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Types of Digital Presence among Seniors

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Abstract

The article is a review and summarizes the knowledge in the presented research area; it also integrates and interprets the results of scientific research to date. It aims to diagnose the scope of seniors' participation in digital media. The presented narrative is an extension of the thesis that activity in digital media (especially in social media) is still perceived as reserved for the younger generation. The text also refers to Berne's transactional analysis, assuming that seniors treat digital media functionally and relationally as companions in everyday life. The research method used in the study was the analysis of the literature on the subject and analyzing statistical data regarding the discussed issue. The analysis showed three main problems that prevent seniors from using digital media on a broader scale. Firstly, there is a limited scope of digital media use by seniors in general; second, there is reduced activity related to age and well-being; and third, there needs to be standard system solutions that increase the digital competencies of seniors. The value of the study lies in identifying the main factors enabling seniors to use digital media actively.

Keywords: seniors, new technologies, digital media, social media, active senior.

Introduction

The problem of aging societies, which is receiving more and more attention, poses new challenges to the Polish state's health, social, and educational policies. The growing percentage of people over 65, combined with the dynamic

development of new technologies, should prompt us to look at how seniors cope with transferring many forms of social life to the digital space. As the statistical data show, despite the constantly growing group of seniors using digital media, their use by this group is still limited [Use of technology..., 2021; Digital exclusion... 2021]. Making full use of the opportunities offered by the Internet is undoubtedly connected, on the one hand, with the lack of access to the network or digital tools, and on the other hand, with the lack of digital competencies, leading to digital exclusion, understood as exclusion from functioning in the information society (Jedlińska, 2018, p.226) and social and civic life (Czerski, 2020, p.16). Digital exclusion also significantly reduces social well-being (Jedlińska, 2018, p.226) and is an element of a broader phenomenon called digital inequality. This phenomenon is nothing more than the social exclusion of people who do not use digital media, forcing them to passively participate in the life of a new digital society. However, another problem in the use of new technologies by older people is, on the one hand, health problems, and the other - fear of using technologies that older people associate with those available only to young people (Wyszkowska et al., 2018, p.145).

According to the Central Statistical Office, among people aged 60 to 74, 61.1% of respondents used the Internet in 2022 (GUS, 2023a). This means a successive increase in new network users each year (compared to 2020, this is an increase of 10 percentage points). This group regularly uses the Internet, in which the frequency of use is correlated with age (among people with primary education, 26%; users with secondary education – 55.8%; higher education – 90.6%) (GUS, 2023a). Older people most often used the Internet to look for information about goods and services (46.7%), read the news (44.8%), look for health information (37.7%), and send and receive an e-mail (34.3%), and use instant messaging – 31.9% (GUS, 2023a). 24.6% of surveyed seniors use social networking sites. At the same time, the percentage of people who have never used the Internet is systematically decreasing (from 34.5% in 2021 to 29.9% in 2022) (GUS, 2023b).

Broadly understood communication via the Internet, especially social networks, plays an increasingly important role in establishing and maintaining interpersonal contacts and mental well-being. Reeves and Nass already in 2000 showed that people tend to treat digital devices relationally, assigning their personality the ability to influence our emotions and participate in our lives (Reeves, Nass, 2000, p. 194, after Łęski, 2017, p.122). We often hear seniors talk on their smartphones, for example, thanking them for connecting with their family, completing a task, showing a movie, or vice versa: they get angry with them, irritating them. Research conducted by Łęski shows that we attribute a structure to digital tools.

1. Seniors as users of digital media

Seniors are an increasingly numerous social group - the aging of Polish society is a fact today. At the same time, the technological development of societies results in the need to include seniors in the digital world and "manage" their presence there, especially since the process of entering the "digital market" of a group of older people with already developed digital competencies has begun.

The use of new technologies allows seniors to feel empowered in their own social, economic, and cultural life; independent in the provision of goods and various goods; gives quick access to information from the country and the world; eliminates the information gap; increases the sense of quality of life (Kowalik, 2000, p.74). It is also a new form of civic and public dialogue (Popielec, 2014, p.97); it allows for self-education and competence development and reduces the problem of loneliness and alienation (Gryczka, 2012, p.108).

Digital skills are slowly no longer an attribute of only the young generation - seniors are quickly catching up in this area, developing their digital competencies, and increasingly using digital media. One of the reasons is that each year, the group of seniors is joined by more and more digitally experienced people, and the youngest seniors quickly learn technological innovations from the younger generation, encouraging them to use digital tools. However, the oldest group of seniors still needs strong support in using digital media. Research by the *National Media Institute* from 2021 shows that seniors in Poland use information and communication technologies to a small extent. The most popular medium in the 65+ group is still TV (92.3%); only 13.8% use a laptop with Internet access.

Meanwhile, as some researchers show, changing media habits (e.g., fewer hours spent in front of the TV in favor of more frequent use of digital media) may benefit seniors. According to Fancourt and Steptoe (2019, p.35), longer viewing of television (over 3.5 hours a day) leads to weakening some cognitive functions. Due to the lack of stimulation and passive reception, long-term television viewing may impair developmentally beneficial activities, impair memory, and reduce the volume of gray matter in the brain and, as a result, even accelerate dementia (Rettner, 2021, p. 120). It is also worth noting that the Internet (in the 55-74 age group) is more willingly used by people who do not have significant health problems that make it challenging to use it (e.g., vision problems) – this is a group of as many as 61.6% (GUS, 2021).

In turn, the "Mature Consumers in Poland" report by the "ARC Rynek i Opinia" research institute shows that 71% of people over 60 already use the Internet. The most popular social media and messengers in this group are Facebook (35%), WhatsApp (33%), Messenger (32%) and YouTube (24%) (Tkaczyk, 2023, p.31). A social media market study conducted by *Gemius* shows that peo-

ple 55+ spend a relatively long time on TikTok - on average 55 minutes a day (Gemius, 2023), while slightly younger users from the 35-44 age group spent 1 hour 22 minutes a day there. One of the biggest surprises of this report is the analysis of social media users (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube) divided into age groups. In 2022, the largest group of recipients were people aged 55-75. In second place were users aged 35-44 and in last place - the youngest, under 14. This research shows that social media is no longer just a place for teenagers and young adults. Social media, especially during the pandemic, have become more popular among seniors as a contact tool. Previous research has already shown (Erickson, 2013, p.243) that the well-being of older people most often depends on the relationships they maintain with their loved ones and other members of society. Digital media can play an essential role in helping older people maintain these relationships. Reduce their sense of isolation while increasing their sense of empowerment. They are essential for people whose families are geographically distant, allowing them to maintain family ties regardless of the place and time in which family members are located.

It is worth emphasizing here that initiatives supporting seniors' use of new technologies are becoming increasingly common in Poland. Such activities aimed at counteracting digital exclusion and improving digital competencies are carried out by commercial, educational, non-governmental, social (e.g., senior clubs), and cultural institutions (Tomczyk, 2010). These valuable initiatives should be one of the priorities of governmental and non-governmental institutions.

2. Digital media and the sense of meaning in seniors' lives

The meaning of life is often understood as a driving force for action, the goal of which is to continue one's existence satisfactorily and complete it as best as possible. The meaning of life underlies subsequent actions and decisions, inspires us to be active, and makes us strive for self-fulfillment, regardless of age (Zajac, 2002, p.54). Paying attention to the sense of meaning in life in older people seems particularly important. Many factors determine the meaning of life. These include social change, quality of life, everyday needs, and loneliness (Pikuła, 2016, p.9). Education of older people should be mentioned as necessary in the context of the meaning of life because it is science that enables them to search for it. Learning is a basic positive aging strategy that leads to positive thinking about changing age (Hill, 2008, p.75). Research shows that higher-educated people have a greater sense of meaning in life (Zajac, 2002, p.53).

The life of seniors is associated with new challenges and difficulties. These are undoubtedly unmet needs, which Tibbitts includes: playing social roles (especially those lost with age), maintaining social contacts (including with peers),

self-expression and sense of achievement, mental stimulation, relationships with family, and spiritual satisfaction (Tibbitts, 1960). Such needs can be met, at least in part, by participation in the digital world. The area related to maintaining social relationships and self-expression can especially be well developed through social media. The education accompanying the use of new technologies (both institutional and - more often - non-institutional) will significantly increase the sense of quality of life and delay the process of biopsychological aging. When they retire, seniors must redefine themselves, their social roles, and activities – there is even a need to redefine the value of life.

A growing problem in this period of life is social isolation, a sense of loneliness, and a lack of meaning in life. In some cases, such meaning in life may be provided by activity on social media, which seniors are increasingly willing to use. Research conducted by Lenhart and Duggan (2013) on a sample of 2,252 people showed a rapid increase in people over 50 years of age as users of social networking sites (an increase from 22% of social media users to 42%). In social media, the surveyed seniors valued the ability to contact family, friends, and acquaintances, help manage daily communication, and share information about themselves with others: photos, videos, messages, and status updates. 47% of social media users were aged 50-64, and 26% were over 65. The respondents most often used Facebook (52%), and 11% used Twitter (currently: X). These studies also showed that one of the reasons why seniors still need to use social media more is problems with high-speed Internet and health (Lenhart, Duggan, 2013).

Older people who use social media declare that they enjoy better well-being and health than those who do not use digital media. Paradoxically, this is the only social group whose use of social media increases their mental well-being (unlike, for example, children and adolescents). Research by Chopik (2016) shows that the use of social media by seniors aged 65+ is prevalent (N=591). Seniors declared a positive attitude towards new technologies. The vast majority responded that they were "delighted with the ability to use technology (95% of respondents). 30% said that new technologies are too complicated, so they do not use them. More frequent use of new technologies (including social media) was associated with better self-assessment of health, fewer chronic diseases (such as hypertension and diabetes), higher (subjective) well-being, and fewer depressive symptoms.

Moreover, the researcher observed that the use of social media was accompanied by a lower sense of loneliness and a sense of successful interpersonal relationships (Chopik, 2016). Moreover, loneliness is strongly associated with harmful health habits, such as overeating, lack of exercise, and avoiding people (Chopik, 2016). However, the researcher emphasizes that it is impossible to answer whether the surveyed seniors are healthier because they use social media or whether their willingness to use social media is simply because they are as-

sumed to be healthier and happier. However, there is a potential link between loneliness and Internet use, and Internet use and better mental health (e.g., no depression).

3. Self-creation of seniors in the digital space – senior as a teacher

Older people see the media as an opportunity to develop their interests and passions (Szmigielska et al., 2012, p.146), educate themselves (Maczuga, 2018, p.38), and share knowledge, experience, and interests. This requires an entirely different type of participation in the digital world: being active, interacting, creating content, and having digital competencies. Following the European Commission, I assume that: "Digital competence involves the confident, critical and responsible use of, and engagement with, digital technologies for learning, at work, and for participation in society. It includes information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, media literacy, digital content creation (including programming), safety (including digital well-being and competencies related to cybersecurity), intellectual property related questions, problem-solving, and critical thinking" (Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, 22 May 2018, ST 9009 2018 INIT).

Adults often have excellent development potential, which they should activate and nurture (Pietrasiniński, 1996, p. 12). The ability to use these potential opportunities is called self-creation. This concept includes intentional and unconscious activities for developing oneself, working on oneself, self-education, and self-education (Błaszczak, 2014, p. 97). It happens that such potential can only be realized in old age. Seniors have time to fulfill old, unfulfilled desires; they can follow their dreams and aspirations. It can be said that such a zone of self-creation will be the transition from one "I" - focused on meeting the expectations of others, to a new "I," in which there is finally room for self-realization. Indeed, such a pattern can be found by listening to the statements of seniors who create on social media. "Silver influencers" and "Granfluencers" – are increasingly common terms for people over 60 who create on social media.

According to Margaret Mead's concept of four cultural systems, the digital world (and the use of new technologies) is the domain of figurative culture, in which younger and older people are equal partners, drawing from each other (Mead, 2000). The young generation most often teaches the older generation how to use new technologies and shows how social media works and how to be active there. Young people are a source of knowledge in this area for seniors; they are a source of advice and support and take preventive actions against digital exclusion. Therefore, generations can learn from each other and stimulate

and motivate each other to act. As Jedlińska (2013) showed, people who have finished their professional careers are ready to share their knowledge and experience with other members of society, and - if their health allows and they have the opportunity - they do it willingly to the benefit of their well-being (Jedlińska, 2013, pp.134-135). People active in social media, such as the creators of: "Życie zaczyna się po 90" ("*Life Begins after 90*"), "Clever Grandma" ("*Mądra Babcia*") or Jan Adamski, and foreign ones: "The Spanish King," gather several dozen thousand followers of various ages and successfully run profiles on Instagram or TikTok. Often, their grandchildren start running the account on their behalf, and over time, when the seniors feel more confident, they run it themselves, introducing their content. "The Spanish King" runs his account with his granddaughter, where he shows how to enjoy life and what the body of a person over 60 looks like. Beata Borucka ("*Wise Grandma - Talks from the Cottage*" – "*Mądra Babcia – Gadki z Chatki*") talks about what it is like to be a grandmother, an older person who has already lived most of her life and who can share her experience. Instagram accounts of fashion seniors are also popular. Jan Adamski is an influencer who discusses style, class, elegance, and chic. He advises choosing *accessories for a given occasion or tying a tie*. In turn, "Szafiarka Dorka" ("*Wardrobe Woman Dorka*"), i.e., Dorota Świętoniowska, shows that even after sixty, you can dress in youth stores, that fashion has no specifics and is for everyone. There are also accounts of senior DJs - one of the first Polish seniors creating online was "DJ-Wika," Wirginia Szmyt, who not only shared her passion for music on social media (the oldest DJ not only in Poland but also in the world), but she is also a social activist involved in senior issues. Virginia breaks stereotypes regarding the image of Polish seniors and shows that at any age, there is time to pursue your passions. Moreover, virtual social spaces connect their users, and the paths of teenagers and seniors often "cross" in the form of comments, providing valuable exchanges.

4. Senior as a student

One of the spaces for self-realization in retirement is the space of intergenerational relationships. The benefits of remaining in good relationships can be noted at the gerontological level (for the senior) and the general social level (for the community). Such intergenerational maintenance of exemplary personal, social, and existential relationships is conducive to finding the meaning of life, defining oneself, and developing (Dubas, 2016, p.302). Only education towards, in, through, and for old age guarantees a satisfactory passage of the aging process (Szarota, 2014, p.14). Szarota understands it as preparation for the last stage of life, shaping certain attitudes and developing appropriate personality

traits. He also notes that our intense times require us to turn to past experiences and draw on older generations' wisdom (Szarota, 2014, p.14). For this to happen, a senior must have the right attitude towards old age and the passing of life. Only people with a positive attitude towards old age can "infect others with life." The problem that stands in the way of digital media activity is often health and physical limitations resulting from age. Visual perception and motor skills (e.g., hand tremors, rheumatism, farsightedness, cataracts, glaucoma) can significantly limit the pleasure of using digital devices. Adjusting digital devices to a person's physical capabilities helps reduce these inconveniences. However, while on a desktop computer, we can use a special keyboard and mouse to increase the font size and image brightness, the smartphone market firmly excludes older people in this respect. Only a few devices available on the market with full digital functionality take age-related dysfunctions into account.

Undoubtedly, one area of implementing the excellent aging model is education, in the context of seniors, which is understood as later life learning - learning at later stages of life, which provides for continuous improvement of competencies throughout an individual's life. Seniors who overcame their fears and entered the online world eagerly take advantage of the opportunity to further their education, improve their competencies, and develop their interests by participating in courses, webinars, and training.

Universities of the Third Age (UTA) play an important role here; they aim to activate seniors in the social, physical, and intellectual spheres and counteract old age's growing stigmatization (Jakubaszek, 2014, p. 88). Unfortunately, only a tiny percentage of seniors still use their offer - according to research, only 1% of all people over 65 (Pikuła, 2020, p. 184).

UTA introduced media-related content into their programs to adapt to the rapidly changing reality and used new technologies as teaching resources (Wróblewska, 2007, p. 82). Using online resources, social networking sites, e-learning courses, and webinars has become an everyday part of UTA functioning. The forms of work with seniors have also partially changed: distance education is now a large part of the UTA offer, requiring seniors to improve their digital competencies but also allowing them to tailor education to their own needs (Błaszczak, 2014, p. 100). Research conducted by Grogor and Kaczorowska-Spychalska (2015) among UTA students showed that as many as 71% of respondents used social media. However, such a high percentage may be related to the specificity of the research sample selection: UTA students are usually enrolled by active people with better health and well-being and more education than the average population. These people spent about an hour on social media (46.6%), and 38.6% even up to three hours daily (Gregor & Kaczorowska-Spychalska, 2015, p. 12).

Senior Clubs (most often run by communes, parishes, foundations, and associations) are also popular among seniors, and they perform the same function as UTA: they activate seniors in many fields. It is worth mentioning their modern alternative: digital e-senior clubs, i.e., virtual spaces intended for older people, presenting them with a wide range of forms of activity, helping them solve everyday problems related to health, public life, etc. These places are entirely interactive. They offer users webinars and videos but also perform a social function: they enable participation in closed groups or discussion forums where seniors make new friends, discuss, and exchange views. Senior clubs also meet information and educational needs - they use new technologies that seniors are increasingly willing to learn.

Summary

Modern seniors are increasingly curious about the digital world, braver and more aware. Although sometimes lost, they are eager to learn and become more and more digitally competent. They are also more likely to break the habits of learned helplessness or beliefs about the inappropriateness of behavior at a certain age in favor of actively influencing their future. Skibińska encourages seniors to consciously make critical decisions regarding the present and the future (Skibińska, 2007, p. 61).

During the pandemic, seniors noticed that there is also a place for them on the Internet and a chance for offline activities that they cannot always participate in. Locked at home, they were motivated - most often by family members - to enter the digital world. They overcame their fear and started digital education because, fearing social exclusion, they wanted to learn something new. They noticed that thanks to such education, they could be more self-reliant, independent, and active. They also broke certain generational stereotypes: They showed that joy, activity, and vitality are not reserved only for young people but can be shared by every generation, including seniors. Seniors' involvement in the use of digital media can be treated as an example of taking on new roles and fitting into the active aging paradigm. The Active Aging Index (AAI) promoted by the European Union has been one of the tools since 2012 that allows countries to develop senior policies and estimate the potential of this age group that can be used. In the Active Aging Index rankings, Poland could fare better. In the categories of employment, social activity and participation, independence, and health and safety, we were placed in one of the last positions (33 out of 100 possible points). These data clearly show that Poland still has a lot to do in terms of systemic solutions and activities aimed at activating seniors. One such activity may be the development of seniors' digital competencies, with the participation

of relatives or appropriate institutions. If taken appropriately, such actions will positively impact the broadly understood well-being and activity of seniors.

Much research still focuses on the reasons why seniors do not use technology (Cotten et al., 2014), showing the digital divide between generations (Carcvalho et al., 2014; Hills et al., 2012; Norris, 2010). They show a decidedly depressing image of seniors who lack the will and motivation to adapt to the changing world and have a negative approach to new technologies. Although there are undoubtedly individual differences in seniors' approach to new technologies, the picture of seniors using digital media may be less gloomy than we thought until recently. A large group of seniors sees the benefits of new technologies (Wagner, Hassanein, 2020), especially when it comes to maintaining relationships with loved ones (Cotten, Anderson, 2013). As long as their health and well-being allow it, they are increasingly willing to use the solutions offered by digital media, seeing them as opportunities to take full advantage of social life. Their positive attitude towards digital media can also improve their well-being – digital competencies are essential in this context. Their absence or low level may constitute a practical obstacle that digitally excludes seniors.

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Formy aktywności cyfrowej seniorów

Streszczenie

Artykuł ma charakter przeglądowy i stanowi podsumowanie wiedzy w zaprezentowanym obszarze badawczym, integruje też i interpretuje dotychczasowe wyniki badań naukowych. Jego celem jest diagnoza zakresu udziału seniorów w korzystaniu z mediów cyfrowych. Zaprezentowana narracja jest rozwinięciem tezy, że aktywność w mediach cyfrowych (zwłaszcza w mediach społecznościowych) wciąż jeszcze postrzegana jest jako ta zarezerwowana dla młodszego pokolenia. W tekście odwołano się też do analizy transakcyjnej Berne’a, przyjmując, że seniorzy traktują media cyfrowe nie tylko użytkowo, ale i relacyjnie, jako towarzysza w codziennym życiu. Metodą badawczą wykorzystaną w opracowaniu była analiza literatury przedmiotu oraz analiza danych statystycznych dotyczących poruszanego zagadnienia. Przeprowadzona analiza wykazała trzy główne problemy, które uniemożliwiają korzystanie przez seniorów z mediów cyfrowych na szerszą skalę. Po pierwsze: nikły zakres wykorzystywania mediów cyfrowych przez seniorów w ogóle; po drugie: obniżenie aktywności seniorów związanej z wiekiem i samopoczuciem; po trzecie: brak powszechnych rozwiązań systemowych, zwiększających kompetencje cyfrowe seniorów. Wartość opracowania polega na identyfikacji głównych czynników umożliwiających seniorom aktywne korzystanie z mediów cyfrowych.

Słowa kluczowe: seniorzy, nowe technologie, media cyfrowe, media społecznościowe, aktywny senior.