence synthesis.

3.7 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was used in extracting the findings. There were common themes, ideas and problems that were found in the selected studies. This methodology allowed the formulation of themes associated with digital exclusion in the elderly. According to Aveyard (2023), thematic analysis is a valuable tool in synthesising the findings of a literature review.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

This was an investigative work done by secondary research that necessitated no participant recruitment. The correct citation, the lack of plagiarism, the objective reporting of the findings, and the utilisation of valuable academic sources in the review allowed for ethical practice.

4. Results

4.1 Overview of Included Studies

Following the screening and selection process, five peer-reviewed studies were included in this scoping review. These papers explored the issue of digital exclusion, health access, and technology adoption and digital literacy in older adults. The chosen articles were in the format of scoping reviews, umbrella reviews, and systematic reviews, which resulted in general evidence on what older adults go through in digital healthcare settings. Despite the differences in the methodology and geographical context, similar results were found concerning the impediments to digital access and access to healthcare. The evidence illuminated the issues of digital literacy, technology confidence, digital healthcare strategies, and access and inclusion. Thematic analysis was used to synthesise these recurring problems to determine the main themes of digital exclusion among older adults receiving healthcare services.

Author	Aim	Method	Sample	Main Findings
Farre et al. (2023)	Examine digital healthcare and health inequalities in UK settings	Scoping review	UK-based studies	Digital technologies can improve access but may increase inequalities

Kunonga et al. (2021)	Assess effects of digital technologies on access to health and social care.	Umbrella review	Multiple review studies	Digital tools improve access, but barriers remain for older adults
Wilson et al. (2021)	Identify barriers and facilitators to e-health use	Scoping review	Older adult studies	Digital literacy and confidence strongly influence adoption
Ge et al. (2025)	Explore digital exclusion among older adults	Scoping review	International evidence	Skills, access and affordability are major barriers
Hepburn, Williams and McCann (2025)	Examine barriers and facilitators to digital health adoption	Systematic review	Older adults with chronic disease	Trust, confidence and support influence technology use

Table 3: Summary of Included Studies

Source: Self-made

4.2 Theme 1: Digital Literacy and Technology Skills

Digital literacy was one of the most commonly recognised factors that affect digital exclusion among older adults. Most of the elderly feel problems in handling digital equipment, online websites and in comprehending online-based health systems. Wilson et al. (2021) discovered that poor digital literacy leads to significantly lower willingness and capability to use e-health services. To successfully use healthcare technologies, older adults need to be provided with extra support. Likewise, Ge et al. (2025) found poor digital knowledge and low technological Confidence as key factors in digital exclusion. These barriers may prevent older adults from accessing healthcare information, booking appointments and participating in remote consultations. The results provide insights into digital literacy as a pre-requisite of effective engagement in digital healthcare and the possible significance of skill development programmes in mitigating exclusion.

4.3 Theme 2: Barriers to Healthcare Access

The analysed papers proved that digital exclusion may have a direct impact on access to healthcare. Aged persons with poor internet access or with digital illiteracy are likely to experience challenges in obtaining the necessary healthcare services. Kunonga et al. (2021) found that despite the opportunity of digital technologies to enhance access to healthcare, not all older adults can fully use them due to technological limitations. Equally, Farre et al. (2023) observed that digital healthcare initiatives can unintentionally increase the presence of health disparities by creating groups of vulnerable people who cannot use digital services. According to common barriers, the lack of internet accessibility, the lack of device accessibility and the lack of confidence in the use of technology were present. These difficulties may limit access to healthcare data, schedules and telehealth. In turn, digital exclusion can be an issue that contributes to disparities in healthcare experiences of older adults and decreases the chances of enjoying the advantages of digital health innovations.

4.4 Theme 3: Trust, Privacy and Confidence

The key elements that emerged to influence adoption of digital healthcare technologies are trust, privacy and confidence. The geriatric population might be reluctant to adopt digital health care due to the fear of data privacy, security and inefficiency in technology. Hepburn, Williams and McCann (2025) established that trust in digital systems is a key factor that determines whether older adults adopt healthcare technologies. Users who have faith in online services will use them. Likewise, Ienca et al. (2021) have found that participation in digital healthcare interventions can be deterred by ethical issues, privacy issues, and perceptions of risk. The results indicate that effective implementation of digital healthcare services presupposes technical availability, as well as measures of trust building, which are to be adopted to address the question of privacy and enhance the confidence of the users.

4.5 Theme 4: Digital Inclusion Interventions

The literature has pinpointed some of the strategies which may be used to mitigate digital exclusion in older individuals. Targeted support programmes, training in digital skills and personalised assistance were often found to be effective strategies. Wale et al. (2025) discovered that tailored support interventions enhanced digital engagement in older adults and participation in digital services. Equally, Leff et al. (2025) have highlighted the necessity of dealing with structural

challenges by designing accessible technology, affordable access to the internet and continuous user support. The most effective digital inclusion programs were those that acknowledged the various needs of older adults and offered viable support. These results indicate that the eradication of digital exclusion depends on the conjunction of educational, technological and organisational measures that aim to enhance access and confidence in digital healthcare services.

5. Discussion

5.1 Interpretation of Findings

The results of this scoping review show that older adults with access to healthcare services continue to be excluded through digital means. In the papers reviewed, practices concerning digital literacy, technology access, confidence, and trust were identified in every study as barriers to engagement in digital healthcare. These results are indicative of the notion that digital exclusion is both a technological problem as well as a social and healthcare access problem. The elderly, who do not have the required resources or capabilities, can find it hard to take advantage of the digital healthcare innovations. A similar result is provided by Zou et al. (2023), who discovered that older adults often face difficulties in adopting digital health technologies, especially in cases where there is limited support and training. Moreover, Yu et al. (2026) highlighted that digital exclusion is a concept that is multidimensional and relates to access and skills, as well as motivation and meaningful use of technology. Thus, enhancing digital healthcare engagement needs omnibus strategies that can tackle more than just one barrier at a time, but also technology provision.

5.2 Comparison with Existing Evidence

The results discovered in the context of this review are aligned with broader data on digital inequalities in health care. The studies reviewed proved that digital technologies could simultaneously make health care more accessible and put in-need populations at risk of exclusion. The same authors, Badr, Motulsky and Denis (2024) also claimed that digital health technologies are both opportunities and challenges since such benefits are usually unevenly distributed among various social groups. Digital healthcare has the risk of promoting existing inequalities due to the themes identified in this review, unless the obstacles older adults face are addressed. Similarly,

Western et al. (2025) have indicated that socioeconomic status, digital literacy, internet access, and confidence in technology use are factors that contribute to digital health inequalities. The similarity of the current results with the literature validates the argument that digital exclusion is a significant determinant of healthcare access and health equity in more digital healthcare systems.

5.3 Strengths and Limitations of Existing Evidence

The analysed evidence has a lot of useful information about the lives of older adults in the framework of digital healthcare settings. One of the strongest aspects of the literature is that it employs a method of reviews that summarise the results of several studies, which enables a general observation of the problem of digital exclusion. Ge et al. (2025) emphasised a broad scope of causes of exclusion, such as technological, social and economic factors. In the same vein, the authors Wilson et al. (2021) presented extensive evidence on both inhibitors and enablers affecting e-health adoption among older adults. Although strong, there are still a number of limitations. The evidence which is available is heavily based on studies performed in other healthcare settings and may make it less applicable to UK healthcare settings. Moreover, the dynamism of the digital technologies implies that the results may be outdated as the healthcare systems will keep advancing. Dissimilarities in study designs, definitions and participant characteristics are also a challenge in comparing results across studies. These shortcomings suggest that additional UK-based studies into the digital exclusion of older adults should be undertaken.

6. Recommendations

This review suggests that to decrease digital exclusion, the combined effort in terms of healthcare services, policy, and research is needed. Brundle et al. (2025) also highlight that it is critically necessary to find digitally excluded older adults and provide them with individualised assistance to reflect their needs and competencies. Improving digital inclusion can enhance healthcare accessibility, reduce inequalities and increase engagement with digital health services.

Area	Recommendation
NHS Services	Provide dedicated digital support services and alternative non-digital access routes.
Older Adults	Deliver targeted digital skills training and confidence-building programmes.
Policy	Increase funding for digital inclusion initiatives and affordable internet access.

Future Research	Conduct more UK-based studies examining effective interventions for digitally excluded older adults.
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Table 4: Recommendations for UK Practice

Source: Self-made

7. Conclusion

This scoping review assessed the key themes in the literature about digital exclusion in older adults accessing UK healthcare services. The results recognised four major themes: digital literacy and technology skills, digital healthcare barriers, trust and confidence in digital healthcare, and digital inclusion interventions. These themes show that older adults continue to be impacted by digital exclusion as a major issue of concern regarding access to and engagement in healthcare. Although digital healthcare presents significant possibilities to enhance service delivery, existing disparities might be further increased by unequal access to technology and digital skills. The review demonstrates the significance of comprehensive clinical strategies aimed at helping older adults to access and use digital services and take advantage of constant digital transformation in healthcare systems.

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