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OLDER PEOPLE IN A DIGITALIZED SOCIETY

From Marginality to Agency

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Older People in a Digitalized Society: From Marginality to Agency

BY

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Introduction

Societies today are in the process of digitalization, which is affecting all service sectors, such as public administration, private commercial services, educational services, and health care and welfare services. In addition, government bodies, media, businesses, and citizens communicate and transmit information to a growing extent through digital media, such as on the internet in general and on social media in particular. However, a large number of people over 60 years of age and outside the workforce lack adequate digital competences to support their learning, well-being, everyday life, and participation in today's digitalized society. Older people's internet nonuse and limited digital competences may present challenges to their use of digital services and to the ongoing digitalization of society. Even though digitalization has been said to be inclusionary in many ways, it may also have exclusionary effects. In addition, the global aging phenomenon has further accelerated the discussion of older people's positions in digitalizing societies.

This book focuses on the social construction of older people's position in a digitalized society. In particular, it focuses on the social construction of older people's digital competences and the use and nonuse of internet[1] and eHealth technologies. The book focuses on the social construction of older people's relationships with the internet and eHealth technologies in Finland's most sparsely populated areas: Northern Ostrobothnia and Lapland in Northern Finland and Kainuu in Eastern Finland. The book examines the construction of older people's relationship with the internet and eHealth technologies in terms of their internet and eHealth technology use, internet nonuse, and digital competences.

The general aim is to develop a contextualized understanding of older people's relationship with the internet and eHealth technologies, that is, an understanding of this relationship within its broader social, cultural, and societal contexts (Haythornthwaite, 2001; Slack & Wise, 2009). This book seeks to gain a better understanding of (1) how older people's (non)use of the internet and eHealth technologies, as well as digital competences, are socially constructed by researchers, older internet non(users), older eHealth users and professionals, and the media and (2) what social, cultural, and societal factors drive the social construction of older people's relationship with the internet and eHealth

[1]Hence forward, the term "internet (non)use" will be utilized to cover both internet use and internet nonuse.

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technologies. In addition, based on the research literature and case studies presented, the book outlines the implications for practice and policy, addressing the potential exclusionary effects of digitalization.

The book argues that the digitalization of society is constructed in national and EU policies as a cross-cutting theme, key project, and necessary and largely beneficial "leap" that governments and citizens need to take (Digi arkeen-neuvottelukunta, 2019; European Commission, 2010; Prime Minister's Office, 2015). This construction is in line with more general societal discourses which are characterized by understanding new technologies as a means for development, progress, and a better life (Bauer, 1997b; Niiniluoto, 2015; Slack & Wise, 2009). However, these policies also acknowledge the potential exclusionary effects of digitalization, especially in the fact that older people are at risk for exclusion.

This book provides insights into older people's exclusion from digital society; it argues that older people are often constructed as being on the margins of digitalization by researchers, older internet nonusers and users themselves, and the media. Furthermore, the book highlights the fact that digitalization is *a contested issue* constructed with various, ambivalent, and paradoxical representations, even in a digitally developed country like Finland, one of the top European performers in the supply and demand of digital public services (European Commission, 2021a). The empirical research presented in this book shows that media representations portray older people negatively, painting them as the incompetent outcasts of a digitalized society. However, it also shows how older internet nonusers may construct their internet nonuse as a critical standpoint toward digitalization and as positive marginality: a choice that they have consciously made.

The book contests the dominant political and scientific discourse, according to which digital technologies and media play central roles in learning, well-being, everyday life, and participation in society for individuals throughout their lifespan (see, e.g., Livingstone et al., 2005; Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019). The book reveals that the "digital leap" that is called for and that is socially constructed by policymakers is not welcomed by all older people. The book argues that the ongoing digitalization – the "digital leap" – may also be constructed as a form of "imprisonment" or "falling of the boat," thus leading to older people's marginalized position in a digitalized society. Based on the research literature and four case studies, the book outlines several implications for digital inclusion practice and policy, addressing the potential exclusionary effects of digitalization.

The book is based on the author's doctoral dissertation (Rasi, 2021), which has been revised throughout to specifically include new texts on the social construction of agency, digital divides, and digital competences. In addition, a new chapter (Chapter 8) reporting on a recent case study by the author and her colleague has been added.

Multidisciplinary Approach

This book takes a multidisciplinary approach to older people's position in a digitalized society. When studying old age and aging, the study topic may fall

within several scientific disciplines and research fields, and the boundaries among these are often blurry (Morgan & Kunkel, 2011). Research that either primarily focuses or touches on older people's internet (non)use and digital competences has been conducted in numerous disciplines, such as sociology, social gerontology, educational gerontology, adult education, human development and psychology, library and information science, and journalism. The primary discipline of the present book is *social psychology* because the study seeks to understand the social nature of older people's internet (non)use, eHealth technology use, and digital competences. The focus is on the social construction of the phenomenon, where the individual and social are inseparable, "in which the individual constitutes and is simultaneously constituted by the social" (Augoustinos et al., 2014, p. 4).

When discussing digital competences – particularly when outlining the policy and practice implications of the results – the book intersects with *adult education* and *media literacy education* (e.g., Hobbs, 2010; Rasi et al., 2021), as well as *educational gerontology* (e.g., Rivinen, 2020; Seifert et al., 2018). The book can also be placed within the research fields of *aging studies* because it strongly intersects with *social gerontology,* particularly with its multidisciplinary and applied nature (see Dannefer & Settersten, 2010; Jyrkämä, 2007a; Koskinen, 2004; McCreadie, 2010; Morgan & Kunkel, 2011). Furthermore, social and critical gerontology's key ideas of the diversity and heterogeneity of aging and old age and its conception of aging that acknowledges its historically, socially, and culturally constructed character (Dannefer & Settersten, 2010; Gergen & Gergen, 2003; Keating & Phillips, 2008) have informed this book.

Research on older people's use of media, including the internet, has been criticized for not acknowledging gerontological theories and, consequently, for seeing older people as a too homogeneous group (Harrington et al., 2014; Nimrod, 2017). Furthermore, some research has been criticized for being based on an overtly optimistic generalization that all older people are willing to use the internet and benefit from it (Richardson et al., 2005). Also, political discussions around the issue of older people's internet use have been criticized for making either pessimistic or optimistic generalizations about older people's motivation and skills in using the internet (Loos, 2012). Finally, the book has been inspired by how the positive aspects of aging and old age have been accentuated in social and educational gerontology, as well as in gerontological social work (Gergen & Gergen, 2003; Kautto, 2004; Koskinen, 2004; Langer, 2004; Nelson-Becker et al., 2020).

Because the book aims to contextualize older people's internet (non)use, eHealth technologies use, and digital competences within their broader social, cultural, and societal contexts, it can be understood as falling within the field of *social studies of technology,* where the framework of domestication of technology (including media technology) has been central (e.g., Luomanen & Peteri, 2013; Peteri, 2006; Sankari, 2004; Silverstone & Hirsch, 1992; Talsi, 2014). The book can also be placed within the research field of *communication and new media studie*s (e.g., Haythornthwaite, 2001; Saari, 2011).

The general question that the present book seeks to answer is the following: How do academic researchers, older internet (non)users, the media, older eHealth

users and professionals, and their social, cultural, and societal contexts construct older people's relationship with the internet and eHealth technologies, along with older people's position in a digitalized society?

Finland as the Context of the Book

The case studies presented in Part II have been conducted in Finland's sparsely populated areas Northern Ostrobothnia and Lapland in Northern Finland and Kainuu in Eastern Finland. Currently, Finland is one of Europe's top performers in the supply and demand of digital public services (European Commission, 2021a) and a leader in terms of its citizens' internet user skills (European Commission, 2021b, 2021c). However, the phenomenon of internet nonuse still exists in Finland: a considerable number of Finnish older people still report not using the internet. In 2021, 2% of people 55–64 years old reported having never used the internet, while this was 10% for the 65–74 age group and 36% for the 75–89 age group (Tilastokeskus, 2021).

A sparsely populated area is defined following the European Commission's criterion (Dijkstra & Poelman, 2018) as a geographic area with a population density of fewer than 12.5 inhabitants per square kilometer. According to the Commission's urban–rural typology, the sites of the case studies presented in Part II are all rural areas, with the share of population living in rural areas higher than 50%. However, there was some variation in terms of whether the respondents of the case studies lived in "predominately rural, remote regions" or "predominately rural regions, close to a city" (Dijkstra & Poelman, 2018).

In terms of older people living in sparsely populated Northern and Eastern Finland, several indicators of vulnerability have been identified in previous research, such as social isolation, financial insecurity, and a lack of access to services (Begum, 2019). According to the Finnish information strategy for social and health care (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities, 2015), eHealth services can secure equal social and health care services for older people living in sparsely populated areas, such as Lapland. However, to use digital services such as eHealth, rural residents need digital competences, which cannot be taken for granted.

Rural areas typically have more internet nonusers than urban and suburban areas (Abad Alcalá, 2019; European Commission, 2020; Helsper & Reisdorf, 2016; International Telecommunication Union, 2021). Currently, there are slight differences in how people living in or near Finnish cities use the internet compared with people living in rural settings (Tilastokeskus, 2021): Of the people living in big cities, 93% reported having used the internet within the last three months, while the number for rural municipalities was 88%. Among those living in large Finnish cities, 5% reported never having used the internet, while the number for residents in rural municipalities was 9%.

Sparsely populated areas across the world, such as the Amazon forests, the Northern Arctic regions, the Australian bush, and the Siberian plains, share some common features despite their ecological or political differences – for example,

weaker administrative control and the survival of cultural differences; this is the case because a significant portion of sparsely populated areas are covered by different types of indigenous territories (Tourneau, 2020). In terms of the case studies presented in Part II of this book, Northern Lapland in Northern Finland is the traditional Sámi area where the indigenous Sámi people live. Elderly Sámi people living in Lapland are especially vulnerable in terms of their well-being because they experience concerns and challenges related to access to health care facilities, availability of traditional food, secure livelihood practices, the preservation of cultural identity, and environmentally sound development (Begum, 2019).

The case studies and results presented in this book are culture specific and cannot, as such, be transferred to other cultural contexts. In many ways, the sites of the studies are unique. First, Finland is one of the top European performers in the supply of digital public services (European Commission, 2021a) and in the use of internet services by citizens (European Commission, 2020), making the "push" toward internet use by older people stronger than in some other contexts. Second, some of the respondents in the present research lived in predominately rural, remote regions in the most sparsely populated areas of Finland and Europe (Dijkstra & Poelman, 2018). Therefore, transferring the results to cultural contexts dissimilar from the studies presented in this book requires careful consideration.

The book is comprised of three parts. Drawing on the research literature, Part I presents the key concepts of digitalization from the perspective of older people, while Part II presents four case studies from Finland that target older people's internet (non)use, eHealth technology use, and digital competences from the viewpoint of agency and marginality. Finally, Part III concludes with the key findings, suggestions for future studies, and practical implications.

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Part I
Defining the Key Concepts

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