There is a meme that has been circulating the internet for a while. It pictures an older grey-haired lady leaning towards the computer screen holding her reading glasses so she can see what it says. The caption reads: “Tracking my cookies? They’ll never get my recipe!” This meme, like many of the others that have mushroomed online in recent years, adopts a familiar theme. It relies on the idea that older adults and new technologies do not necessarily go together and, implicitly, that the culture dominated by the imperative of connectivity and being always “on” is mostly inhabited by and belongs to the young. Memes like this one are seemingly informed by stereotypical understandings of older adults and technology, portraying them as not, particularly tech-savvy, dependent on assistance and support and generally not interested in learning and acquiring new skills. Put simply, such stereotypes imply that older adults and new technologies are often mutually exclusive categories.

As Pickering (2015) suggests, stereotyping is a way of both representing and judging people in fixed and unyielding terms. Rather than being viewed as complex individuals with distinct qualities, stereotyped portrayals reduce people to a fixed category and the limited narrative that informs it. Often these categories come with homogenising and confining attributes that are difficult to question. Recent research shows that older adults are reluctant to use technology because of the threat of confirming ageist stereotypes that define them as incapable or incompetent (Mariano et al., 2021). Stereotype threat may thus be an important barrier to technology acceptance and usage in late adulthood. Such stereotypical representations, however, do not occur in a vacuum. They are part of a specific cultural context in which they are evoked, reproduced and disseminated.

The goal of this chapter is to explore and understand how older adults cope with everyday life in a culture of connectivity or, to be more precise, how older users of technology navigate and negotiate everyday life in an ageist culture and in an unfamiliar context where digital technologies and progressively more expansive digitalisation have often been considered the new normal. Ageism is a form of discrimination that has been defined as the expression of negative behaviours or attitudes towards individuals based solely on their age (Butler, 1969, see also Rosales et al., 2023 in this volume).
This chapter departs from the idea that both cultural and structural forms of ageism are an integral part of the culture of connectivity. It applies a cultural sociological perspective that investigates the processes of meaning-making that people attach to their practices and interactions (Spillman, 2020). Instead of investigating, for instance, how the media represents older adults and how the technology industry discriminates against them, this chapter looks at how older adults themselves navigate and negotiate everyday life in a culture of connectivity, how they make sense of embedded power relations and understand the notion that in this culture, the social world often discriminates against them by parodying their use and understanding of digital technologies. It asks:

- How do older adults understand and experience life with digitalisation and digital technologies?
- How do they respond to some stereotypical representations of older adults and digital technologies?

This chapter begins with a definition of culture and a discussion of the conundrum or paradox often present within it of connectivity/disconnection. It then moves on to address the problem of ageism in the culture of connectivity followed by a discussion of the empirical material and method employed in the study. The results are presented under the headings of three distinct themes, such as self-ageism, the “we/them” distinction and responding to ageist stereotypes, that were identified during the analysis. They are then discussed along with some concluding remarks that suggest that getting older in a digital culture implies living and coping with digital ageism.

The paradox of an “ordinary” culture of connectivity

By linking the materiality of language to social relations, Raymond Williams (1958) has demonstrated that culture is ordinary for everyone and not only for the elite. He points out that culture’s ordinariness lies in its materiality. This can refer, for instance, to the proliferation of objects in everyday life, such as coffee mugs or clothes, or even mobile devices and services like telephones, laptops or streaming websites like Netflix and Spotify. These “things” fill our lives but are often taken for granted. Williams’ understanding of culture as material means that any analysis of culture or cultural practices, ideas, values or forms needs to consider the social conditions behind the production and circulation of objects, products and services and the importance of language as co-constitutive of those conditions. As McGuigan and Moran (2014) argue, “language strains and changes at the limits to enable new ways of seeing and acting; [it] is stretched and adapted in order to accommodate and create new practices and experiences” (p. 173). Such an understanding of culture is based on the perception of language as “built into our living” (McGuigan & Moran, 2014,
McGuigan and Moran use as an example the concept of “social class”. The concept not only indicates the way we describe social relations but also how we order and organise them. In other words, the materiality of culture encompasses both the material objects that surround us and the way we approach, think, and talk about them. This understanding of culture invites the reflection that stereotypical understandings of certain groups, such as older people, for instance, do not solely refer to biases against them and their exclusion on a personal or individual level. They also encompass structural and institutional practices, some unintentional, such as a lack of representation or wider cultural biases and assumptions. When it comes to culture of connectivity, then, these assumptions could include the idea that older adults are not interested in computers or digital devices, that they are not particularly tech-savvy or willing to learn new skills and are not interested in innovation and progress. Consequently, if we implicitly assume that culture of connectivity and new media technologies belong to the young, then older adults are automatically labelled “outsiders”. They become “strangers” in their own culture, a culture which potentially puts them at risk of discrimination based on their age. Simply put, they become victims of ageism (WHO, 2021).

In her 2013 book *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*, José van Dijck describes, by focusing on five particular media platforms, how social media has altered the networked media landscape. She emphasises the fact that social media has become an intrinsic element of mediated culture that, in turn, has deep political, economic and cultural implications (Van Dijck, 2013). Regarding the last of these implications, van Dijck argues that a *culture of connectivity* has developed and has become an intrinsic element of everyday life. She defines this as, among other things, a blurring of the boundaries between public and private life and normalisation of what she names “the platformed sociality”, namely the “coded structures [that] are profoundly altering the nature of our connections, creations, and interactions” (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 20). Culture of connectivity can therefore be understood as an everyday context that is different from the period prior to the advent of digital media. It is now an environment where the nature of social connections, human interactions, and sociality are primarily informed by the organisation of social exchange based on neoliberal economic principles such as effectivity, privatisation, resourcefulness, individualisation and commercialisation (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 21). For instance, the technological innovation of “sharing”, “liking” and “following” buttons has transformed these physical actions into social values, which have, in turn, affected “cultural practices and legal disputes” (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 20). The dominant principles of economic exchange make connectivity and staying online a source of pressure, both from peers and social networking platforms alike. In other words, in a connected culture, *connectivity* becomes a social value and is almost perceived as a necessity. Being connected is simply taken for granted.
In a similar fashion, Brubaker (2020) suggests that digital hyperconnectivity is a condition where everyone is connected, at least potentially, to everyone else. This type of connectivity constitutes a relatively new phenomenon that has characterised the past decade and is tightly related to the rise of smartphones and social media networking platforms. Brubaker (2020) argues that, alongside the rise of new obligations, expectations, and anxieties, we are facing the transformation of both social relations and cultural practices. Techno-social systems, for example, are driving the transformation of the social self and the cultural practices associated with identity such as a variety of cultural and social practices objectifying, quantifying, producing, regulating, and governing the self (Brubaker, 2020, p. 771). As one example of this, Brubaker (2020) recalls the early debates about the internet and virtual online realities from the late 1980s and 1990s. At the time, many scholars pointed out the potentially emancipating characteristics of “virtual reality” and its power to overcome social hierarchies and challenge traditional controls over bodies, gender, race, and age through, for instance, participation in virtual communities and role-playing games. However, in today’s world, the digital is not a separate reality. Rather, it is an inherent part of everyday life. The digital environment and the material world are mutually interdependent and interwoven with each other. This means that the social hierarchies and inequalities related to the body, gender, race and age that are evident in the physical environment are just as likely to be reproduced in an online context as well as through digital products and services. “Going online” is hardly ever a way of truly escaping our physical and material reality as well as discrimination and inequality that surround us.

At the same time, I would like to suggest that this culture of connectivity as we know it can be characterised by a certain paradox. This paradox is inscribed in two separate discourses, each of which claiming connectivity as a cultural imperative. On the one hand, because of the overwhelming presence of connectivity and an increasing awareness of the negative impact of digital technologies on health and well-being, there is a growing scholarly and public discussion on online disconnection and social media refusal (Hesselberth, 2018; Light, 2014; Portwood-Stacer, 2013; Syvertsen, 2019). On the other hand, alongside the idea of increasing digitalisation as the engine behind numerous social, political, and economic developments, there is a perspective which advocates increased global access to the internet as well as the development of ever more online-based commercial and public services. One line of research views the development of policy interventions that encourage digitalisation as a positive and transformative force in societies, particularly those technologies which have practical applications for use by older adults (Fozard & Wahl, 2012).

These paradoxical discourses of connecting and disconnecting, in turn, encourage two mutually exclusive approaches to connectivity and digitalisation. The imperative to disconnect stems from the idea that there is too much information and social media in our lives and that to stay focused
and satisfied we need to, at least temporarily, remove ourselves from digital connections to reconnect with ourselves and our lives (Sutton, 2017). The ability to disconnect, its necessity even, is defined as a matter of regaining and maintaining individual control and is often supported by commercial actors and technology developers (Beattie & Cassidy, 2020). The imperative to connect, however, is supported by the idea that policy-driven interventions to increase connectivity and digital engagement can potentially contribute to overcoming existing social and economic inequalities (Selwyn & Gorard, 2005). This is particularly the case with vulnerable and/or marginalised groups, such as ethnic minorities, people with disabilities and the elderly. Older adults have been portrayed by the media, by research and in other public debates as a rather homogenous group that is neither particularly tech-savvy nor particularly willing to learn how to use digital technologies. The concern has been that this group has the greatest difficulty with digitalisation and that their exclusion from key service infrastructures could have a negative impact on their mental health and well-being (Russell, 2011; Seals et al., 2008).

In both cases, however, these imperatives are informed by the technodeterministic logic of solutionism (Morozov, 2013), where technology (or its temporal refusal) becomes the remedy for both digital technology “oversusers” and non-users like. At the same time, in recent years, media and communication scholars have begun to question and destabilise the norm of digital connectivity by suggesting, for example, that digital engagement and online disconnection be approached as a continuum with a variety of forms of digital engagement, rather than use/non-use or on/offline sharp dichotomy (Kuntsman & Miyake, 2019). In a similar vein, scholars have started to investigate older people’s agency and the process of co-constitution of aging and technology with the aim of challenging the image of older adults as digital laggards (Peine & Neven, 2019; Wanka & Gallistl, 2018). This research has aimed to nuance the negative discourse surrounding older adults and digitalisation, as suggested by the interventionist and solutionist logic, but also to point out that people (dis)engage with technology in multiple, sometimes contradictory, ways. This research focuses more on the users themselves, their habits, and cultural practices. It suggests that by nuanced the picture of technology use beyond the binary logic of use/non-use, a more complex view on engagement with technology, in general, can be reached. However, by focusing solely on users, these investigations have provided a rather limited understanding of the context of such practices, namely the culture and structures in which they operate. If we agree with the notion that social reality is reflected in the digital realm, we must also confront the idea that social inequalities, structures and hierarchies are reflected there as well. It is more frequently the young who are associated with the imperative of staying connected, of having the technological skills that need constant development and improvement and to whom much of the marketing power of the technology industry is directed.
Digitalisation and connectivity in Sweden

From an international perspective, a person counts as “internet user” if they access the internet at least once every three months (see: www.itu.int). It is therefore important to acknowledge the national context of this study, namely Sweden, and its high-quality internet coverage and use over almost the entire country. According to the report, which measures internet use on an annual basis, in 2020, 96 per cent of the Swedish population have used the internet at one time or another, and 93 per cent connected to it daily. This data makes Sweden one of the most connected countries in the world. Internet use among older Swedish adults (76+) has also been growing, increasing from around 43 per cent in 2015 to 73 per cent in 2020. In the Digital Strategy for Sweden (2017), the Swedish government set itself the goal of becoming the best in the world when it comes to the use of digitalisation and the opportunities it brings. Followed by this strategy, in 2018, an Agency for Digital Government has been established with the mission to promote digitalisation of public administration and sustainable welfare society for all its citizens. According to an OECD report titled “Reviews of Digital Transformation: Going Digital in Sweden”, also from 2018, Sweden has led the world in digitalisation, showing, among other indicators, high levels of technology use and trust in technological devices and networks (OECD, 2018). This process of digitalisation has implied the development of an extensive digital infrastructure followed by a proliferation of online services, such as digital banking, e-commerce, social insurance services and others. From a sociological perspective, however, digitalisation is not only a process of technological advancement but also, perhaps even more importantly, a process of social transformation. While it brings with it both advancement, innovation and development, it is also marked by some challenges, such as for instance digital inclusion and digital literacy. Access to the Internet as well as a set of digital literacy skills available to all citizens, regardless of their age, social status and economic background have been among such challenges addressed relatively early on during the late 1990s in Sweden.

For instance, in 1997, inspired by similar initiatives in the USA, SeniorNet Sweden (SNS) was established. Their motto “Older people teach older people digital communication and internet” departs from the idea that digital education by and for older adults is more accessible and effective. Today, the network includes about 50 different clubs across the country providing education and information about digital communication technologies and their use. Additionally, the network also emphasises the importance of social connection for their members, which, in the spirit of their motto, implies the mutual support and inclusion of older adults. The question of digital inclusion has been high on the public agenda in Sweden as well. The national campaign for increased digital inclusion, named Digidel2013, has set the goal to facilitate internet use and participation in digital development of society, including access to services, information, education and entertainment.
During the three years between 2010 and 2013, the number of citizens over 16 years of age who never or very seldom use the internet has decreased from 1.7 million to roughly about half a million and has continuously been going down since then (Swedes and the Internet, 2020). Digitalisation and digital inclusion have also been named priorities in terms of building a sustainable and democratic society in Sweden (Nordqvist, 2019). Among other prominent actors of digitalisation in Sweden is The Swedish Internet Foundation, an independent, private foundation that in its mission emphasises the work for the positive development of the internet in Sweden, provision of stability in the Swedish internet infrastructure and spread of knowledge about the internet and electronic communication. The foundation also releases an annual report, “Swedes and Internet”, documenting internet habits and online media consumption and use among Swedes. These initiatives are only a few examples to show that digitalisation and connectivity have been an important motor behind innovation and change as well as technological, economic and social development in Sweden.

Against this background, it is important to mention that with the ambition of becoming world’s leader of digitalisation, online connectivity and knowledge of how to use digital, online devices in Sweden are not only valued as such but also to a large extent normalised and taken for granted. In practice, this means that social groups that potentially could fall behind the rapid digital development, such as older adults, became targeted relatively early on, as the case of SNS illustrates. This also means, however, that those groups experience, to some extent, pressure to acquire certain sets of digital skills and knowledge to “keep up” with social and cultural development (Kania-Lundholm, 2019; Olsson & Viscovi, 2020). Because of its relation to social media and social networking sites, which are mostly used by the younger population, culture of connectivity in Sweden is also strongly associated with the youth. Consequently, when it comes to the relationship between older adults and technology, digital ageism (Manor & Herscovici, 2021) finds fertile ground in the context of the culture of connectivity. This is due to the combination of both stereotypical representations of older adults as “digital immigrants” (Prensky, 2001, cf. Sorrentino, 2018) and discriminatory practices that are inscribed in the system of power relations within the technology industry that has itself perpetuated those practices. When “being online” and tech-savvy is normalised as a practice defining the young and online connectivity is taken for granted, the culture of connectivity can be described as more than just a context where the nature of interaction and sociability has been altered. It can also be described as a profoundly ageist culture. As discussed earlier, the aim of this chapter is thus to explore how older adults based in Sweden manage their everyday lives in the culture of connectivity, or to be more precise, how older users (and non-users) of digital technology negotiate everyday life in this culture. This chapter seeks to understand how older adults make sense of the embedded power relations within the digital world and how they perceive the fact that the social world in digitally
networked societies often discriminates against them and their ability to use and understand digital technologies.

Method and material
The empirical basis for this study comes from a research project that focused on exploring older people’s understandings and experiences of digital technologies and how older adults relate to their own understandings of aging and old age. The material comprises the transcripts of six focus group interviews that were conducted in Sweden in the autumn of 2017. The interviews were conducted in Swedish and transcribed verbatim. Each focus group had approximately 4–6 people, giving a total sample of 30 participants between the ages of 68 and 88. The 18 women and 12 men were recruited through several associations for older adults located in central Sweden. To account for the inevitable variety of digital experiences within the sample, participants were asked to answer a brief questionnaire to assess their level of technology use. Those who said that they owned a desktop computer and/or tablet and checked emails and online news daily were labelled users. Those who went online a few times a week were described as seldom users. Those who said that they did not own a digital device and never searched for information online were categorised as non-users. The sampling strategy was informed by three aspirations: first, to challenge the binary use/non-use division that has informed some of the early research on digital inequalities and gaps; second, to acknowledge that the context of digitalisation (and culture for that matter) is relevant for all social actors, regardless of their levels of engagement with digital technologies; and third, to give voice to potentially marginalised groups while avoiding stigmatisation. Given this national context for digitalisation and digital acceptance, the analytical approach adopted by this study has been inspired by the theoretical underpinnings of critical discourse analysis (CDA), although no specific analytical tool or protocol was adopted. The term “discourse” refers here to socially reproduced knowledge and social reality; meaningful, often normatively reproduced, practices are constructed within and through discourse (Wodak, 2013). From a discursive point of view, focus groups are sites of reproduction of socially and culturally embedded ways of giving meaning and thinking. Thus, the interview material used in this study was approached as a source of normative, dominant discourses pertaining to digitalisation and technology use among older adults. The analysis carried out on this material involved a close reading of the interview transcripts in which the material was coded. The codes were then used to further inform the emerging three main discourses (for a more detailed discussion of the method used here, see Kania-Lundholm, 2019). The results presented in this chapter are derived from a secondary analysis of that part of the data corpus that focused specifically on the research questions relating to, firstly, how older adults understand and experience digitalisation in their everyday lives, and secondly, how they respond to and experience stereotypical
representations of the relationship between older adults and new technologies circulating in some Swedish press. It is important to note that a relatively small sample and its corresponding small data corpus are always at risk of “never being more than illustrative” (Barker, 2008, p. 165). This sample is by no means representative of older Swedish users of the internet and digital devices. Nevertheless, given that relatively few studies have focused on experiences of older (non-)users, it provides an idea of how some members of this group understand and experience life with and in the culture of connectivity, especially given that this culture is often associated with youth.

To facilitate discussion during the interviews, which lasted about 70–80 minutes each, the study participants were presented with broad, open questions about the digitalisation of society. For instance, participants were asked, “Do you remember your first encounter with computers?” and “What do you think about the idea of a paperless society?” Additionally, to prompt more spontaneous reactions and interactions, participants were asked to comment on a selection of headlines from national Swedish newspapers about older people’s often negative experiences with digital technologies. In the following section, several extracts from the empirical material will be presented to illustrate some of the study’s key themes and findings. These extracts have been translated from the original Swedish by the author and participant anonymity has been ensured using nicknames. This study has been vetted and approved by the Swedish Research Ethics Agency (nr 2016/080).

**Self-ageism and internalised stereotypes**

When reflecting upon their engagement with various digital devices, the participants in this study often described themselves in a specific manner. Namely, they employed a discourse of *self-ageism*, informed by the perception that when it comes to engagement with technology, old age is often synonymous with dependence, especially in the form of tech support. For instance, Anna (74, Group 6), is an occasional, seldom user who describes “feeling old” as directly related to the issue of assistance. She says, “It is probably what you feel as an older person, that you need help with many things”. Anna means that the experience of ageing implicitly involves the need of help from others, especially when it concerns issues that she does not have knowledge of nor the skills to fix by herself. This shortfall in knowledge and skills includes, as she says, “many things” for Anna, such as assistance with paying bills online or updating the software on her computer. Similarly, Ingrid (71, Group 4), also a seldom user, when asked about how she dealt with the problems that can arise when a computer or mobile phone does not work the way it should, says: “Yes, there is the support that you can call … but they talk so fast. So, I start talking slower and calmer, and say: “Sorry, I am old, I do not understand anything about computers”. These experiences reflect what scholars have previously discussed as forms of digital ageism. One of the most important aspects of digital ageism is that it often departs
from a *stereotypical image* of an older person or group of older people, often in regards to their conduct in the digital world (cf. Rosales & Fernández-Ardévol, 2020, Manor & Herscovici, 2021). Consequently, older adults in the digital world are often represented and perceived as not particularly tech-savvy and dependent on the technical help of their friends or relatives. This digital ageism can take an even more negative form when such stereotypical and ageist representations of older adults’ digital capabilities are internalised and appropriated by older adults themselves. According to Bodner (2009), one of the sources of digital ageism is the ageist attitudes older adults have against their *own* group. In other words, older adults can often be self-ageist, adopting negative, ageist perceptions about themselves and their peers. This is, for instance, when Ingrid is describing the experience of getting in touch with IT support services, who she feels are not adjusted to clients like her because they “speak so fast”. She then refers to “being old” as a reason for asking them to speak slower. Both Anna and Ingrid suggest that in certain contexts and circumstances, older adults feel that extra help because of their age is justified, especially when unfamiliar technical issues and their solutions are involved.

Other participants in the study also demonstrated feelings of insecurity and unease around their age which they expressed as a synonym for falling behind and requiring assistance from others. As Barrie et al. (2021) suggest, the negative portrayals of older adults’ digital literacy skills are often deeply ingrained in society. Ageism is often *self-acquired* and is often expressed as a sense of feeling “too old” for engagement with “new” technologies. Barrie et al. also argue that the attitudes older adults acquire about technology, and thus their potential engagement with and desire to learn more about these, are shaped by ageism within wider society which they themselves have internalised. In this study, it was the occasional or non-users of technology who expressed attitudes to their age in both problematic and typically ageist terms. By using such self-ageist stereotypes, these participants reduced, simplified and to some extent even exaggerated their relationship (both real and imagined) to and with digital technologies. Consequently, such self-ageist discourse becomes a type of self-fulfilling prophecy where participants are “too old” to bother and cannot be bothered because they feel too old. In a culture of connectivity, where engagement with technologies and online networking and maintenance of social relationships is not only considered a value but is often taken for granted, this discourse could easily render marginal older users of technology vulnerable.

**We/Them**

Another discourse informed by the stereotypical self-ageist perception that participants in this study evoked relates to the distinction between the categories of “us” versus “them”, the “old” and the “young”. As Hall (2013) argues, stereotyping is a signifying practice that deploys a strategy of “splitting”
Namely, it divides the normal and the acceptable from the abnormal and the unacceptable. The practice of stereotyping then becomes a matter of fixing the boundaries between closure and exclusion and maintaining the symbolic order. Maintaining order in the context of the culture of connectivity often means discursively emphasising that digital culture is “young” and focused on novelty. It means, for instance, the importance of continuous updates, renewing and innovative practices. This is how Britta (75, Group 3), an occasional user, describes her children’s reaction to the mobile phone she owns:

Britta: I have one like that (which is) 10 years old.
Interviewer: Yes, the one with the buttons?
Britta: Yes, and then the kids say: No, but mom, you have to get a new phone because this one is so old … it’s ten years old, but I say: No, I can still make calls with it!

Britta’s children have challenged her for having an “old phone”, one that she herself was satisfied with since it worked and could make calls. This example illustrates, however, that the splitting between acceptable and unacceptable is not really between Britta and her grandchildren but rather between the understanding of what makes for a good mobile phone. An “old phone” is something that Britta understands as needing replacement, regardless of its functionality. This distinction between what older adults and their children do and do not value is rather sharp in the analysed material, particularly when it comes to the relationship with digital technologies. What for older adults is perceived as useful and well functioning is often considered “old” and unattractive by younger users. On the other hand, what younger users might perceive as a useful upgrade in the form of a new and “better” mobile phone, can be seen by older users as potentially threatening and problematic. There is also the possibility that older adults’ more conservative attitudes towards innovation come from the self-internalised stereotypes of old age, as discussed above. This is not to say that older users are not able to benefit from innovation and innovative solutions, but rather that their understandings and experiences of digital technologies are the results of already existing attitudes, which they end up inadvertently perpetuating. Furthermore, the problem of ageism in a culture of connectivity is often reinforced when different actors do not consider the needs, habits, uses, values or interests of older people. This can be the result of, for instance, the technology industry and its prevalent assumptions about age.

As Rosales and Svensson (2021) suggest in their study on ageism in the technology industry, ageism is often reinforced by stereotypes of older adults and the common assumption that “most users are young, and hence that the design and development of products and services is best handled by young tech workers” (p. 87). These assumptions are also reinforced by the widespread social representation that older adults are not necessarily interested in
technology use and innovation, which to some extent, existing research has confirmed (cf. Hakkarainen, 2012). Consequently, there is a bias when the technology industry designs and markets its products and services, namely that they are developed by young people and directed towards them. This bias or splitting between “young” and “old” takes the form of differentiation between the two categories: those who “master the digital world details and those who are less familiar with them”. This, in turn, “creates a dichotomous distinction between users and non-users, giving each category a distinctive narrative” (Manor & Herscovici, 2021, p. 7). When connected to age, these categories can serve as self-ageist or internalised explanatory frames and, as such, become reinforced in a fixed “us” versus “them” distinction. However, it is important to mention that these user/non-user categories can also be flexible and context embedded. They can be employed as a signifying practice to evoke different age groups’ values regarding the relationship to and experience with, for instance, technological devices. They can also be employed to evoke different “others” within the older age group, such as the social categories of ethnicity and class, something my previous research has shown (cf. Kania-Lundholm & Torres, 2015). As such, the “we/them” category can serve to reinforce discriminatory practices – like ageism – in the culture of connectivity. Nevertheless, the participants in this study not only confirmed the presence of self-ageist discourses informed by negative stereotypes among older adults, but they also actively challenged some of the social representations and stereotypical categorisations that are made about them.

Who gets cheated online? Responding to media stereotypes

The participants in this study frequently complained about the fact that they were no longer able to purchase tickets at the train or bus station because it is now only possible to do this online via an app. Some expressed disappointment about the fact that it has become more difficult to meet a medical doctor in person because they are encouraged to consult a phone-based healthcare service first. Others questioned the relevance of carrying and using cash since most financial services and transactions now take place online. To start a discussion of media representation of older adults and their portrayal in debates related to digital technologies, during the focus group interviews, participants were shown published headlines from some of Sweden’s leading daily newspapers that dealt with the issue of digitalisation and age. The headlines were published between 2013 and 2015 and read: “An older couple was denied flights and train due to new technology”, “One million older adults excluded from the digital society”, and “Only older adults get cheated on the net”. Participants’ reaction to these headlines was interesting, particularly because the phrasing implicitly referred to ageist stereotypes about older adults and new technologies.

The headline about older adults being more vulnerable to online cheating provoked a reaction from participants in all six focus groups. The opinion
was clear that susceptibility to cheating was not a matter of old age. Participants felt that anyone could fall victim to online fraud. For instance, the occasional users Kristoffer (72, Group 2) and Leon (70, Group 2), both felt this was not an age-related issue.

Interviewer: How do you relate to headlines like this that present older adults as excluded? Do you think it is an issue for older people?
Leon: No. They [the fraudsters] don’t care whether you are old or not.
Kristoffer: I believe that anyone can be cheated online, you do not need to be older, young people can certainly be cheated on.

Kristoffer and Leon agreed, therefore, that online fraudsters are looking to cheat anyone, regardless of age. Ada (75, Group 6) expressed a similar opinion when she commented that the information behind those headlines must have been a “myth”. Likewise, both the occasional user Ingrid (71) and the non-user Katja (78) in Group 4 suggested that young people can fall for fraudulent online claims in the same way as older people:

Ingrid: Those who get cheated online might as well be young.
Katja: I also think so, it could happen to anybody.

These excerpts illustrate that media headlines containing stereotypical representations of older adults as digitally vulnerable, excluded and prone to online fraud did not resonate well with participants. On the contrary, the older adults in this study distanced themselves from these representations and, to some extent, even contested them. For instance, they represented online fraud as a more general social problem and contested its association with old age. It is important to note that these contestations were expressed during the same interview situation, where participants also acknowledged the difficulties they experience with a digitalised society. This points to the fact that their experiences and understandings of digitalisation and of living in a culture of connectivity are informed by complexity and ambivalence. By distancing themselves from at least some ageist stereotypes about older adults and technology, the participants in this study have suggested that digitalisation potentially brings challenges to all social groups, regardless of age.

Discussion: Ageing with digital culture and living with digital ageism

Digital inclusion and participation are among the prerequisites for a well-functioning and sustainable digital society. For older adults and other social groups who struggle with the challenges digitalisation presents, Sweden’s policy of widespread digitalisation has required a radical change in their ways of doing things and, to some extent, the adoption of new norms and practices.
In other words, digitalisation has obliged many older adults in Sweden to enter a new and unknown territory and culture. This means that, regardless of their digital skill level, their experience of using computers and the frequency with which they do so, all the participants in this study have experienced digital transformation to the extent that it has impacted their everyday lives. Tech-savvy or not, older users of technology must deal with digital ageism at some point.

The goal of this chapter has been to explore and understand how older adults cope with and navigate their everyday lives in a culture of connectivity, which, as argued earlier, is a condition characterised by a paradoxical relationship to connectivity and informed by ageist understandings of the relationship between humans and digital technologies. The two research questions addressed first, how older adults understand and experience life with digitalisation and digital technologies (RQ1) and second, how older adults respond to some stereotypical representations of older adults and digital technologies (RQ2). The analysis has shown that there are at least three discursive ways of navigating the digital reality of an (ageist) connectivity culture. First, it is by discursively employing self-ageism built on the notion that older adults and “new” technologies do not go hand in hand and that older people are not particularly tech-savvy. Second, and related to the first, is by discursively employing the “we/them” category based primarily on age, namely between “us” the older people and “them”, the youth, which could possibly serve to reinforce discriminatory practices – like ageism – in the culture of connectivity. Third, navigating the culture of connectivity also implies discursive distancing from, at least, some of the stereotypical representations of older adults and digital technologies, particularly those based on the assumptions that older adults are more prone to online scamming as compared with other social groups and categories. Consequently, when it comes to the first research question, the analysis in this chapter illustrates older adults understand and experience life with digitalisation and digital technologies in terms of coping and dealing with this, relatively new circumstances, at least on the discursive level. This means that they cope with their everyday lives in this culture by discursively reproducing and internalising some of the self-ageist stereotypes that circulate about them, such as requiring help, assistance and support when fixing technical devices and dealing with other IT-related issues and by appropriating and reproducing the “we/them”, “old/young” age category. This process where older adults appropriate some of the ageist stereotypes can be identified as part of ageing with and in the digital culture of connectivity.

When it comes to the second research question, namely responding to some of the stereotypical representations about older adults and digital technologies, it could be argued that evoking ageist stereotypes can be both a way of making sense of the complexity of the world and culture we live in and a way of discriminating against certain groups like older people. Within a culture of connectivity, digital ageism informs a set of discriminatory practices on both the individual- and the structural levels and assumes older adults are
not particularly “fit” for the requirements of our “connected times”. However, this process of living with digital ageism also means that older adults can and do challenge and distance themselves from some ageist stereotypes, like the one that suggests that older adults are particularly vulnerable to online fraud and scamming. In other words, coping in a culture of connectivity implies the need to navigate between acceptance while discursively reproducing of some ageist stereotypes on the one hand and distancing oneself from them on the other. Ageing with digital culture also means that, as Wanka and Gallistl (2018) poignantly argue, the social and cultural practices of later life, including various engagements with digital technologies, and to some extent also the social construct of age itself, need to be reframed.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis and discussion in this chapter, I would argue that ageing with digital culture also implies living with digital ageism. For older people, ageing with digital culture implies the daily practice of navigating and negotiating the meaning of their relationship with digital technologies and the norms and values that come with it. It also implies that meanings are never fixed but are rather context embedded. It could also be argued that, left to itself, a culture of connectivity could expand beyond the limits of social networking sites to encompass the idea of connectivity as not only positive and desired but also as taken for granted. Connectivity also encompasses digitalisation as a socially transformational force that affects different social groups. As a normalised and publicly accepted culture, it is also a profoundly ageist culture. It is also important to clarify that, as mentioned already in the methods section, this study and its results refer to non-users and seldom occasional users only and not the entire population of older people. One could assume that perhaps proficient older users might cope differently with ageism and its consequences. Last but not least, the results discussed in this chapter should also be contextualised in light of a recent study by Ackerman and Chopik (2021), who point out the cultural variation in attitudes towards older adults. They suggest that while ageing is generally perceived as something inevitable and a part of everyone’s life, it is also viewed differently around the world and in different environments. They found that countries with a collectivistic ethos were less associated with age bias than those which were highly individualistic and often fixated on youth and individual independence, a tendency which takes the form of, for instance, a strong emphasis upon maintaining a youthful appearance. Sweden is considered by some as “the most extreme country in the world” (Lindenfors, 2016) and an example of a highly individualistic and secular culture. It follows, therefore, that it is also an ageist culture. A valuable contribution of future research would be, for example, to investigate the relationship between country-specific values, the levels of digitalisation and the bias against older adults.
References


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