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Editorial

Communication for Seniors' Inclusion in Today's Society: The Effects of Digitisation on Active Ageing

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Abstract

The progressive ageing of developed societies requires strategies and tools to ensure the well-being of older adults. The new communication paradigm offers ways to reduce the stigma associated with ageing and to improve the quality of life for older adults, but it can also create a dynamic that could put their inclusion at risk. The internet has fomented digital gaps that have exacerbated some of the exclusionary barriers faced by many older adults, while allowing a considerable number of others to maintain emotional ties with loved ones during the worst moments of the pandemic. This thematic issue addresses the different opportunities offered by Information and Communication Technology in improving the social inclusion and quality of life of seniors, but it also considers the risks that digitisation may pose by limiting certain rights of this group. Through the different articles in this issue, the repercussions of communication on the management of ageing are highlighted from different perspectives and methodological approaches. In this way, the complexity of the issue has been revealed, along with the need to address it from positive and constructive perspectives that reassess the role of older adults in the societies in which they live.

Keywords

active ageing; digital inclusion; digital literacy; digitisation; older adults; seniors; communication; technological skills

Issue

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1. Introduction

The exponential ageing of the world's population, which is due to the increasing longevity of individuals, has prompted developed societies to design strategies that will ensure the well-being of older adults (WHO, 2021). Beyond the justifiable concern for the economic sustainability of these well-developed systems, the required involvement of older adults in citizenship and social participation has started to be re-established from different perspectives. Nevertheless, digitisation has curtailed the interaction and participation of many seniors who are at risk of social exclusion, at least in cases

where they lack sufficient digital capital. Thus, the digital divide has exacerbated the inequalities already affecting this vulnerable group (Mihelj et al., 2019). Despite this situation, the positive influence that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) can have on the quality of life of older adults and, consequently, on the promotion of active, healthy and inclusive ageing has also been pointed out (Colombo et al., 2015; Llorente-Barroso, Sánchez-Valle, & Viñarás-Abad, 2023). Thus, digital literacy is highly important for this demographic group (Abad-Alcalá, 2014), as well as the need to implement strategies that inspire their civic participation (Ferrucci et al., 2020).

Given the context, this thematic issue analyses and reflects on the opportunities offered by the internet and ICT in improving the quality of life of older people and contributing to their social inclusion. From highly diverse and sometimes hybrid approaches, a total of 10 articles have been collected, which explore variables that have an impact on the digital inclusion and social participation of older adults. There are writings that insist on the necessary involvement of public institutions in order to standardise a positive digital experience among silver surfers. Other articles suggest digital literacy initiatives and/or non-formal support to promote the true acquisition of technological skills by the older population.

2. ICT as an Instrument for Inclusion and Participation by Older People

Research on the digital divide has identified up to three levels that intensify the inequalities already affecting the most vulnerable demographic groups (Mihelj et al., 2019). These gaps include the following levels: differences in access to digital resources, or the first level divide (van-Deursen & van-Dijk, 2019); general digital skills and use of ICT, or the second level divide (Hargittai, 2002); and benefits resulting from the use of ICT at the social, economic, cultural, and personal levels, or the third level divide (van-Deursen & Helsper, 2018). Older adults are one of the audiences most severely impacted by these digital divides, but they show an increasingly positive attitude toward technology, as they are gradually discovering the social, economic, personal, and cultural benefits of using ICT (van-Deursen & Helsper, 2018). In this regard, the potential of digitisation in promoting active ageing, which is beneficial for developed societies, has also been highlighted (Llorente-Barroso, Anzanello-Carrascoza, & Ferreira, 2023).

To better understand the impact of these gaps on the senior population, the article by Carlo and Buscicchio (2023) shows how previous professions and the current employment status of seniors (retired or active) have an impact on their use of the internet and ICT in their home environment. For their part, the results of Papí-Gálvez and La Parra-Casado (2023) suggest that socio-demographic aspects such as education, purchasing power, age, and gender have an influence on the status of participants with regard to the digital divide, and that the family context, as well as the characteristics of some digital service providers, explain the digital and social exclusion of some of these adults.

On the other hand, the digital divide does not affect all older adults in the same way. Various studies have found intra-generational inequalities that identify different clusters of older internet navigators according to the uses they make of technology (Llorente-Barroso, Sánchez-Valle, & Viñarás-Abad, 2023; Vulpe & Crăciun, 2020), cybersecurity concerns (Elueze & Quan-Haase, 2018), online shopping habits (Viñarás-Abad et al., 2022), and their use of e-government (Sánchez-Valle et al.,

2022). Fernández-Ardèvol et al. (2023) have identified three styles of mobile practices among these individuals, ranging from the most sophisticated (diversified and advanced uses of the mobile phone) to the most restrictive (simpler uses). These results provide valuable information that can be used to focus policies on promoting more effective inclusion of the senior population.

The classifications of silver surfers reflect diversity in their digital capital that must be addressed so that the most vulnerable older adults are not left out of contemporary society. The TechSAGE model works in this area, and is intended to be an operational initiative to promote the age-friendly redesign of ICT (Mitzner et al., 2018). Within this thematic issue, Ferrer-Mavárez et al. (2023) propose the redesign of an employment web portal for older adults (Servisenior) from a UX methodological perspective based on user-centred design. As such, these authors offer a way to enhance the usability and universal accessibility of inclusive digital tools in workspaces.

Social media have been designed as a space for the digital participation of users, which can also contribute significantly to their inclusion. These applications have improved the digital capital of older adults (Hsu et al., 2021; O'Brien et al., 2021) by enhancing their well-being and independence (Simons et al., 2021). In addition, social networks have been established as a shared virtual space for the exchange of ideas and citizen participation. Specifically, the limited empirical analysis of the involvement of older adults in the socio-political discourse on social networks has encouraged research by Sánchez-Valle (2023). Her results reveal that seniors' negative perceptions of the information and opportunities for socio-political participation on social networks are related to the dissemination of fake news, while their positive perceptions are linked to the interaction with other users enabled by such networks.

3. Institutional involvement in the promotion of active ageing

In order to prevent the digital and social exclusion of certain older adults from completing tasks that are essential nowadays, such as e-government and e-commerce (Sánchez-Valle et al., 2022; Viñarás-Abad et al., 2022), it is necessary to involve both companies and public institutions. Several of the articles included in this thematic edition have carried out research along these lines.

Olsson and Viscovi (2023) have focused their research on the relationship that Swedish public institutions develop with their citizens over 65 years of age, with the slogan "digital first." Their results show that the three levels of the digital divide, which are access, use, and outcomes, are related to the citizens' access to resources that are material, discursive, and social, as well as to their age and previous experience with computer devices.

Rivoir and Reilly (2023) explore the results of a digital literacy programme based on the experiences of older

adults with Uruguay's new National Comprehensive Health System (SNIS). The study proposes potential digital literacy initiatives that would allow older people to understand and use computerized health systems effectively.

Kolotouchkina et al. (2023) offer an empirical-conceptual view on the commitment of governments toward achieving the digital inclusion of older adults in the process of making a digital transition of cities toward age-friendly models. Their results reveal the need to develop a coordinated plan of action to achieve the following: foster digital literacy among older adults; standardize a positive digital experience among these users; and help them break down the barriers that ageism has imposed on the digital environment.

4. Training Required to Promote the E-Inclusion of Seniors

Along with an ageing population, developed societies have witnessed extraordinary advances in ICT that have made the digital literacy of older adults a priority, in order to allow them to adapt effectively to technological changes (Abad-Alcalá, 2014). Recent studies on this issue point to training models that combine self-regulated learning with guided literacy blocks adapted to different profiles of older adults, according to their level of digital competence (Schlomann et al., 2022). In this regard, online gaming may emerge as a method for improving the digital capital of this social group. Regalado et al. (2023) assess the impact of older adults' participation in digital games on active and healthy ageing. Their findings show a positive influence from such games, as well as online communities, in fostering the participation of older people in society, their acquisition of digital competence (informational, communicative, and security skills), and their well-being.

In general, ICT-mediated learning has had a positive impact on the emotional well-being of older adults (Llorente-Barroso et al., 2022). Social networks also play an important role in older adults' digital learning, due to the fact that they foster social contact, which promotes shared and reciprocal learning among seniors, and the result is a positive impact on their quality of life (Caliandro et al., 2021). Along these lines, Korpela et al. (2023) examine informal digital peer support to promote the social inclusion of older adults in Finland. Their results suggest that this type of learning is perceived by seniors as an opportunity to strengthen bonds between peers of a similar age or life situation.

5. Conclusions

The research gathered for this thematic issue has helped increase the knowledge base regarding the implications of multiple and hybrid communication practices for the digital and social inclusion of older adults. Firstly, by using diverse methodologies, the studies herein offer

approaches that explore the opportunities provided by ICT as tools for the digital inclusion and social participation of older adults. The second block of studies addresses the necessary involvement of public institutions in making a commitment to active ageing, in order to contribute to their social inclusion through the opportunities offered by new forms of communication. Finally, research has also been included that explores the possibilities offered by digital literacy in providing older adults with the technological skills and social support necessary for them to open doors and participate in today's society.

It is difficult to outline priorities for action in the field of digital communication aimed at improving the quality of life and inclusion of older adults. In fact, several of the contributions included in this thematic issue address more than one of the topics discussed above. However, what is clear is the importance of continuing to work on recognising older adults as one of the pillars of developed societies, who should be involved in all the dynamics of citizenship.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest involved in the work herein.

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