

PhD of Media and Communication Studies (VUB)

PhD in Information Systems (UWC)

Digital Ageing: how ageism and technology influence the ageing experience of older adults

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Abstract:

The ubiquitous presence of digital technology means that the ageing experience has become entangled with technology. Older adults' digital technology engagement is diverse and ranges from proficient and frequent users to non-users. However, there remains a generational difference in the acceptance of digital technology between the young and the old. An under-researched cause of this vulnerability to digital disengagement is discrimination based on age or ageism. There is an urgent need to examine how ageism and digital technology influence the ageing experience of older adults. Therefore, the aim of this PhD was to answer the question: what role do ageism and digital technology play within the ageing experience of older adults?

This PhD addressed three key areas. Firstly, the PhD investigated how older adults are portrayed within the media discourse on digital inclusion. This analysis involved studying two decades' worth of Dutch language newspaper articles from The Netherlands and Flanders to comprehend how older adults are portrayed in these publications. The research scrutinized encountered stereotypes and the capacity for self-representation within the digital inclusion discourse. Concluding that older adults are prevalently depicted as incapable of digital inclusion, often a victim of digitalisation efforts, and presented in reductive ageist stereotypes.

The second area examined the intersection of ageism and data. This is a relatively novel aspect within ageism research as it explores the invisibility of older adults in collected and processed data used for data-driven systems. This thesis examined a method to ensure inclusion of older adults within the process of development of these systems. The PAR4POA method ensured that the expertise of older adults is used and that older adults obtain the ability to help determine both which data is collected, and its purpose. In that sense, it contributes to making the lived experience of the older adult visible and quantifiable.

Finally, the findings of the third area found that older adults themselves use ageism to make sense of their own (lack of) engagement with digital technology. Interviews reveal that digital technology is often perceived as a marker of active participation in daily life, distinguishing those considered "old" from those who are not. This perception aligns with societal stereotypes of "true old age", which leads to the conclusion that lack of digital skills is considered to be part of the social imagery of "true old age" like burden, frailty, and dependence. Furthermore, the findings allowed for the creation of the Digital Ageism Interplay Model and Typology. This model provides insight in the complex interplay between ageism, digital technology, representation, and the lived experiences of older adults. The findings show that older adults are not heterogenous and that their digital engagement is diverse and complex. The aim of this thesis is to understand this heterogenous nature and to advocate for an age-inclusive approach to digital technology that considers the effect of the life course beyond a statistical chronological fact