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The paradoxes and pragmatics of digital leisure in later life

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ABSTRACT

In previous studies, older adults (65+) are commonly regarded as a heterogeneous group of technology users who do not utilise digital technologies as frequently or comprehensively as younger age cohorts. There has, however, been less emphasis on how and why digital technologies are used by older adults, especially in terms of their critical attitudes towards digital leisure, which serves as a source of digital, and thereby social, inclusion in later life. In this study we ask (1) what kind of conflicting attitudes and activities, or paradoxes, are there associated with digital leisure in later life and (2) where these paradoxes stem from in the everyday lives of older adults. The qualitative analysis is based on 20 participant-induced elicitation interviews conducted among older Finnish adults in 2018. Drawing from the concept of digital repertoires and our thematic analysis, we conclude that there are discrepancies in how the interviewees viewed their personal involvement with digital leisure and how they engaged with it on daily basis. Our analysis suggests that these discrepancies associated with the use of digital technologies for leisure derive from a strong pragmatic emphasis older adults bestow upon digital leisure, highlighting an instrumental perspective on digital technologies.

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Introduction

Digitalisation is frequently described as a ubiquitous societal process that contributes to the efficiency, accessibility, and sustainability of any given society. However, turning to a more user-oriented view, despite the many advantages of digitalisation, not everybody benefits from it. The heterogeneity of digital technology use in later life does not extend only to specific age cohorts as has been confirmed in multiple previous studies (Jacobetty & Fernández-Ardèvol, 2017; Sawchuk & Lafontaine, 2020). Instead, it can be argued that older adults do not use digital technology in the same way as younger age cohorts, and that this is also true for digital leisure. Previous studies (Hebblethwaite, 2017; Loos, 2012) suggest that older adults' attitudes towards digital leisure are more ambiguous and critical compared to, for example, public digital services, which are commonly seen as useful and even necessary by older adults.

Engaging with the Internet, social media, and digital leisure in general, promotes the overall wellbeing of older adults by attenuating many of the issues related to ageing, such as loneliness, boredom, social disengagement, and lack of information (Chiribuca & Teodorescu, 2020; Liechty et al., 2011; Nimrod & Shrira, 2016). In fact, according to Lifshitz et al. (2018), out of the four principal online functions of digital technologies (communication, information, task performance and leisure), only leisure predicted an increase in the subjective wellbeing of older adults. There are several possible explanations as to why older adults do not engage with digital leisure to the same

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extent as younger age cohorts. Drawing from the Theory of Digital Divides, which seeks to understand why digitalisation does not benefit everybody, two of the main reasons are, first, restricted access, and second, limited digital skills and digital literacy (Broady et al., 2010; Friemel, 2016; Lifshitz et al., 2018; Nimrod, 2017).

To broaden this perspective in the context of the third digital divide focusing on the meaning and benefits of digital technologies and leisure, we introduce the concept of digital repertoire. In this study at hand, digital repertoire serves as a theoretical framework in the analysis of the heterogeneity of digital leisure engagement among older adults. According to Hasebrink and Domeyer (2012) point out, the media repertoires, or in this study digital repertoires, consist of all the media a person regularly uses. As digital repertoires manifest themselves in the individual lifestyle of a person within a specific social context (Schwarzenegger, 2020), the focus of the study must reflect their practical meaning (Hasebrink & Popp, 2006). Furthermore, the concept of digital repertoire suggests that all digital technology users, including older adults, use digital technology according to individual digital repertoires constructed and guided by personal interests, skill sets, networks, and the availability of devices and applications (Hänninen et al., 2021). An older adult can, for instance, use WhatsApp fluently, but struggle with public digital services or other social media platforms, such as Facebook. The adoption and use of digital technologies is, in many cases, supported by family and friends in the sense that older adults often use the same applications as their families to stay connected with them, or they are, in technological terms, supported by their family and friends. In this light, it can be argued that, alongside the individual aspects of digital repertoires, the repertoires can also be shared and that there is a distinct social element to them.

Following Lifshitz et al. (2018) idea that adopting various digital leisure activities is limited by digital skills and literacy, it is plausible that the frequency and ways of using digital technology can predict the level of engagement in digital leisure. However, based on the notion of individual and shared digital repertoire, it seems that there is more to engaging with digital leisure activities than digital skills and literacy. Thus, to better understand how older adults engage with digital leisure and why their involvement is not as frequent and less diverse than in younger age cohorts, we investigate the discrepancies regarding older adults' engagement with digital leisure from the perspective of their everyday life. Drawing from the concept of digital repertoire, we ask (1) what kind of conflicting attitudes and practices or paradoxes are associated with digital leisure in later life, and secondly (2), based on these findings, where these paradoxes stem from in the everyday lives of the older adults. Our thematic analysis is based on 20 participant-induced elicitation (PIE) interviews carried out in Central Official Statistics Finland, OSF (2021) with interviewees aged between 65 and 89. The theoretical framework of the study draws from the Theory of Digital Divides and the concepts of digital leisure, heterogeneity, and digital repertoire.

Controversies of digital leisure and aging

Leisure can be understood in relation to time, activity, and state of mind, or, in other words, the meanings bestowed upon time and activity (Tribe, 2015). The latter, contextual perspective maintains that leisure is, above all, determined by motivation and thereby meanings attached to the notion of time and activity, and that the question of whether something is leisure depends on the experience of the person involved (Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989; Lopez et al., 2021). 'Digital' refers to an element of technology in leisure, such as online games, hobbies, education, and shopping (Nimrod & Adoni, 2012; Sharaievska, 2017). It can be used as both a tool for learning and planning for leisure and a means to engage with it directly (Genoe et al., 2018). Moreover, digital leisure activities have unique qualities such as interactivity, anonymity, asynchronous involvement, and immersion in virtual reality, providing experiences that may differ from their offline equivalents (Nimrod & Ivan, 2022).

As Nimrod and Adoni (2012) point out, new media studies often relate to digital leisure as one sub-set of online activities whereas studies focusing on leisure refer to it as one of the subsets of

leisure activities. There is also a tendency in these studies to overlook how older adults' online and offline leisure activities complement each other (Gallistl & Nimrod, 2020). Furthermore, previous studies focusing on new media are prone to focus on specific activities, such as using social media or playing digital games, which leaves the more general discussion of the roles ICT, or digital technology, play in leisure underdeveloped (Nimrod & Ivan, 2022). Another gap can be found in the way older adults have, in many ways, been disregarded in recent studies on digital leisure (Dal Cin et al., 2021; Gallistl & Nimrod, 2020; Hebblethwaite, 2017), which suggests that older adults do not engage with digital leisure activities or that they are less prone to do it. Here, the concept of a grey divide, or the idea that older adults use less digital technology than younger age cohorts, has been introduced to explain the lack of digital leisure engagement in later life (Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2014). However, the problem with ageing and leisure suggests that although older adults would benefit from leisure involvement more than younger age cohorts, they face more constraints with the beneficial use of leisure (Nimrod & Shrira, 2016).

The significance of digital leisure as an integral element of 'good aging' for older adults has been recognised in multiple previous studies focusing on the physical (Hong et al., 2018; Iltaanen & Topo, 2022), mental (Cornwell & Waite, 2009; Santini et al., 2020), and social aspects (Ivan & Hebblethwaite, 2016; Lopez et al., 2021; Schreurs et al., 2017; Xie, 2008) of health and wellbeing. Older adults who use the Internet are likely to experience a higher level of leisure satisfaction than those who do not (Heo et al., 2011). Lifshitz et al. (2018; Nimrod & Warren-Findlow, 2020) found that only an increase in the use of Internet leisure functions contributed significantly to the subjective wellbeing of older adults and that involvement in leisure activities has a significant impact on older adults' health and comfort.

In previous studies (Lifshitz et al., 2018; Nimrod & Ivan, 2022; Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2014), it is frequently argued that one of the key factors behind the critical or negative attitudes towards digital leisure activities in later life is, following the second digital divide, the lack of digital literacy and skills. Older adults can also refrain from adopting and using digital technology due to limited access (Leonard & Hebblethwaite, 2017), various age-related physiological limitations (Quan-Haase et al., 2018) or because they do not find it interesting or beneficial to them (Genoe et al., 2018; Hänninen et al., 2021). According to Nimrod and Shrira (2016), older adults are prone to media use traditionalism, according to which, refraining from intense use of innovative practices can lead to familiar media use.

Research focusing on the active agency of older adults underlines the selective aspects of media and leisure engagement in later life. Being selective of one's media repertoire, or in this study, digital repertoire, does not necessarily mean that older adults have poor digital literacy, but rather that they have, for example, other things to do with their time (Nimrod & Warren-Findlow, 2020). In this light, it could be argued that older adults are, in fact, critical consumers of the new digital society (Ragnedda & Mutsaers, 2017). As Hebblethwaite (2017) points out, their choice to engage with various digital media and leisure, should be carefully considered not only in terms of their life course and individual preferences but also the neoliberal discourses of ageing that privileges individualism and productivity over collective, agentic experiences that may be achieved through leisure. Lastly, it is important to note that digital leisure cannot be reduced to a marginal past time that older adults engage with if they have the necessary skills. Instead, digital leisure can also serve as a positive incentive or a tool to adopt new digital skills by providing a motivational platform for learning (Lopez et al., 2021).

The role of digital technology and leisure in older adults' lives in Finland

In Finland, which is considered one of the leading countries in digitalisation (European Commission, 2022), 82% of the population aged 16–89 and 71% of older adults aged between 65–74 used the Internet on daily basis, while among the 75–89-year-olds, the respective percentage was 36. The most popular online activities in both older age groups were online banking (81/49%)

and sending and receiving emails (81/48%), whereas considerably less emphasis was given to various digital leisure activities such as listening to music (36/19%), social media (45/22%), online streaming services (17/7%), reading blogs (27/9%) or listening to podcasts (10/3%) or audiobooks (11/4%) (Official Statistics Finland, OSF, 2021). As a point of reference, in the Finnish adult population aged 16–89, the corresponding percentages were listening to music (69%), social media (70%), online streaming services (53%), blogs (37%), podcasts (33%) and audiobooks (23%) (Official Statistics Finland, OSF, 2021).

It is also important to note that although the popularity of both Internet use and leisurely use of the Internet and digital technologies have recently been on the rise among older Finnish adults; the percentages consistently decline while moving from 65–74-year-olds to 75–89-year-olds. The frequency of using digital technology and digital leisure is dependent on the many physical and cognitive changes and challenges associated with ageing (Chang et al., 2015). Additionally, there are gaps in digital infrastructure that can affect the use of digital services. Finland, for example, has the largest differences in broadband subscriptions between rural and urban areas in Europe (European Commission, 2022). Furthermore, older adults are a heterogeneous group of individuals from various backgrounds, so their needs and incentives to use digital technology, or not, vary considerably (Hänninen et al., 2021).

Methods

Data collection and participant-induced elicitation

The research material consists of 20 participant-induced elicitation interviewees (PIE) conducted in November and December 2018 in Central Finland. The participants were aged between 65 and 89. Twelve of the interviewees were female and nine were male. The disparity between the number of interviews (20) and interviewees (21) is due to one of the interviews being a pair interview. During the interviews the research participants elaborated their digital technology use by showing the researcher, which digital technologies they had adopted and how they used these technologies in their daily lives. These examples were also photographed (approximately 5–10 photographs per interview) by the researcher to visually document the fieldwork. The photographs in this research provide an interesting data set reflecting the various aspects of digital technology use in later life that could also be analysed independently from the interview data. In this study, however, the main function of the photographs was to support elicitation by evoking new topics of conversation inductively (see more Hänninen, 2020) and to give the researchers a concrete way to contextualise the interviews through visual references (Hänninen et al., 2021).

PIE is an interview technique where the interviewee is asked to take photographs dealing with the topics of the research (Bignante, 2010; Padgett et al., 2013). Elicitation, in turn, refers to a process in which a response, meaning, or answer is evoked from the interviewee by using, for example, photographs or as, in this study, digital devices and applications, which can also serve as a starting point for the interview (Hänninen, 2020). In this study, PIE served as conversational point to discuss digital technology and leisure and to make the concept of digital technology easier to grasp for the interviewees (Annear et al., 2013; Downs et al., 2019; Hänninen, 2020; Kaufmann, 2018; Kuoppamäki et al., 2022). It also served as a necessary point of reference in cases where the interviewees described their use of digital technology in a different way than they used it in practice (Hänninen, 2020), which provided valuable insight on some of the paradoxes of digital leisure in later life discussed in this study.

The research participants were recruited from a housing association that provides communal housing services to older adults over the age of 55. Although this was not required in our research design, all participants owned either a smartphone or feature phone and most of them also used other devices such as tablets or laptops. The interviews focused on what kind of digital technology, including for digital leisure, the research participants used

in their daily lives and the problems and benefits they had experienced with various digital technologies and services. The research participants were asked, for example, which digital technologies they used and why, were there any digital technologies they would have liked to use, but for some reason, could not engage with, and how they viewed digital technologies, including digital leisure, in their everyday lives. The research data comprises a total of 336 pages and the average length of each interview was approximately one hour (Kuoppamäki et al., 2022).

Data analysis

The analysis is based on systematic inductive close reading, specifically in the form of thematic analysis (Clarke et al., 2015). While the interview data represents aspects of digital technology use as whole, rather than solely focusing on digital leisure, the sections covering more general use of digital technologies provided important contextual information regarding the role and significance of digital leisure in the daily lives of the research participants. In the first part of the thematic analysis, we identified key discrepancies regarding older adults' engagement with digital leisure, or lack thereof, and explored the conflicting attitudes associated with leisure in later life. We particularly paid attention to the contradictory themes that emerged from the interview data and compared these conflicting views both within the context of individual research participants and across the interview data. In the second part of the analysis, we delved into possible explanations for why these discrepancies occur among older adults and sought to clarify the conflicting views expressed by the interviewees regarding digital leisure. In both parts of the thematic analysis, we first distinguished key themes relevant to the research questions, gathered similar accounts in the interview data for a closer examination, and formulated the main themes of the analysis. This joint effort undertaken by all the authors, was systematically repeated theme by theme under both of our research questions throughout the interview data.

Research ethics

The fieldwork was conducted following the guidelines of the Human Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of Jyväskylä that works in accordance with the national guidelines issued by the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (TENK). The research participants were provided with a research notification and a privacy notice indicating the purpose of the project, a description of the implications being involved with the study and how research data would be used, archived, and shared. The informed consent of the participants was documented before proceeding with the research.

Results

Conflicting practices and attitudes associated with digital leisure in later life

The interviewees were engaged with a variety of digital leisure activities. Although traditional media, such as TV, radio, and newspapers, were popular among the older adults, they also listened to audiobooks while doing other things, watched online TV shows, and engaged with YouTube to listen music, watch concert videos, and to share videos of their own on, for example, travel and fishing. Digital technologies were also used for seeking information, shopping, and connecting with family and friends. Considering that some of the interviewees were strongly against using any form of social media, there were also many research participants that were active online and used social media platforms, such as Instagram and Facebook, to follow their favourite artists, do charity work and engage with politics. Some of the older adults utilised digital leisure in their hobbies, like writing a blog or book, searching for knitting patterns and recipes, and playing games, such as

Mahjong, Word Snack and other brain teasers, while others engaged with it explicitly to learn new things or to just pass the time.

Based on the first theme of our analysis and previous studies (Lifshitz et al., 2018), if older adults for various reasons (e.g. access, economic resources, digital skills, personal motivation, and attitudes) cannot or do not want to use digital technology, it is less likely that they would engage in digital leisure. Thus, in this very restricted sense, digital technology use can act as a precondition to digital leisure. Drawing from the concept of digital repertoire (Hänninen et al., 2021), the heterogeneity of digital technology use in later life reflects whether older adults engage with digital leisure in multiple ways.

Secondly, we argue that similarly to digital technology use in general, some older adults engage with a variety of digital leisure activities while others have less interest in it, or alternatively, are not involved with it at all. The interviewees that had a distinctively positive take on digital technologies found several benefits to digital leisure, for instance, self-expression, learning new skills, connecting with people (see also Chiribuca & Teodorescu, 2020; Korpela et al., 2023), or as Vera, 73, points out, avoiding boredom or passing time:

[...] I think it [digital technology] is very good. You can connect with people by using it and find people and all in all it is part of the contemporary modern world. And as for the older adults, if they can just find the courage, and many of them of course do, it's entertainment. [Digital technology] is great entertainment with which the time just flies.

Drawing from the third theme of our analysis, the heterogeneity of digital technology use was also reflected in engaging with digital leisure through the devices, applications and services used by the research participants. Some of the interviewees were well versed with digital technologies to the point that digital leisure was thoroughly embedded in their everyday lives. In practice, they were engaged with at least one or more digital leisure activities and viewed them as integral part of their daily lives. Yet, they did not engage with all available applications or services associated with digital leisure, but rather concentrated on those they found interesting or enjoyable or gravitated towards digital leisure activities that supported their previous leisure preferences. The key element prevalent in this group of older adults was that digital gaps, such as a lack of access or digital skills, did not restrict their choice of digital leisure activities, but rather, they engaged with the digital leisure according to their personal preferences. There were also numerous examples of more limited involvement with digital leisure, suggesting that many of interviewees did not find it, or other related application, important or integral to their everyday lives, as Anna, 65, describes in her views on Facebook:

I have never been interested in it [Facebook]. I'm not quite sure why but there was this one time, I was visiting Helsinki with one of my friends a couple of years ago [...] because she had been recently widowed and had not had the chance to travel a lot. And then in the evening when we were at the hotel, she spent the whole time in Facebook with his son or with an acquaintance of hers. I thought that was so unnecessary. I don't really understand it. Just some silly messages [...]

Fourthly, the heterogeneity of digital leisure use often manifested through the individual and shared digital repertoires of the older adults (Hänninen et al., 2021), indicating that alongside digital gaps, the engagement with specific leisure activities was guided by the personal and social elements of everyday life. Touching on the shared aspects of digital repertoires, the influence of family and friends was obvious in the interview data, especially in terms of the adoption and use of various social media applications. Laura, 69, for example, decided to use Facebook because she wanted to get involved with her grandson's hobby:

I used to say that I would never join Facebook but then my grandson who is into disc golf was in a competition in [a country in Eastern Europe] during the summer and suddenly I had this urgent need to [log in with Facebook] because he was interviewed in [a country in Eastern Europe] and the only way to see the video was to join Facebook because the interview was available only at the Finnish Disc Golf Association's Facebook page.

Lastly, the contradictory practices and tension between digital leisure and the interviewees that reported they did not engage with digital leisure activities was tangible in the interview data. Interviewees could, for example, criticise one digital leisure activity, such as playing games, but engage with other similar activities, exhibit critical attitudes towards digital technology and leisure in general or downplay their engagement with digital leisure. This was especially evident in cases where, according to the research participants, they did not engage with digital leisure activities at all.

Analysing the whole body of the interview data, however, it turned out that recurrent examples of digital leisure activities could be found even among those interviewees that were self-reported non-users of digital leisure. In other words, although some of the research participants exhibiting a critical or negative stance towards digital leisure, maintaining that digital leisure was not for them, they did, in fact, engage with various activities that could be defined as digital leisure. During the interviews, Karl, 82, for example, first described his use of digital technologies as distinctly pragmatic by stating that ‘all I care is that I can make phone calls with it [smartphone]’ because he could only book a doctor’s appointment by phone and that he feels that everything else is ‘just too much’. Later in the interview, however, as Karl was describing his daily use of digital technologies, his engagement with digital leisure started to expand:

Sometimes I surf on the Internet and watch roadmaps and places I used to live [...] I also like to read newspapers and *Iltasanomat* and *Iltalehti* [Finnish tabloids]. That is something I do very often and then there are all these photographs available on the Internet that I browse through frequently. I also watch online videos quite often too.

Similarly, in Christina’s, 66, case, she first maintained that she was not very interested in playing games:

What disgusts me in [digital devices] is that they are all designed for gaming while I have only a very basic phone that I use. There are so many games and if you look at all the games you can download, there are just so many of them. I’m certainly not going to get involved with any of them.

Later in the same interview, however, it turned out that although Christina had a critical view on gaming, she did, in fact, engage with not only playing games but also other digital leisure as well:

Even with my laptop I only play *Solitaire* and *Bobble* [Bubble Bobble] if I get to decide. Because I don’t really like games. People invest so much in them, and everybody is playing *Angry Birds* or some such [...] And now that I have *Elisa Viihde* [a Finnish streaming service] on my television, I can watch YouTube, *Areena* and *Ruutu* [two other Finnish streaming services]. I watch them on my television when I don’t have better things to do.

In both Karl’s and Christina’s cases and beyond, with other similar accounts that were common in our interview data, there are multiple explanations for the ambivalent relationship between older adults and digital leisure. In the next part of our analysis, we will look at these discrepancies and examine where these paradoxes stem from in the everyday lives of the research participants.

Understanding the paradox between older adults and digital leisure

From a methodological standpoint, it is firstly possible that the discrepancies described in the previous section could emerge from the simple fact that the interviewee at first could not recall all the digital leisure activities they were engaged with, or that digital leisure activities varied between devices. Additionally, there were various views and definitions of digital leisure in the accounts of the research participants, which reflected the contradictions and elusiveness of digital leisure both as a daily activity and a concept. In terms of the digital repertoires of the older adult, however, the heterogeneity of digital technology use can highlight both positive and negative aspects of digital leisure in later life. According to Anna, for example, who found digital leisure an entertaining past time, watching films while waiting for someone can be convenient but only to a degree:

You can watch films if you have time and if you are waiting for someone. If I had had to wait for you [the interviewer] for half an hour, I might have watched something on my smartphone. It is a great time killer but it's not okay if it becomes a time eater. That would be missing out on something else.

As a second theme rising from our analysis, the idea of 'missing out on something' suggests that digital leisure should not be something that penetrates all areas of life but rather an activity for a specific time and place. Similar instrumental or pragmatic emphasis, underlining the necessary boundaries of digital leisure, was also prevalent in more critical accounts, such as Alex, 78, who described his engagement with digital leisure activities as sparse:

There are all sorts of [social media platforms and applications] like Facebook and others that I don't even touch. I have decided that if I manage to stay away from them it's only a good thing. The only digital technology I use is paying bills and reading email. [...] There are not much leisure activities to it, mainly practical use. And sometimes I watch Katsomo [a Finnish streaming service] but for the most part I watch regular TV.

One explanation for this distinctly pragmatic emphasis on digital leisure is that it reflects the views and attitudes of the interviewees towards digital technology in general. Many of the so-called baby boomer generations represented by the interviewees retired from the work force in 1990s and at the turn of the 2000s when digital technologies were only beginning to become a more common part of working life in Finland. As most older adults have developed daily routines outside of such media, adopting new technologies may require a concerted effort (Dal Cin et al., 2021). In practice, this means that older adults do not partake in digital leisure to the same extent as younger age cohorts for whom digital leisure plays a central role in the construction of identity and class (Ragnedda & Mutsavairo, 2017). It is also possible that traditional conceptions of the division of work and leisure or free time, that in many ways determine the meanings associated with leisure, contribute to the interviewees' critical views on digital leisure.

Furthermore, limiting digital technology only to its instrumental functions indicates that the embeddedness of digital technology, and especially digital leisure which was seen as something 'not necessary' or 'less important' by many interviewees, had not reached the same level among the participants as is characteristic to younger age cohorts. Thus, it can be argued that the critical or negative attitudes towards digital leisure varied in terms of the embeddedness of digital technology in the everyday lives of older adults in general. This view is also supported by recent studies (Genoe et al., 2018; Lifshitz et al., 2018) which indicate that older adults who use digital technology more frequently are also more likely to adopt various digital leisure activities as a part of their everyday lives.

As a third analytical theme, following the notion of personal digital repertoires, it was common for the interviewees to focus on specific applications and services that supported their individual digital leisure preferences instead of others, as Anna points out:

I'm not on Twitter or Facebook or anything. I'm not interested in them simply because I don't need them. [...] It is tiring enough to participate in all these WhatsApp groups that I am involved with, all these hobbies, The Mannerheim League for Child Welfare, Red Cross, and this multicultural organization I'm involved with. [...] Sometimes I just mute it [the smartphone] because there can be twenty messages in a row. Somebody asking something or giving the thumbs up.

In Anna's case, the reason for the limited use of social media platforms and applications was that she did not have time or a need to engage with them and found that being involved with numerous leisure activities could become overwhelming at times (see also Nimrod & Shrira, 2016; Nimrod & Warren-Findlow, 2020; Quan-Haase et al., 2018). Concurrently, however, some of the interviewees had refrained from getting involved with digital leisure despite being interested because they could not afford it, as Emma, 74, described her husband's take on online streaming services:

I think we are falling behind [engaging with digital leisure]. He [Emma's husband, Olav, 81] is a sports man and he would like to watch all these high-quality football matches [on streaming services], but we cannot afford them. We have had to accept that this is the way things are in our life and that others may have it differently.

In some cases, it was easier for the older adults to maintain that they were just not that intrigued by digital leisure than to admit that limited financial resources did not allow them to engage with activities or services within their interests. The cost of digital leisure, including both the actual service as such and the necessary devices and broadband connection, can thus limit not only the engagement with digital leisure but also the personal digital repertoires of older adults. Similar rationalisation was also associated with the problem of insufficient digital skills. It can be more comfortable to contend that one is just not that into digital leisure than admit to lacking the necessary skills to engage with digital leisure activities.

As a fourth theme based on our analysis, saving one's face connects the engagement with digital leisure to a complex fabric of emotional elements contributing to the notions of digital leisure in the interviewees' everyday lives. To follow up on the negative connotations, there were various examples of anxiety and apprehension associated with digital leisure by the older adults. These concerns ranged from the health effects of radio-frequency energy emitted by mobile and smartphones and addictive use of digital leisure, such as gaming and social media, to security issues and being afraid of technical problems causing monetary losses while shopping online. One of the most common sources of anxiety was fear of failing to use digital devices, applications, and services 'correctly', as Ella, 89, describes using the self-service lending machine at the local library:

I have never used it. I just left the books on the counter. [...] I think I was insecure, so I thought let's play it safe and let the library clerk to process them. It's just the feeling of embarrassment that, oh how stupid can you be. It was the biggest feeling of embarrassment.

The emotional components attached to digital leisure by older adults also call attention to the difference between the structural and experiential elements of leisure. As constituents of leisure, time and place can provide (digital) leisure a structural appearance, which can be seen clearest in various games, hobbies, and recreational activities. The experiential element, however, does not always comply with the structural characteristics of leisure (Callois, 1958/1961; Hänninen, 2003; Huizinga, 1947). Although certain activities can be commonly regarded as leisure, the interviewees did not necessarily define or experience them as such and correspondingly, it is possible that older adults found things that are not typically regarded as leisure enjoyable. Additionally, as Laura pointed out whilst describing her favourite game Word Snack: 'It is [useful] because you need to use your brains to do it but then it is a great way to past the time too. [...]', it was not uncommon that something was considered both useful and leisurely at the same time.

Discussion

In the first part of our analysis, we examined the conflicting practices and attitudes associated with digital leisure among older adults and concluded that the scope and frequency of digital technology use can act as a precondition to digital leisure use. In theoretical terms, this observation suggests that older adults that use digital technologies more broadly and frequently and have incorporated them as an integral element of their everyday lives, are more prone to include digital leisure as a part of their individual digital repertoire (see also Hasebrink & Domeyer, 2012; Lifshitz et al., 2018). Furthermore, we found that those older adults, who viewed digital technologies prominently in positive terms, and engaged with multiple digital leisure activities, could also find more benefits in them (see also Heo et al., 2011).

We also observed that the research participants tended to gravitate towards digital leisure activities they found interesting and overlooked digital leisure that was not necessary or important to them, regardless of their digital skills. In this light, it seems evident that the heterogeneity of digital leisure activities reflects the individual digital repertoires of a given older adult, including a variety of elements crucial to digital leisure engagement, such as personal interests, skill sets, social networks, and availability of devices, and applications (Hänninen et al., 2021).

Following the notion of personal digital repertoires, the interviewees typically focused on specific applications and services that supported their individual digital leisure preferences, instead of using all the available devices, applications, and services. The reasons behind this were, according to the research participants, that they could not find the time to engage with digital leisure, there were too many alternatives to choose from, or they could not afford to engage with digital leisure.

Furthermore, heterogeneity of digital leisure engagement reflected the individual and shared digital repertoires of the older adults. Alongside with the possible digital divides or gaps, the engagement with leisure activities followed the lines of how the interviewee's family and friends used various digital technologies and consequently engaged with digital leisure.

As a methodological observation, it is important to note that digital leisure constitutes an elusive category, ranging from hobbies and recreation to learning and daily routines, that, at times, can be difficult to define as either digital leisure or something that goes beyond these activities (Lopez Sintas et al., 2015). In fact, it was not uncommon that a given activity or practice was viewed by a research participant as both at the same time, which emphasises the experiential and individual aspects of digital leisure. This was especially apparent in accounts that touched on whether digital leisure, such as playing a digital game, can also be useful in the sense that it can enhance cognitive skills and problem solving. Additionally, the older adults participating in our study had various ideas on what constitutes digital leisure. Some of the interviewees thought of digital leisure as something that only younger people do, including mainly gaming and social media, and thus, felt disengaged with it (see also Chiribuca & Teodorescu, 2020) while others had adopted a broader scope on what they considered digital leisure.

In the second part of our analysis, we examined (2) where these paradoxes stem from in the everyday lives of the older adults. This is a key question especially in terms of the Theory of Digital Divides as it underlines the idea that skills play only a partial role on whether older adults engage with digital leisure in later life (Hänninen et al., 2021; Quan-Haase et al., 2018).

Instead, many of the research participants seemed to favour a distinctly pragmatic perspective on digital leisure regardless of their skill set. Thus, drawing from the notion of digital repertoire, which stresses the significance of individual and shared or social aspects of digital leisure, the research participants were more inclined to emphasise the instrumental aspects of digital technologies rather than recreational (see also Iversen, 2021). It was also evident that making voluntary choices between various leisure activities was important to the interviewees as they underlined the sense of independence and active agency of the older adults participating in the study (see also Chiribuca & Teodorescu, 2020).

The conflicting views on various digital leisure activities reflect a complex matrix of interrelated needs, interests, attitudes, and emotions towards both digital leisure, and in broader terms, digital technologies in later life. In terms of 'good aging', we conclude that although digital leisure can indeed support older adults' everyday life, this can only happen if older adults themselves choose to adopt a given digital leisure activity. It is also important to note that while digital technology use typically acts as a precondition to digital leisure engagement, this is not a one-way street as digital leisure can, in many ways, support new digital skills by providing a motivational platform and tools for learning (Lopez et al., 2021).

Thus, in future research, it is critical to focus not only on digital skills but also the motivation, emotions and values guiding older adults' engagement with digital leisure, and furthermore, to pay a closer attention to the educational and supportive role digital leisure can have in using and adopting digital technologies in general. Learning new skills or applying skills that were adopted through and for digital leisure is a key idea here in the sense that it underlines the adaptive and pedagogical potential of digital leisure activities (Genoe et al., 2018).

Finally, touching on cohort-based variation in later life, it is important to acknowledge that similarly to other age groups, older adults (65+) constitute a heterogeneous social group from all kinds of backgrounds (Friemel, 2016; Loos, 2018; Neves & Amaro, 2012). In our research data, for example,

only 4 out of 21 research participants were over 80 years old. In this light, considering that engagement with digital leisure typically decreases with age, it is important for future research to investigate the benefits and limitations of digital leisure engagement among the so-called ‘oldest old’, or 85-year-old or older (National Research Council, & Committee on Population, NRCCP, 2001) in later life. Another important perspective that was not examined in this study is the significance of gender in terms of digital leisure engagement. This is an interesting starting point especially taking into account the benefits of digital leisure activities to older adults and the declining number of men among the oldest old.

Conclusions

In previous studies on digital technology use and ageing older adults are typically seen as a heterogeneous group of technology users as they do not engage with digital technologies to the same extent or in the same way as younger age cohorts (Hebblethwaite, 2017; Jacobetty & Fernández-Ardèvol, 2017; Loos, 2012; Sawchuk & Lafontaine, 2020). Based on a qualitative research data ($N = 20$) in this study, we asked (1) what kind of conflicting attitudes and activities, or paradoxes, are there associated with digital leisure in later life, and secondly (2), where these paradoxes stem from in the everyday lives of older adults. Drawing from the notion of digital repertoires, we conclude that those older adults that are avid users of various digital technologies are more likely to include digital leisure activities into their individual digital repertoires (see also Hasebrink & Domeyer, 2012; Lifshitz et al., 2018). We also discovered that the older adults participating in our research gravitated towards digital leisure activities interesting and stimulating to them and overlooked digital leisure that did not meet these requirements, regardless of their digital skills. In this light, we argue that the secondary role of the digital skills emerges from the individual and shared (social) digital repertoire of a given older adult. It also highlights other key elements behind digital leisure engagement, including personal interests, social networks, and availability of devices, and applications (Hänninen et al., 2021). Based on our second research question, we discovered that there was a strong pragmatic emphasis bestowed upon digital leisure among the research participants. We argue that this very distinct instrumental perspective on digital leisure, can explain why older adults do not engage with digital leisure. The conflicting views on various digital leisure activities reflect an entangled combination of overlapping needs, interests, attitudes, and emotions towards digital leisure and digital technologies in later life. In this light, we conclude that although digital leisure can support good ageing, this can only take place if the older adults themselves see the benefits of digital leisure as a part of their daily lives.

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