

# International Journal of Ageing and Later Life

Volume 17, No. 2, 2024

Published with the support of the Swedish  
Research Council (2023-00394)

ISSN 1652-8670 (www)

URL: <http://ijal.se>

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## Acknowledgements

The Editor of the *International Journal of Ageing and Later Life* wishes to thank the following referees who generously provided evaluations and constructive criticism on submitted manuscripts in 2023/2024.

**Monica Algrin**, Jönköping University, Sweden  
**Michael Annear**, Waseda University, Tokyo, Japan  
**Gemma Collard-Stokes**, University of Derby, Derby, UK  
**Michael Fine**, Macquarie University, Australia  
**Vera Gallistl**, Karl Landsteiner University of Health Sciences, Austria  
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## What do the papers say? The role of older adults in 20 years of digital inclusion debate in Dutch and Flemish newspapers

By CORA VAN LEEUWEN<sup>1,2</sup>, AN JACOBS<sup>3</sup>, ILSE MARIËN<sup>4</sup> & ANINA VERCRUYSSSEN<sup>5</sup> ON BEHALF OF THE DIGITAL AGEING CONSORTIUM

### Abstract

Adoption of digital technology by older adults has become an important topic in academia and the public sphere within the debate on digital inclusion. Likewise, this topic has gained traction in the print media also. This paper assesses the representation of older adults in print media in the past 20 years in The Netherlands and Flanders. A total of 281 articles in the Dutch language were analysed to determine the representation of older adults and their level of agency. We found that they were represented in three manners: a) ambassadors of digital skill acquisition; b) naturally lacking in digital skills; or c) not alone in being helpless. These representations clearly increased during the COVID-19 crisis. Some representations can be problematic, as the relationship between older adults

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and digital inclusion is not envisioned positively. Furthermore, they receive no agency to participate actively in the discussion surrounding their own digital inclusion and are too often used as the automatic example of the digitally illiterate – which is not particularly encouraging older adults towards digital skills acquisition.

Keywords: Ageism, Digital Inclusion, content analysis, media discourse, representation

## Introduction

Representation in the media has an important role in public debates as it can influence the perception of groups by associating them with certain attitudes, skills, and issues (Bernhold 2021; Lepianka 2015b; Sink & Mastro 2017). The media representation of older adults with regard to digitalisation might lead to the conclusion that digital devices are not for them as they are too old (e.g. Köttl et al. 2021, 2022b; McDonough 2020; Neves et al. 2018). Older adults themselves already tend to think that new digital technologies are not meant to be used by them. For example, a study by Gallistl et al. (2021) found that older self-defined non-users would define their own (limited) use, of for example WhatsApp, as inappropriate and as such equate it with non-use. Moreover, several studies have found that older adults distance themselves from a certain image of old age (Astell et al. 2020; Hurd 1999; Minichiello et al. 2000; Pirhonen et al. 2016), one way of doing this is by avoiding using technology in order to not confirm the stereotype of technical inability (Köttl et al. 2021 2022a; Mariano et al. 2020). Another is by avoiding technology that would convey frailty and is associated with “true old age” (Ivan & Cutler 2021; Köttl et al. 2021; Neven 2010). The implication from these studies is that self-inflicted ageism, self-discrimination on the basis of age, can impede older adults in the adoption of digital technology (Mannheim et al. 2023). Additionally, Ivan and Cutler (2021) concluded that the combination of societal ageist stereotypes and internalised ageism contribute to a self-fulfilling prophesy of expecting and experiencing difficulties when it concerns older adults and technology.

The underdevelopment of older adults’ digital skills has been connected in the past to a lack of access, lack of interest and perceived usefulness,

and fear of mocking (i.e. Hill et al. 2015; Neves et al. 2018; Quan-Haase et al. 2016; Wu et al. 2015). However, one element that has not received as much attention is the impact of the media representation regarding the digital inclusion of older adults – even though it has been theorised that such representation, and stereotypes especially, can influence the behaviour of older adults (Ivan & Cutler 2021; Levy & Leifheit-Limson 2009). Specifically stereotype threat (i.e. fear of conforming to a negative image) has been found to inform older adults' adoption of digital technology (Ivan & Cutler 2021). This paper provides novel insight by examining media representation in newspapers articles which discuss digital inclusion. Furthermore, it explores this in two Dutch-language countries which have comparable high digital technology adoption, Eurostat reported that in 2022 92% of Belgian and 98% of Dutch households had access to the Internet (*Eurostat DE Households 2022*). The research question that we therefore want to answer is: *What is the role of the older adult in Dutch and Flemish newspaper articles discussing digital inclusion?*

## Digital inclusion and ageism

Digital inclusion of older adults has been examined regarding access, skills and usage (i.e. Gallistl & Wanka 2022; Gallistl et al. 2020; Hunsaker & Hargittai 2018; Marler & Hargittai 2022; Neves & Amaro 2012; Olsson & Viscovi 2020; Quan-Haase et al. 2018; Van Deursen & Helsper 2015). Digital inclusion is here understood to mean the interaction between social and digital factors that lead to differences in access, skills and usage, which ultimately impact the outcomes an individual can expect as a result of their (lack of) engagement with digital technology (Asmar et al. 2022). Digital technology in this context refers to everyday information and communication technology (EICT) that enable full meaningful participation in daily life, such as online banking and government e-services (Köttl et al. 2022b). It is necessary to provide a brief introduction to the main concepts of digital inclusion before providing the context for older adults. The initial focus of digital inclusion research was on access to new EICTs and the differences in adoption among the populace. In the parlance of digital inclusion research, this is known as the first level divide (Van Dijk 2020a). As the technology was domesticated in everyday life, it became clear that although differences in access were still present, solely focussing on access was not enough to bridge the

detected divide, which is why a second level was identified: that of usage and skills (Hargittai 2010; Howard et al. 2001). Similarly, the further ubiquitous spread of EICTs resulted in the focus on a third level identified that of a disparate outcome. Concurrently research seemed to indicate that digital divides were not sufficient to accurately convey the influence of society and societal structures on the digital inclusion of a person (DiMaggio & Hargittai 2001; Helsper 2012; Mariën & Van Audenhove 2010). Ageism is one such influence which has been found to influence the digital inclusion of older adults (Köttl et al. 2022a; Mannheim et al. 2023; Swift et al. 2017). For example, ageism in the form of self-censure has been found to influence the adoption of digital technology use as argued by Mikulionienė and Rapolienė (2020) and Neves et al. (2018). Additionally, older adults are not a monolith when it comes to digital skills. As older adults have been found to be experts in their own rights (Hunsaker et al. 2020; Olsson & Viscovi 2018), divide digital labour among themselves (Marler & Hargittai 2022) or have distinct practices in their non-use (Gallistl et al. 2021). Furthermore, the use or non-use is determined by the life-course, social environment, and cognitive factors (Olsson & Viscovi 2020; Van Deursen & Helsper 2015).

Digital inclusion has received an increase in attention due to the COVID-19 crisis. Early research in 2020 identified vulnerable populations and determined that older adults were more at risk (Van Deursen 2020). This vulnerability was further corroborated by a survey that found that older adults “seem less equipped to use Covid-19 web-information and communication, although they are more at risk of having severe complications from this disease” (Van Dijk 2020b: 8). Various studies have explicitly examined the ageist views present in media and policymaking, and their disparate impact on the older segment of the population; see the work of Ayalon (2020) or Berridge and Hooyman (2020) for example. Ayalon argued that the representation of older adults during the COVID-19 crisis resulted in intergenerational tension and the erasure of the actual heterogeneity of old age, in essence reducing old age to stereotypes and prejudices. Research has shown that images of ageing can negatively affect attitudes towards ageing and the older adult population (Bai 2014; Cuddy et al. 2005; Cuddy & Fiske 2002; Enßle & Helbrecht 2021; Ivan & Cutler 2021; Loos & Ivan 2018). Additionally, stereotypes or negative attitudes to ageing can affect the well-being of older adults in detrimental

ways: it can negatively influence mental health (Lai 2009) and even influence performance in complicated skills (Levy & Leifheit-Limson 2009).

Ageing is a social construction where age itself is “a linguistic and cultural act” (Bytheway 2011: 9). This implies that the construction of age is not only determined chronologically, it is also influenced by the individual’s experience. This complicates how old age can be defined in scientific terms as it becomes subjective and heterogenous, as the accumulation of experiences cause a rich diversity in late life (Givskov & Deuze 2018; Van Dyk 2014). However, a critical reading of scientific literature in regards to the representation of old age in media found that chronological time is currently still prevalently used to determine old age while examining the role of media in later life (Iversen & Wilińska 2020). The qualification and description of “older adults” is a fraught question. The fact that the term can encompass such a diversity of experiences and multiple generations is one that the scientific literature has similarly struggled with in the past. For example, an older adult can mean someone who just retired at 65, or a 101-year-old who experienced the great depression as a child. This diversity in experiences has led researchers to define older adults in different stages as they realised that the ageing population is not a homogenous group. Laslett (1987) identified the third age as a new chronological identity in contemporary life (Gilleard & Higgs 2008). Where the third age is seen as the “active, healthy and productive side of ageing” (Higgs & Gilleard 2016, p. 1), the fourth age refers to a period in life that is defined by what it lacks instead of what it entails (Higgs & Gilleard 2016). Arguably, the transition to true old age is subjective and determined not by chronological age but by other elements, such as considering oneself frail (Nicholson et al. 2012). Thus, a definition of old age is not provided in this section but will be more inductive and determined as found in the examined texts. This process is described in more detail in the methodological section.

If ageing is socially constructed it follows that ageism is similarly co-constructed by society and the individual. Our definition of ageism builds on this and is inspired by Iversen et al. (2009) conceptual analysis. We define ageism as the often-negative co-construction of ageing by the individual and society. This co-construction results in implicit and/or explicit beliefs about ageing, which, in turn, give rise to cognitive, emotional, or behavioural expressions of exclusions based on age, ultimately

shaping an individual's mental model of ageing. This definition explains why representation can influence the ageing experience; as the individual's ideas of ageing are influenced by the images that they encounter. Self-directed ageism is then the result of incorporating and embodying societal expectations.

## Representation

There is relatively limited research into the representation of the older population. More specifically, in terms of representation in newspaper media the research is quite scarce, as Fealy et al. (2012) and Rozanova et al. (2006) concluded. Research on representation is often focussed on that in either multi-media sources (e.g. Edstrom 2018; Lepianka 2015a; Phillipson et al. 2008), television (e.g. Bernhold 2021; Hofer et al. 2022; Lauzen & Dozier 2005; Markov & Yoon 2021), or film (e.g. Loos et al. 2017b; Robinson & Anderson 2006). According to Fealy et al. (2012), the discourse surrounding the ageing population is often one of dependency and vulnerability. This is confirmed by Lepianka (2015a) who found that negative descriptors of older adults were often connected to their "(alleged) incompetence (poor health, infirmity, special social needs and dependencies)" (p. 1108). However, this is disputed by a recent study by Markov and Yoon (2021), who found that the ageing stereotype that was represented most often in the United States of America (US) primetime television was related to the paradigm of "successful ageing," where older adults were often portrayed as ageing graciously, active, and in good health. Furthermore, they found a significant general underrepresentation of older adults in comparison to the actual composition of the US population, and, specifically, a dearth of older adults with intersectional identities, meaning those with disabilities, different sexual identities, or from minority backgrounds were underrepresented in the US primetime television. This could imply that a recent shift has occurred in stereotypes connected to older adults, which is confirmed by the work of Ivan et al. (2020). Loos and Ivan (2018) coined the term "visual ageism," which is the underrepresentation of the diversity of older adults and the overrepresentation of a specific version of ageing, that is connected to the third age. In a cross-country study of images in seven European countries, it was found that the images overwhelmingly focussed on

ageing well which focus on “success independence, efficiency, sociability and wealth” (Loos et al. 2017b: 13).

In terms of the representation of older adults’ technological ability, prior research is limited. Loos et al. (2017b) examined how older adults’ digital skills were shown in the film “Pony Place” and concluded that the two grandparents in the movie were depicted as the “digital immigrant” juxtaposed to the “digital nativeness” of the granddaughter. When they compared this to the actual statistical information of digital engagement in the Netherlands, they concluded that the level of unfamiliarity with digital games as portrayed in the movie does not correlate with the actual experience of older adults in the Netherlands. A study examining the discourse surrounding older gamers found that their portrayal emphasises how games can assist in ageing better, in other words on health, financial, and social benefits (Lavenir & Bourgeois 2017). A discourse analysis of three German newspapers found that older adults were often portrayed as helpless and non-users by other older adults themselves (Köttl et al. 2022b). This helped to create a difference between their own positive ageing experience and that of the perceived real old age (ibid). They also found that there was a particular focus on older adults in the areas where they were perceived to be future consumers and technology as a solution to the problem of ageing, which corresponds with previous research on media representation (Lee et al. 2007; Pasupathi & Löckenhoff 2002; Robinson & Callister 2008; Yläne et al. 2009). In a similar study, Rasi (2022) examined three Finnish news publications for their treatment of older adults and their digital skills and Internet use. They found that the portrayal of older adults’ digital competency was mostly negative and had a focus on skills connected to communication and collaboration (Rasi 2022). Our study adds to the literature by both examining a medium that is under-researched regarding the representation of older adults, as well as by providing novel insight on the changes in perception of older adults regarding digital inclusion over a longer period of time.

## Methodology

In this section we will first describe the data collection method, followed by a description of the sample and the data analysis.

*Data Collection*

We conduct our study on a multi-national sample of Dutch language newspapers from Belgium and the Netherlands. The choice for these countries was due to their geographical location and the comparable technological and societal contexts. And both countries currently have between 80 and 91% daily internet users as per 2022 (*Eurostat – Statistical Atlas* n.d.). A systematic search of the electronic database Lexis Nexis was conducted, which offers, among other things, a vast collection of journalistic documents (Nexis Uni 2021). This database was chosen as it offered access to Dutch as well as Flemish regional and national newspapers for the time-period 2000 to 2020. Although a full listing of all available papers within this database is not available, the database offers access to a wide variety of publications and newspapers. This was confirmed by the authors after the initial data set were compiled. The sample of publications included a clear variety of newspapers across the political spectrum in both Flanders and The Netherlands. The most read newspapers from both countries were all present within the sample and provide a full range across the board. The database itself contains both articles published online and articles that were published in hard copy; this was evident in the document as they had either page indicators (hard copy) or newspaper section headings (online). Table 1 shows the different types of articles,

**Table 1.** Range of types of articles.

Article	167
Financial	14
International	1
Letter to the editor	6
Media, Culture, Arts	6
National	23
News	12
Opinion	21
Regional	22
Weekly magazine	9



ranging from news reports to letters to the editor. Most articles were not specifically noted as being part of a section of the newspaper and are noted as “article” in the Table to indicate that their placement could not be determined.

The systematic search was conducted to understand what the role of older adults was within the discussion surrounding digital inclusion. For this reason, CL, IM, and AJ held several meetings to determine and discuss the initial keywords. The initial list was based on desk research and consisted of ten keywords combined with the indicator of a country: Belgium, Flanders (only the Dutch region of Belgium) or The Netherlands. The meeting resulted in additions to this list with a focus on digital inclusion as a human right, which resulted in a first search based on 14 keywords. The keywords were selected in Dutch and are based on that vernacular, meaning that their translations to English can be prone to some loss of nuances that result in a more negative interpretation or connotation that is not necessarily part of the Dutch/Flemish vernacular.

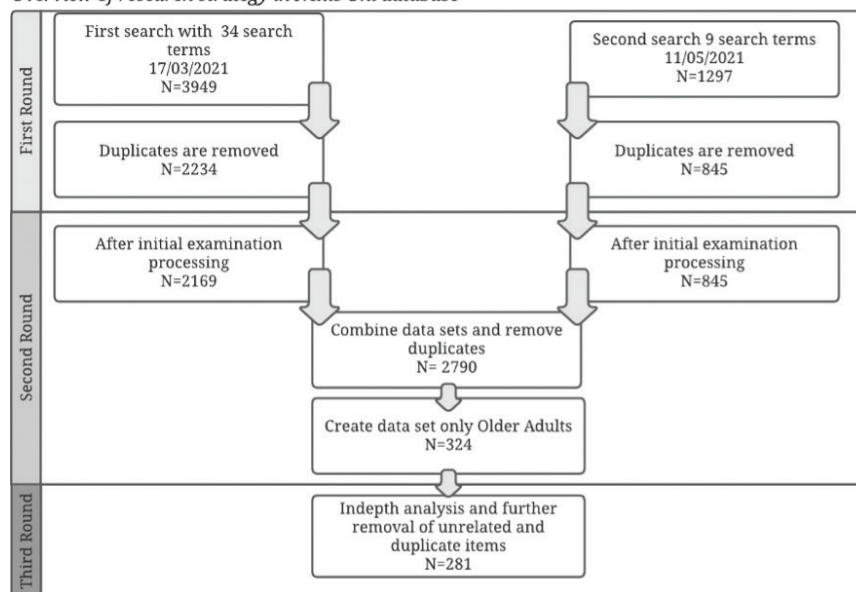
As we took an iterative approach to the review at a later meeting, further keywords such as “digital literacy” and “digital skills” were added; this is visible in Figure 1 as there are two dates of data collection. The iterative approach, combined with the experience of processing the first batch, also allowed for refinement in the search structure, as terms such as “seniors” or “elderly” were added as a quantifier instead of the location. The goal of our research was to understand the definition of older adult according to those media representations. We chose not to specify based on a chronological birth year or number.

The additions or changes in the initial query were discussed between the first and second author, or in larger collaborative moments with all the authors. The focus on the debate surrounding digital inclusion means that some keywords may appear to have a negative bias as the discussion exposes a negative division within society. This notwithstanding, this systematic review was meant to provide insight into media representation of older adults specifically in relation to their role in the newspaper articles about digital inclusion, and not general technology use or technology adoption. This specificity informed the choice of keywords, and an overview of all the keywords is provided in Table 2.

The following exclusion criteria were used during the selection of the articles: the articles needed to be concerned with digital inclusion,

**Figure 1.** Overview of research strategy in Nexis Uni database.

*Overview of research strategy in Nexis Uni database*



needed to pertain to either the context of the Netherlands or Belgium (i.e. articles reporting on developments in Africa were discarded), and needed to mention older adults in some form in relation to digital inclusion. Furthermore, due to the structure of newspaper consortia in The Netherlands, there were duplicates of the same articles in multiple regional editions. These were excluded as duplicates if they had the same title as well as the exact same number of words as indicated in the downloaded article. A consensus was reached among the authors on ambiguous cases. Figure 1 shows the review strategy; as mentioned before, there were two dates of data collection: on the 17<sup>th</sup> of March 2021 and the 11<sup>th</sup> of May 2021.

The first round resulted in 3949 records including duplicates. The second round found a further 1297 records including duplicates. The two sets were reviewed separately, and in each set duplicates were

**Table 2.** Overview of keyword combinations for older adults.

Dutch	English	Country	Older people / seniors
Toegang internet	Access internet	Yes	No
Digitale kloof	Digital divide	Yes	No
E-inclusie	E-inclusion	No	No
Inclusie ICT	Inclusion ICT	No	No
Inclusie Internet	Inclusion Internet	No	No
Digitale uitsluiting	Digital exclusion	No	No
Exclusie	Exclusion	Yes	No
Uitsluiting ICT	Exclusion ICT	Yes	No
Toegang tot internet	Access to internet	Yes	No
Recht op internet	Right to internet	Yes	No
Basisrecht internet	Basic right internet	Yes	No
Mensenrecht internet	Humanright internet	Yes	No
“Recht op het internet“	Right to the internet	Yes	No
Uitsluiting Internet	Exclusion internet	Yes	No
Digitale geletterdheid	Digital Literacy	Yes	Yes
Digitale vaardigheden	Digital skills	No	Yes
Digitale ongelijkheid	Digital inequality	No	No

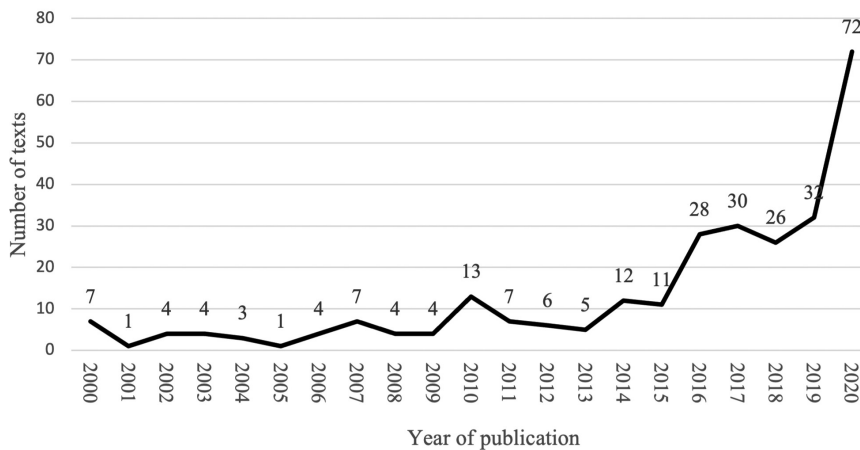
removed, resulting in a total of 2169 articles in the first set and 845 in the second set. For each individual record, we noted whether a text was Flemish or Dutch, whether it concerned older adults, its publication year, and word count. After this review was completed, the two data sets were combined and further duplicates were removed, resulting in a total data set of 2790 individual texts. Concentrating solely on the texts that mention older adults results in a dataset of 324 newspaper articles. During further in-depth analysis, another 43 texts were removed as they either were duplicates or did not, on closer examination, mention older adults and the digital inclusion theme simultaneously, leading to a final sample of 281 articles. The duplicates' removal was necessary as the combining of the data revealed duplicates that were previously not recognised as such due to changes in the title or word count but were upon closer examination duplicates after all. For

those that were deemed to not be on topic, a closer examination was necessary to reveal that the topic did not pertain to digital inclusion or older adults as previously concluded. The final sample consisted of 281 individual texts. A total of 211 articles were published in Dutch newspapers and 70 in Flemish newspapers. Figure 2 shows the distribution of texts between 2000 and 2020.

### Data Analysis

In order to examine the role of older adults within the digital inclusion debate in Dutch and Flemish newspapers the data analysis occurred in two steps. We made use of the qualitative analysis software MAXQDA 2020 and 2022. The software allows an easy collaboration and facilitates the coding process. The first step in the analysis process consisted of a content analysis to determine whether the texts discussed digital inclusion and older adults. We determined whether older adults were a topic if the text mentioned the Dutch term “ouderen” or another

**Figure 2.** This figure shows the number of articles per year.  
*This figure shows the number of articles per year*



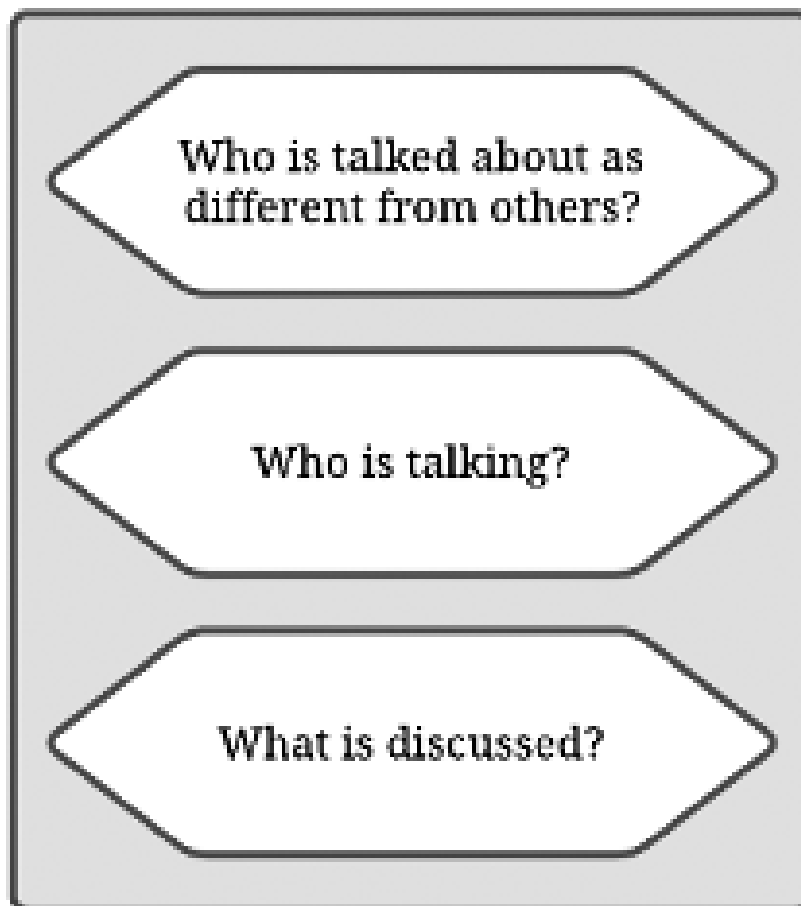
indicator that implied an aged individual, for example, “senioren.” Originally, the aim of the study was to define an older adult as those individuals 65 and older, since 65 is the traditional retirement in both countries. However, it became evident that this definition was not sufficient nor supported by the corpus. We found that the newspapers were considerably flexible in their classification of older adult. Most commonly, the newspaper articles defined an older adult as an individual who is 50 years or older. This coincides with the target audience of the various senior citizen organisations encountered in the texts. For example, in Flemish text no. 225 (Het Belang van Limburg 22/2/2020) one organisation is described as “55-plus organization OKRA” and Seniorweb.nl, a Dutch organisation that assists older adults with digital skill acquisition, uses either 50 or 55 as the youngest age limit in their infographic about older adults and internet activities (2022). For this reason, we decided to include those texts mentioning 50- or 55-year-olds as a lower limit to not lose those articles that clearly dealt with older adults (as determined by the newspapers). This distinction is not specific for the Dutch-speaking region, as it is in line with the findings of Köttl et al. (2022b).

After a text was included a memo was created based on Entman’s (1993) theory of framing. This theory was used to avoid the mistake in content analysis of focussing on dominant messages and to disregard the nuances that would better convey the perception on older adults and digital inclusion (Entman 1993). Figure 3 presents the questions that were answered in the MAXQDA memo. These questions help to provide nuance in the analysis as they provide information about the interplay between the various actors and the perceptions of older adults.

The second step consisted of an inductive thematic analysis (TA) as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis can be used in a contextualist analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006), and provides a clear analytical process. The coding was primarily conducted by the first author. The codes were presented to the second author and themes were collectively derived. During these discussions, the themes and codes were challenged until agreement was found or a theme or code was reconsidered. This was an iterative approach until no new themes arose.

**Figure 3.** Questions asked in each memo in MaxQDA.

## *Questions asked in each memo in MaxQDA*



## Results

### *Who Talks About Older Adults?*

In our findings, it is possible to distinguish four different types of spokespersons. To be included, the spokesperson needed to either speak on behalf of older adults or discuss their situation in order to make a point about (lack of) digital inclusion. Table 3 shows the main types and their distillation into smaller subtypes. Each type will receive a more detailed discussion below.

### *Government*

This first group of persons speaking on behalf of older adults consists of *politicians*, *governmental organisations*, and *libraries*. The involvement of *politicians* can be observed in two ways: they would either act as a caller to action to change the current state of digital inclusion (i.e. a city councillor who argues for special dispensation for older citizens with regard to digital agendas of public services (text no. 197 AD/Algemeen Dagblad 26/6/2019), or they would promote a current cause that they had taken up

**Table 3.** Types of participants in the 281 texts.

Main Type	Sub type	Number of texts
Government	Libraries	26
	Politicians	34
	Governmental liaised institutions (such as unemployment agencies)	24
Civil organisations	Dedicated to older adults	34
	Broader target group	25
	Service provider	4
Researchers	Experts in digital inclusion	34
	Other	20
Older Adults	-	26
No spokesperson determined	-	54

(i.e. Antwerp city councillor promotes a 2020 initiative to decrease the local digital divide [text no. 221 Provinciale Zeeuwse Courant 16/12/2020]).

The *governmental organisations*, on the other hand, provide context to the issues surrounding digital inclusion. For example, in the text no. 153 (De Telegraaf 27/12/2018), the former director of the Dutch unemployment agency explained his experience with people who are 55+ and unemployed regarding digital connectivity. Finally, the *libraries* are funded by the government and were classified as a separate group as, according to the various articles, one of their main goals is teaching digital literacy. Within the sample, the libraries often used the opportunity to point towards the library's social cohesion function to clarify that they also serve the purpose of providing courses. They often used older adults to frame the need for introductory courses for digital devices.

### *Civil Organisations*

These organisations can be divided into *organisations with a focus on older adults* and *organisations with a focus on wider society*. Within the first segment, the Flemish organisations for older adults "Okra" and "Ouderenbond," and the Dutch "SeniorWeb" are the most prevalent. They promote services that they offer; for example, in text no. 265 (Het Parool 11/05/2020) the service of a helpline for video calls is introduced. They are also asked to comment on social injustice or situations, as in text no. 225 (Het Belang van Limburg 22/2/2020), for example. In this text, Okra provides their opinion about discounts that are only available via apps. The *organisations with a focus on wider society* use older people more as an example to describe the impact of a digital society. One example is: "It is possible that for many older people it will be a while before they can see and hug their family" (text no. 270 BN de Stem.nl 11/4/2020, p.1), in relation to a wider discussion about the impact of COVID-19 on the Dutch population.

### *Researchers*

Within the newspaper texts it is possible to see the difference in treatment of digitalisation between texts where *experts on digital inclusion or adoption* are asked to comment versus *other researchers*. There are two names that stand out with multiple articles in which they are asked to comment: Jan



van Dijk in the Netherlands and Lieven De Marez in Flanders. Both these researchers are experts in digital inclusion or adoption and are asked to provide context or are interviewed regarding research results they are presenting. For example, De Marez presents and contextualises the results of the Flemish Digimeter, a yearly survey that provides insight on the state of digital Flanders (see Vandendriessche et al. 2020 for an example of such a report). The *other researchers* form a distinct group within the discussion as they are often used to substantiate a claim or to provide context on a new phenomenon from their own field, such as in text no. 175 (De Morgen 17/7/2018), where a technology acceptance expert is asked to provide context for why care robots might not be accepted.

### *Older Adults*

Out of the 281 texts, there were only 26 in which older adults contributed to the discussion themselves. Older adults were often not the main subjects of the texts. In text no. 231, for example, the efforts of an organisation are described, and an active member provides feedback on their services: "SeniorWeb gives a sense of security with issues. I find it very nice to be helped by peers. The volunteers of SeniorWeb take time for my questions and I like that" (text no. 231, Trouw 26/2/2020: 1). This brings us to the first distinct representation that an older adult played, and that was of an *ambassador*. This representation was seen often in texts in which the older adults gave positive comments on a course, or an activity organised by the library or non-profit organisation. The only text out of 26 in which the older adults did not express any interest in digital skills is text no. 107 (NRC Handelsblad 08/05/2016), which focusses on the reasons behind the disengagement of older adults from the digital world. The article does offer views from both professor Van Dijk and SeniorWeb, but the focus of the article is on the experience of older adults.

### *The Perception of Older Adults and Digital Inclusion*

In this section, we will explore the way older adults are portrayed within the newspapers pertaining to digital inclusion in greater detail. The corpus of texts shows a tendency to portray older adults as the typical example of someone without digital skills. Older adults can function like this

either alone or in conjunction with other disadvantaged groups. Overall, we identified three perceived roles of older adults in the digital inclusion debate: “ambassador,” “naturally lacking digital skills,” and “not alone in being helpless.” The prevalence of these categories is also mentioned for each portrayal.

### *Ambassador*

As explained above, the ambassador is used to showcase digital initiatives for older adults. Their input has a twofold effect: firstly, their input is used to show that *learning digital skills* has value for older adults. This can be seen in text no. 172 (Eindhovens Dagblad 23/11/2018), where one 82-year-old explains that she recently used the Internet to request that her municipality repair the sidewalk. She learned these skills in a 2-year project described in this text. The other effect is that it shows that these *are skills that older adults can learn*. Often the participants are older participants ranging from 75 to 90. Their portrayal shows that it is possible for every age to participate and benefit from these projects. As an example of this, we can paraphrase a 90-year-old participant explaining the benefits of a different course (text no. 158, De Nieuwsbode Groot-Zeis 28/11/2018): “Now I can e-mail my granddaughter in Basel and read the newspaper on the iPad. Because my children cancelled my subscription when I moved,” This type of portrayal was found in 18 documents.

### *Naturally Lacking in Digital Skills*

The second portrayal that can be identified is that of older adults as unquestionably lacking in digital skills; this was found in 101 documents. Often, just by using the term “ouderen/senioren” (in English: “elderly”), it is implied that this group is digitally illiterate. One article introduces the lack of digital skills as a barrier to e-governance and then equates analogue access with fighting for the rights of older people (text no. 197 AD/Algemeen Dagblad 26/6/2019). Here it is taken for granted that older people are unable to make use of the digital possibilities and all of them will need to have an analogue solution. In another text, the discussion on the disappearance of regular in-person banking services leads to the mention that, besides e-banking options, there will be service points where older

adults can receive help with internet banking (text no. 196, De Telegraaf 7/12/2019).

As seen in the two previous examples, the older adult is often presented as helpless regarding, or a victim of, the shift to “digital only,” and as the reason why alternatives need to be found. An extreme example opposes the decision by the Dutch government to only offer online tax forms, as “autonomy is taken away from older people in the Netherlands and they are made dependent on the help of others when the government decides that all contact between civilians and government is digitalized” (text no. 90, De Twentsche Courant Tubantia, 19/11/2015: 1). The author goes so far as to say that older adults cannot learn to use digital technology: “Old people no longer have the flexibility to learn these digital skills and on top of that many have a lesser interest in digitalisation, these groups have missed the computer age completely” (text no. 90, De Twentsche Courant Tubantia 19/11/2015: 1).

### *Not Alone in Being Helpless*

This next portrayal of older adults occurs when they are grouped with others that are seen as “naturally” digitally illiterate. This was found in 52 documents. The most common denominators here are people with a lower level of education, people with lower social economic status, and people living in poverty. These groups are often used when an author is describing the problem and a quick description is needed to sketch the situation. Older adults are part of those unable to join a more digital society as seen here: “old people, lower educated, unemployed and immigrants are barely able to close the gap in usage of computers in comparison to the rest of the Netherlands” (text no. 31, Reformatisch Dagblad 18/10/2007: 1). The portrayals as discussed above have one thing in common, and that is that the older adult, alone or grouped with others, is seen as a victim in need of help regarding digitalisation.

### *When Are Older Adults Invoked in the Discussion?*

We were able to distinguish four distinct fields in which older adults were used in one of the roles as described above. These fields were social life, health care, economic welfare, and societal changes. In some of these

fields it was possible to discern a change caused by the COVID-19 health crisis, and this has been highlighted in the below sections.

### *Social Life*

The social life and the implications of digitalisation prior to 2019 was mostly focussed on the loss of social connections due to digital technology, such as the loss of face-to-face contact because of digitalisation (e.g. text no. 109, Het Nieuwsblad 31/8/2016). Often linking this to psychological reasons for not using digital technology such as shame or negative response by their children (i.e. text no. 31, Reformatisch Dagblad 18/10/2007).

Overall, the focus is more on what older adults lose due to digitalisation instead of the potential benefit. And if a benefit is discussed it is not perceived to be equal to offline contact rather as a poor substitute, even if an article highlights that it makes connection with distant grandchildren possible (text no. 35, Trouw 4/5/2008). This stressing of the importance of offline connection changes during the COVID-19 health crisis when the ability to use digital communication technologies became the only means of safe communication for many older adults. This resulted in a lot of articles in 2020 highlighting the importance of digital skills and showing the benefits of digital communication. Articles call upon older adults to learn how to use digital communication devices i.e. text no. 229 (De Faam 30/12/2020). And in 2020 the articles do not ask for analogue solutions anymore and instead focus on the struggles of older adults to learn these new skills. One example, text no. 229 (De Faam 30/12/2020), confirms these struggles by reporting on the 15 per cent increase in the number of calls received by SeniorWeb, this is an organisation which aims to provide computer and internet assistance to older adults in the Netherlands.

### *Health Care*

The second field to be discussed here is health care, and the benefits that digitalisation can offer for a growing ageing population worldwide regarding societal problems such as: higher health care costs, insufficient available care facilities, and a growing demand for health care (Pekkarinen et al. 2020). An essential element of digital health care is the ability to remain autonomous at home (text no. 175, De Morgen 17/7/2018). In

the corpus of texts, robots and alarms are proposed as means to remain at home longer, allowing ageing in place. The problems associated with these are discussed, such as the inability to use a health alarm correctly (text no. 18, Rotterdams Dagblad 22/9/2004), or the lack of training of the care workers (text no. 175, De Morgen 17/7/2018). This discussion is centred on the acceptance of digitalisation in health care, and is interwoven with psychosocial and economic concerns of both the care staff and older individuals towards digitalisation: “so this means that I might not have a job anymore, [the student nurses] say when they see the robot” (text 175, De Morgen 17/7/2018: 4).

The other problem that is highlighted in the texts is the disparity between those with and without digital skills in acquiring the necessary health advice. This includes the benefits for those digitally skilled enough to find health solutions, specialists, and health information. The difference in access to health care is highlighted in a call to action for politicians to ensure that the disparity does not grow and that those vulnerable to digital exclusion are offered analogue solutions (e.g. texts no. 202 [Reformatorisch Dagblad 14/5/2019] and no. 188 [Nederlands Dagblad 17/4/2019]). The focus in 2020 is not on health care when digitalisation and older adults is discussed, as only one article discusses digital health care. However, this concerns the specific context of the older adult with a migration background, who according to two scientists, experience more boundaries in accessing digital health care (text no. 240, Het Parool 8/7/2020).

### *Economic Welfare*

In terms of economic welfare, prior to 2020 a lot of articles focus on the abilities of those over 50 to obtain and maintain sufficient digital skills to continue employment. One such text discusses the changes in the *financial services* industry, which is rapidly becoming more digital, and focusses heavily on the employees who are unwilling to change. The employees consider that they have weathered these storms before, and they expect to not be affected this time (text no. 133, De Telegraaf 13/5/2017). The other economic welfare aspect can be found in the consequences of not being able to access banking services without using internet banking (e.g. text no. 35, Trouw 4/6/2004), or the inability to independently file taxes (e.g.

text no. 135, *Het Nieuwsblad* 7/9/2017). The older adult was portrayed multiple times as the main victim of the push of the Dutch government to only allow tax filing online (e.g. text no. 90, *De Twentsche Courant Tubantia* 19/11/2015). The main argument was that this would require third-party help and would mean a loss of autonomy for the older adult.

### *Societal Changes*

The fourth and last field is that of the position within society. Pre-COVID 19, the focus is on the loss of autonomy experienced by older adults when they encounter digital technology. We classify this as a societal issue, as not participating impacts non-users beyond the social or financial level. It has an influence on full participation in the public sphere, as can be observed in the closure of physical service points in municipalities, banks, and train stations. These closures have had a profound impact on those that are unable or unwilling to use digital alternatives (e.g. texts no. 196 (*De Telegraaf* 7/12/2019) or no. 159 (*Krant van West Vlaanderen* 21/9/2018). Autonomy is also seen as important by older adults themselves as it is one of the main reasons for older adults' participation in a digital skills course (i.e. texts no. 172 [*Eindhovens Dagblad* 23/11/2018] and no. 132 [*Het Laatste Nieuws* 06/28/2017]).

### Discussion

Based on this analysis, we see that the digitalisation debate, and specifically the media representation of older people, is a matter of underrepresentation of capable and diverse older people, and a misrepresentation of older people in general as digitally incompetent. This is similar to the concept of "visual ageism," as coined by Loos and Ivan (2018), in that the media representation is not balanced compared with the segment of the actual population. Similar to visual ageism the observed expression of ageism is influenced by the concepts of successful ageing, as the examined media representation embodied the same tenets of successful ageing (i.e. autonomy and independence). Our observations differ from that of Loos and Ivan (2018) in that, unlike visual representation, word choices in printed media can already be ageist and the focus is not on physical ability but more on cognitive ability. The representation by

older adults themselves illustrates this emphasis on cognitive ability. As they provided evidence of their ability to acquire digital skills. This is further reflected in the fact that prior to COVID-19, the social life received less attention in comparison to others, as the focus was more on the loss of the analogue social life. While the digital social life was barely considered a possible addition or replacement of the analogue social interaction. We theorise that this might be because the newspaper could not foresee that digital social connections were needed to replace in-person contact, as was the case during the COVID-19 period. It then became an essential tool to avoid social isolation. This theory is supported by the increase of attention to the social life in the newspapers in 2020.

As the findings show, older adults and digitalisation can be found in a variety of contexts. It is important to make a distinction between when older adults themselves contribute and when others speak for them. Older adults were able to contribute directly to only 26 out of 281 documents, and this occurs often in relation to a digital initiative such as a computer course. Here the perception of older adults is that of ambassador and is positive on purpose to illustrate that older adults can learn these skills. This is similar to the findings by Rasi (2022) in that the older adults are happy targets of digital inclusion initiatives; however, the difference between the Finnish portrayals and the Dutch-language are found in that they are portrayed not so much as incompetent but as eager beginners or average users. Two texts out of 26 are an exception to this as they contain older adults who reject digital technology. The two texts contextualise the disengagement of technology as a conscious choice. The difference between self-representation and representation by others is found in the autonomy available to the older adult and the diversity that is present in old age. When others discuss older adults in relation to digital inclusion it is often as one homogenous group in need of digital assistance, this concurs with existing research (Loos et al. 2017a, 2017b). There are exceptions, as the senior citizen organisations specifically acknowledge that there is heterogeneity in the abilities of older adults. However, there they distinguish between groups within the older population and portray the oldest-old “naturally lacking in skills.”

In the other texts where, older adults are mentioned but not directly engaged with, the focus is on the consequences and existence of the digital divide, and most often the older adult is mentioned as a group that is left behind and/or not benefiting from the possibilities of digital technology. The contexts in which older adults and digital technology are discussed vary; the societal and financial contexts are often dominated by negative expectations for older adults. The focus here is on the loss for older adults and less on the possibilities that digital technologies might have for them. The older adult is used as an example to easily clarify the issue for the reader who might be impacted if the digital divide continues.

The misrepresentation of older adults as naturally digitally incompetent is a form of *ageism* as it frames older people in an inescapable state of being. It can be argued that age, unlike poverty or education, is a state that cannot be changed. By casting older adults as digitally incompetent, it grants a certain futility towards the aim of changing that state. Furthermore, this framing may strongly contribute to older adults remaining unable to recognise the benefit of digital technology in their lives. Yet, this is essential for technology adoption as several scholars have noted that a lack of need or interest is often a reason for non-engagement or disengagement with technology (Ghorayeb et al. 2021; McDonough 2016, 2020; Quan-Haase et al. 2018).

## Conclusion

Media representation is known to impact the perceptions of the public, and the representation of older adults within the digital inclusion debate over the last 20 years is mostly negative or hopeless. This can affect the goal of achieving digital inclusion of older people. Previous studies have shown that several of the barriers to inclusion for older people are related to fear of mocking, fear of being perceived as stupid, and the perception that it is not for them. The image that is prevalent throughout the corpus of texts does not portray the older adult in an empowering manner. Rather, in some cases, it might even enhance their reluctance about digital technology. The inclusion of older adults' perspectives in 26 articles is encouraging as they are given agency to represent themselves. However, the overall lack of



texts and self-representation means that the media representation is not yet sufficient. The definition of older adult in the newspaper articles seems to start from 50 or 55 years onwards, and this impacts the topics that are discussed. Subsequently, it ensures that newspaper articles about older workers and their issues are included but dilutes the effectiveness of the category “older adult” as it consists of at least three generations, and it becomes difficult to identify with this representation.

The representation of older adults as enthusiastic users of digital technology might have an impact on the adoption of digital technology. The older users show that digital technology is useful and beneficial for them. Previous studies have argued that older adults’ adoption is hindered by the perception that technology will not be useful for them (Castleton et al. 2020; McDonough 2020). The COVID-19 crisis has made clear that internet communication is essential for the current situation, and this might entice older adults to learn digital skills. It would, therefore, have been interesting to hear from more older adults in the 72 texts published in 2020. Their descriptions of finding digital solutions might inspire others to act and to develop skills. Peer-to-peer education has proven to be essential in retaining skills. Representation in this instance is ensuring visibility of digitally skilled older adults.

The media coverage of older adults and digital inclusion mostly does not contain a positive or hopeful narrative. If a society wants to ensure more digital participation of older adults and wants to promote successful ageing by digital social engagement and autonomy, we must ensure that the representation of the digital older adults improves. This can be achieved by guaranteeing that older adults are given space in the media to represent themselves. This includes more representation via the organisations dedicated to older adults and by older adults themselves. The fact that only 26 articles over a span of 20 years contained the voices of older adults results in an underrepresentation of this population. Moreover, the representation as *naturally lacking in digital skills* needs to be changed. The population of older adults is too diverse to be used in that fashion. It erases their competency and history.

The main limitation of this research is that the corpus of texts was retrieved from one database only. Even though Lexis Nexis is a vast

database, it is possible that certain newspapers were not included due to their lack of “deep archives” (Nexis Uni 2021), or that these same newspapers do not provide access to all of their archives. Still, we did encounter all the most-read newspapers, a broad selection of the established Dutch magazines, and a variety of papers over the whole political spectrum. Further research is necessary to investigate whether similar trends can be found in other countries. One suggestion is to investigate the discourse present in newspapers in Afrikaans (one of the main languages in South Africa and deriving a lot of the vocabulary from Dutch) to see the differences between their discourse and that of their European counterparts. Moreover, it would be interesting to investigate whether the overrepresentation of texts from the Netherlands is reflected in a difference in digital inclusion policy between Flanders and The Netherlands, where it might be expected that there is more public sphere debate surrounding the digital inclusion of older adults in The Netherlands due to more media attention.

### Funding

This work was supported by the The Research Foundation – Flanders FWO under Grant S005221N. The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

### Acknowledgements

The Digital Ageing Consortium is composed of researchers from Vrije Universiteit Brussel and University of Antwerp: Ignace Glorieux, Dimitri Mortelmans, An Jacobs, Anina Vercruyssen, Nico De Witte, Ilse Mariën, Werner Schirmer, Bram Spruyt, Cora van Leeuwen, Jorrit Campens, and Nelly Geerts. The authors would like to thank the other members of the Digital Ageing Consortium.

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## Social exclusion in service settings amongst Swedish-speaking older adults in Finland: Language incongruency or identity discrimination, or both?

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### Abstract

Previous studies suggest that older adults from minority linguistic groups are at a higher risk of experiencing social exclusion, with service exclusion being a highly evident form. This article explores how Swedish-speaking older adults in Finland experience the availability and adequacy of services in their first language and how their experiences are linked to social exclusion. Anchored in the intersection between two dimensions of social exclusion, service exclusion and identity exclusion, this study presents findings from 14 semi-structured interviews with uni- and bilingual Swedish-speaking older adults. The results indicate that inequitable access to services and facing language discordant services can shape experiences of exclusion. The inability to receive

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everyday services in Swedish further fosters feelings of inferiority and identity discrimination. This study findings contribute to the social gerontological literature on social exclusion and demonstrate how identity intersections with service exclusion.

Keywords: Finland, linguistic identity, official linguistic minority, older adults, services, social exclusion.

## Introduction

It has been argued that official linguistic minority older adults encounter barriers and obstacles when seeking and receiving services in their own native language (Holmqvist & van Vaerenbergh 2013; Nyqvist et al. 2021a). Additionally, differences in service quality as well as a lack of linguistic congruency in care services have commonly been experienced amongst official linguistic minority older adults in various contexts (Batista et al. 2019; Guerin et al. 2018; Martin et al. 2018; Stout et al. 2008). Even if service exclusion has mainly been addressed amongst unilingual minority older adults, even bilingual older adults have expressed a strong desire to be served in their preferred language in both high- and low-involvement services (Holmqvist & Van Vaerenbergh 2013). High-involvement services, such as medical, social and financial services, are services that tend to rely heavily on coproduction and communication between service provider and receiver, whereas communication is not such a crucial tool in low-involvement services, such as grocery shopping or visiting a restaurant or café (Holmqvist & van Vaerenbergh 2013).

Various services, with an emphasis on care services, play an increasingly fundamental role in the everyday life of an ageing person. Older adults' health and social care needs are diverse and possibly complex (Evans et al. 2019). Receiving services in one's native language(s) also becomes increasingly important in later life. In later life stages, a person is likely to experience a reduced ability to maintain fluency in multiple languages and may encounter heightened difficulties in activating their second language(s) (Holmqvist & van Vaerenberg 2013). Age-related cognitive changes may lead to a reduced fluency or even a complete loss of second language skills, highlighting the importance of native language(s)

(de Moissac & Bowen 2019; Martin et al. 2018). Alternatively, a gradual decrease in second language proficiency may be caused by changes in everyday language use as a result of life transitions (e.g. retiring from a job where one functioned in a second language) or simply from an increased willingness to use one's native language(s).

Earlier studies on service exclusion amongst official linguistic minorities tend to focus broadly on a lack of linguistic proficiency and linguistic incongruity, whereas service exclusion deriving from questions of identity, identity exclusion and language preference is more under-researched (e.g. Alimezelli et al. 2013; Bowen 2001; Kalland & Suominen 2006; Martin et al. 2018). Language is not only merely a tool for interaction but also a way of producing and reproducing identity, which accentuates the importance of the use of one's first language(s) (Bucholtz & Hall 2004). In the contextual framework for social exclusion presented by Walsh et al. (2017), both exclusion from services and sociocultural exclusion – including aspects of identity exclusion – are presented as dimensions of social exclusion. This present study strives to address these dimensions as interlinked by highlighting the aspect of linguistic identity as an aspect that plays a part in service quality. Such a link between dimensions of exclusion is especially evident in the case of bilingual service seekers, to whom straying from their first language is possible but not desired. Thus, this study emphasises identity as a possible key component in social exclusion studies, focusing on services for linguistic and/or ethno-linguistic minorities.

In the Finnish context, both unilingual and bilingual Swedish-speaking older adults belong to a societal minority language group that is often referred to as a privileged minority due to the official national language status of Swedish in Finland. However, it has been reported that the social inclusion of Swedish speakers is challenged by them not being able to use their first language regardless of their strong linguistic rights (e.g. Törmä et al. 2014). Finland is an officially bilingual country, and authorities are obliged to offer services in both Finnish and Swedish (Language Act 2003; The Constitution of Finland 1999). Regardless of their robust legal status, research shows that the position of the Swedish language in Finnish society, as well as in the linguistic climate in general, is deteriorating (Herberts & Suominen 2019; Lindell 2021).

This study brings to light older Swedish speakers' experiences of seeking and receiving services as an official linguistic minority older adult. This study addresses language barriers and the lack of availability of services, with further reflections on linguistic identity, and how it can be compromised in linguistically discordant services. The first section introduces the theoretical framework, drawing upon theories of social exclusion, with a focus on the intersection between service exclusion and identity exclusion. Second, this study addresses the methodology and presents the qualitative data drawn from 14 individual semi-structured interviews with uni- and bilingual Swedish-speaking older adults residing in the western parts of Finland. Third, this paper analyses the participants' experiences of service availability and adequacy, not only with a focus on language proficiency and exclusion from services but also on language sensitivity and discrimination, tackling exclusion on a broader sociocultural level.

### *Service Exclusion Amongst Official Linguistic Minority Older Adults*

Earlier research on exclusion from services from an official linguistic minority perspective has greatly focused on larger population samples, with less of a focus on age differences and the specific attributes and needs of older groups (e.g. Hughes et al. 2009; Savard et al. 2018; Stout et al. 2008). The contextual realities between the study countries vary, making the study findings largely context-bound, highlighting the specific conditions and peculiarities that make the experiences of each population special (Nyqvist et al. 2021a). Furthermore, the status of the linguistic minority group is likely to affect the intensity and nature of the exclusion experience, with official linguistic minorities having a more robust legal foothold than minorities lacking official status (Nyqvist et al. 2021a).

Limited access to services amongst official linguistic minority older adults has been reported in terms of housing, transport, leisure, home support, health care and home care (Dupuis-Blanchard & Villalon 2013; Dupuis-Blanchard et al. 2014; Simard 2019). Lacking availability of health information in the official minority language, as well as longer waiting times, has also been addressed, affecting perceived service quality (e.g. Eriksson-Backa 2008). Lacking service access has been argued to have negative effects on ageing in



place, health outcomes and well-being, amongst other things (Batista et al. 2019; Dupuis-Blanchard & Villalon 2013; Martin et al. 2018).

Additionally, differences in service quality in terms of language have received attention in social exclusion research. Generally, lacking service quality has been discussed as linguistically and culturally incongruent services, including difficulties in communicating with the service provider, sometimes leading to misinformation and misunderstandings (Eriksson-Backa 2008; Martin et al. 2018). Dupuis-Blanchard et al. (2015) consider adequate communication with professionals to be a hallmark of safe practice. The inability to use one's native language whilst receiving services has been argued to increase feelings of vulnerability and insecurity (Bouchard et al. 2012; Day et al. 2010), with the difficulty of communicating pain, emotions and sensitive subjects ridding the service encounter of a sense of individuality and trust (Bouchard et al. 2012; Hughes et al. 2009).

The ways in which receiving linguistically inadequate services is interlinked with identity exclusion have been less studied. Earlier studies suggest that experiences of exclusion are not merely generated from the service providers' inability to speak the official minority language but also from a lack of sensitivity towards the service seeker's linguistic preferences (Mutchler et al. 2007). Irvine et al. (2006) make a distinction between language proficiency and *language awareness*, of which the latter incorporates not only proficiency but also attitude, motivation and an appreciation of the crucial role of language in expressing cultural identity. A study conducted by Hughes et al. (2009) amongst bilingual Welsh-speakers concludes that possession of majority language skills does not prevent the disadvantages experienced by official minority language speakers when trying to access services. Even for bilingual service seekers who do have proficiency in the majority language, receiving service in one's first language has been reported to create feelings of comfort, homeliness, understanding and trust (Hughes et al. 2009; Madoc-Jones 2004). Consequently, services provided in the official minority language have been perceived to be of better quality (e.g. Hughes et al. 2009).

### *A Social Exclusion Approach Focusing on Services in Later Life*

Essentially, social exclusion refers to a form of separation of individuals or groups from mainstream society (e.g. Rawal 2008; Walsh et al. 2017).

Social exclusion has been defined as the process through which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society within which they live (EUROFOUND 1995). Concerning definitions of social exclusion of older adults specifically, Walsh et al. (2017) have presented the following definition adapted from Levitas et al. (2007):

Social exclusion among older persons is a complex process that involves the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services as people age, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people across the varied and multiple domains of society. It affects both the quality of life of older individuals and the equity and cohesion of an ageing society as a whole. (Walsh et al. 2017, 83)

According to Walsh et al. (2017), the research on social exclusion within the context of ageing remains under-developed. Social exclusion research disproportionately tackles exclusion of children, young people and adults (Mofatt & Glasgow 2009), overlooking the situation of older people. However, Walsh et al. (2017) point out three notable features that make old-age exclusion a unique form of disadvantage. First, earlier research has recognised that exclusion can accumulate over the life course, increasing the prevalence of exclusion in later life (Kneale 2012). Second, exclusionary phenomena often act as tipping points towards precarious situations for older adults, limiting their opportunities to escape exclusionary conditions (Scharf 2015). Last, in some cases, older adults tend to be more susceptible to exclusionary processes and more vulnerable to their impacts (e.g. Jehoel-Gijsbers & Vrooman 2008).

It is generally argued that the opposite end to being socially excluded is social inclusion. In fact, Rawal (2008) brought forward the perceptions of exclusion and inclusion as 'inseparable sides of the same coin' (171). Frequently, conceptualisations of inclusion appear as invocations of the "normal" or "mainstream" applied to various things that people are understood to be excluded from (Cameron 2006). Even though definitions of social inclusion are often conceptually dominated by exclusion, it has also been argued that there can be simultaneous exclusion and inclusion, meaning that one can be excluded in one domain and included in another (Jackson 1999).

Not only is social exclusion defined in different ways across research, but also the domains capturing exclusion also tend to vary (see, e.g.

Burchardt et al. 2002; Tsakoglou & Papadopoulos 2002). For consistency and clarity, this article refers to a framework presented by Walsh et al. (2017), which recognises six common domains of social exclusion in later life: (1) neighbourhood and community, (2) services, amenities and mobility, (3) social relations, (4) material and financial resources, (5) socio-cultural aspects and (6) civic participation. Out of these six dimensions, exclusion from services, amenities and mobility, as well as socio-cultural aspects of exclusion, including issues related to linguistic identity (Bucholtz & Hall 2004), will be at the heart of this article.

Not receiving welfare services in one's own language not only challenges a person's linguistic skills but also further diminishes and invalidates core components of their identities. Language has been identified as a social tool that encompasses a significant emotional dimension and assists in building and maintaining a personal and linguistic identity (Arzoz 2007). According to Bucholtz and Hall (2004), language plays a crucial yet often unacknowledged role in the formation of cultural and social subjectivities. It could be assumed that social exclusion in service situations is not merely a product of the inability to use one's preferred language; it is also strengthened by the feeling that one's linguistic and perhaps cultural identity is not respected.

Based on the theoretical viewpoints presented earlier, this study seeks to answer the following research questions in relation to issues of social exclusion and the misrecognition of linguistic identity amongst Swedish-speaking older adults in service settings:

- 1) How do unilingual and bilingual older adults experience and describe the availability and adequacy of services in their first language?
- 2) How is social exclusion shaped in linguistically lacking high- and low-involvement services?

### *Methodological Approach*

The data analysed in this study is part of a larger research project with the overall aim of exploring social inclusion amongst older adults from a minority perspective (see Acknowledgements), specifically focusing on the Swedish-speaking official minority. This paper draws on semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted in 2020 with 14

Swedish-speaking older adults living in the region of Ostrobothnia in Western Finland. Ostrobothnia was chosen as the study area due to the region's unique linguistic environment; Ostrobothnia is highly bilingual, with the highest number of Swedish-majority municipalities in Finland (Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities 2020). The inclusion criteria for participating in the study comprised being aged 65 or older, identifying as a uni- or bilingual Swedish speaker, residing in Ostrobothnia, being willing to provide informed consent and share their own experiences.

Interviewees were recruited via social media and newspaper advertisements and several associations for Swedish-speaking older adults. Those who were willing to participate contacted the researcher directly, after which they were provided with further information about the study and a consent form. Ethical approval was obtained from the host institution (Åbo Akademi University), and all participants were given the right to withdraw from the study during or after the interview. All data were treated confidentially and pseudonymised.

Two researchers (first and second authors) took part in the initial phase of the study, which included creating the interview guide and gathering the empirical data. Two pilot interviews were carried out to test the applicability of the interview guide. These pilot interviews secured the suitability of the questions in the interview guide, and no revisions were made to the guide. This interview guide was used during all interviews, and it included three broader themes: (1) relation to language (including past and current language use), (2) language in use of services (including high- and low-involvement services) and (3) language and social participation. Theme (1) was chosen to provide a life course perspective to the older adults' experiences since in studying inequalities and social exclusion in old age, the life course should be considered (Van Regenmortel et al. 2016). Themes (2) and (3) were chosen since social exclusion in service use and social participation have been considered common and frequent forms of exclusion amongst official linguistic minorities (e.g. Nyqvist et al. 2021a).

The interview guide further consisted of semi-structured questions organised under these three broader themes, completed with follow-up questions, which the interviewer asked depending on the responses from

each participant. Questions with a focus on the COVID-19 pandemic were added to the guide since the emergence of the pandemic was considered highly topical and relevant to the subject studied.

## Context

Swedish bears the position of a second national language in Finland (Language Act 2003, 1§). Approximately 5.2% of the total Finnish population of 5.5 million is Swedish-speaking, whereas other linguistic minorities account for 8.3% of the population (Statistics Finland 2022a). Finnish municipalities are either officially unilingual or bilingual, depending on the size of the official language minority community. Of the total number of 308 municipalities in Finland in 2022, 33 were classified as bilingual, and 16 were classified as unilingual Swedish (Statistics Finland 2022b). The duties of regional and state authorities to provide services in both languages depend on the linguistic status of the municipality as unilingual or bilingual (Language Act 2003, 5§). In bilingual municipalities, authorities are obliged to offer services in both languages.

The linguistic identities of Swedish speakers in Finland have been referred to as complex, with affiliations both with Swedish and Finnish speakers as well as bilinguals – a distinctive ethnolinguistic group that exists alongside and between Swedish and Finnish speakers (Vincze & Henning-Lindblom 2016). The Swedish-speaking minority has become less visible in Finnish society due to factors such as increased bilingualism, the significant growth of immigration and greater linguistic plurality (Saukkonen 2011). The main components of what constitutes Swedish-speaking identity fluctuate and are hard to grasp. Amongst Swedish speakers, language has been presented as the main component and the basis of their identity (Polanowska 2015). Areas populated by Swedish speakers are, in many senses, divided, which is reflected in the variety of dialects, the practical usage of Swedish and access to and use of services in Swedish (Polanowska 2015).

## Participants

A total of 14 interviews with unilingual and bilingual older adults alike were conducted, out of which 12 were conducted as phone interviews due

to the global COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews lasted 30–70 minutes each. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. The first researcher transcribed six interviews, and an assisting student was hired to transcribe the remaining eight interviews. Out of the 14 participants, 10 were female and four were male. The ages of the participants ranged from 68 to 92 years, with an average age of 78.5 years. The participants were identified as either bilingual or unilingual Swedish speakers, with eight participants considering themselves fluent in Finnish. The definition of language groups was based on the participants' self-identification as either uni- or bilingual. Bilingual study participants were able to choose the interview language themselves; however, all participants chose to be interviewed in Swedish. Further information on the participants is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Participant profiles

	Unilingual ( <i>n</i> = 6)	Bilingual ( <i>n</i> = 8)
Age:		
65–80	4	3
81+	2	5
Gender:		
Female	6	4
Male	0	4
Residence:		
Bilingual town	3	8
Swedish majority municipality	3	0
Marital status:		
Married	2	2
Widowed	2	5
Divorced	1	0
Cohabiting relation	1	1
Household composition:		
Alone	3	5
With partner/spouse	3	3

### *Analysis*

In the initial phase of the analysis, the transcribed interviews were uploaded to NVivo 12 (QSR International) for coding. The analysis centred on the linguistic availability and adequacy of high- and low-involvement services. The data were analysed by the author using a process of thematic coding based on the qualitative content analysis framework presented by Graneheim and Lundman (2004). First, the transcribed texts were read several times to obtain a sense of the whole. Next, citations about the participants' experiences accessing and receiving services in Swedish were brought together into one text, which constituted the meaning units of the analysis. The meaning units were further condensed, and the condensed units were abstracted. The whole context of the participants' texts was considered when condensing and labelling meaning units. Next, the condensed meaning units were sorted into four themes (sufficient/insufficient availability of services and sufficient/insufficient adequacy of services), which further formed two main themes (availability of services and adequacy of services). The research team (all authors) was consulted when sorting the condensed units into different themes and subthemes. Examples of this analysis procedure are further illustrated in Table 2. Deductive coding was used to extract recurring and significant issues and to code them into predefined themes and subthemes. Afterward, citations – some of which are presented in the findings – were selected to outline the major themes. For translation of interview extracts from Swedish to English, a hermeneutic translation approach was used to remain faithful to the original context (Abfalter et al. 2020). We opted for an individual non-recursive translation without specific rules and without back-translation, favouring a more hermeneutic approach involving more intuitive and meaningful translations.

In the initial phase of conducting the interviews, the first author made a separation between high-involvement and low-involvement services in line with the characterisation used by Holmqvist and van Vaerenbergh (2013). In the following results section, high- and low-involvement services will be addressed separately.

**Table 2.** Qualitative content analysis procedure (Graneheim & Lundman 2004)

Meaning unit	Condensed meaning unit: Description close to the text	Condensed meaning unit: Interpretation of the underlying meaning	Sub-theme	Theme
P1: "And what I have heard from long-term care, it is very difficult to get a nurse who speaks Swedish, so... What is better then, do you choose a Finnish speaker or no one at all? Of course you have to take the Finnish speaker."	She has heard that it is difficult to receive care in Swedish in long-term care facilities, in which case the patient must choose between Finnish care or no care at all.	Has the impression that choosing care in own language is not always a possibility.	Insufficient adequacy of care	Adequacy of high-involvement services
P2: "[...] You do not always have to switch to Finnish even if it would be easiest. You have to be a bit, maybe... Have tentacles and try to sense if maybe that one would agree to speak a bit of Swedish."	Switching to Finnish is often easiest, but not always a must. By analysing the situation and trying to speak Swedish, one might receive Swedish service.	It is easy to get service in Finnish, whilst receiving service in Swedish is harder and requires more effort.	Insufficient adequacy and availability of services	Availability/adequacy of high-involvement services
P3: "And now when they have informed of corona, so especially in the beginning, it was not that you received information in Swedish."	Explains how information on COVID-19 was not properly given out in Swedish in the initial phases of the pandemic.	Difficulties in receiving important, national health information in own mother tongue.	Insufficient availability of services	Availability of high-involvement services



### *Language Incongruency in High-Involvement Services*

Most research participants in this study described the availability of Swedish social and healthcare services in Finland as sufficient. This was particularly the case regarding healthcare services – with specific mentions of the local central hospital. Positive perceptions of service access and availability were more common amongst bilingual participants who preferred receiving service in Swedish but did not regard it as a necessity. These participants shared how they sometimes even naturally switched to the Finnish language. Here, it is important to note that approximately 43% of the Swedish-speaking population lacks the proficiency in Finnish required to perform such language switches (Lindell 2021). A common perception amongst the participants who were satisfied with service availability was that they were privileged in comparison to their peers who resided in Finnish-speaking majority areas:

But I do think they have it difficult in many [...] other cities, let's say [names a Finnish city] and big cities where people are very Finnish, even though the area should be bilingual. They may have difficulties in finding staff who can speak Swedish, when there are already staff shortages in many areas. (Gunvor, 86)

In some cases, the experiences of having access to services in Swedish were mixed. Sofia (aged 74) described a 50/50 chance of receiving high-involvement services in Swedish and felt that there over time has been a gradual increase in Finnish-speaking personnel. Generally, bilingual participants did not personally experience the availability of services as problematic but expressed concern on behalf of unilingual Swedish-speaking peers:

[...] I can imagine that those who only speak Swedish can have problems. Because there are those within health care and within the service sector who do not master Swedish. This I have come across many times. [...] Let's say out of ten contacts, maybe three have been such. Where it is only Finnish. (Maj, 81)

Although services in Swedish were generally considered available, several participants described the availability of Swedish services as lacking. Poor availability was most discussed in relation to COVID-19 information, with information in Swedish described as lacking and/or more difficult to obtain. Previous studies – albeit primarily focusing on racial minorities

- have drawn parallels between linguistically lacking information and negative health consequences, with communication barriers being connected to inappropriate care and decreased quality of life (e.g. Martin et al. 2018). Furthermore, long-term care services were considered harder to access in Swedish, and even unilingual Swedish speakers were reported to receive said services (long-term care housing services for older adults) in Finnish only. This is in line with previous research, according to which older adults do not always receive long-term care services in their preferred language (e.g. Törmä et al. 2014). These findings are worrying, as age-related cognitive impairments may lead to a loss of second language skills, making the lack of linguistic congruency in long-term care services detrimental (de Moissac & Bowen 2019; Martin et al. 2018).

Two participants made specific mentions of the poor availability of mental health services in Swedish. Zhao et al. (2021) emphasise the importance of linguistic congruency in mental health services, since in such services, language use is often central to diagnosis and treatment in different ways than for physical health, for instance when it comes to discussing the patients' unobservable psychological experiences and administering treatments that involve changing how patients think and behave. In an interview, mental health service availability was described as follows:

[...] Within psychiatry it has been a real pity here in [city], it is almost impossible to get either psychiatric or psychological care in Swedish. They are all [...] virtually all of them are Finnish. (Lovisa, 75)

The participants' experiences of service quality were more ambiguous and mixed. Unilingual and bilingual participants alike stated that they preferred using Swedish in high-involvement services. The participants who spoke Finnish occasionally described having to switch to Finnish to avoid misunderstandings. Language barriers in care settings have previously been reported to contribute to poorer patient assessment, misdiagnosis and/or delayed treatment and incomplete understanding of patient condition (de Moissac & Bowen 2019; Mustajoki 2020; Törmä et al. 2014).

Amongst the interviewees, a switch to Finnish was described as a precaution to avoid such negative service outcomes. However, simultaneously, the participants commonly expressed a reluctance to switch languages, mainly because the use of Swedish felt more comfortable, relieving and

“homely,” whilst using Finnish felt less nuanced and less detailed. Similar descriptions have been reported amongst bilingual Welsh speakers in a previous study, with a common language between service receiver and provider increasing the feelings of comfort and understanding and further leading to a closer and more trusting relationship (Hughes et al. 2009). Being able to use one’s preferred language was considered essential when dealing with sensitive, emotional and difficult matters. The importance of one’s first language is emphasised in care situations that involve feelings of distress, vulnerability and sensitivity amongst uni- and bilinguals alike (de Moissac 2016). This is illustrated in the following citation:

[...] I have been to therapy to [mental health facility] and the therapist I got there was completely Finnish-speaking. She could maybe say “good day” and “thank you” in Swedish, but that was surely it. [...] So, there I missed being able to speak Swedish and it later led to me having to quit there. [...] All nuances and how one wants to express oneself and understand each other, yes, it is really important. (Sofia, 74)

Seeking services in Swedish was described as a balancing act between taking the “easy route” by switching to Finnish and putting in extra effort to be able to use Swedish. Henrik (aged 80) specified how it was possible to receive service in Swedish, but that it required more effort and patience. Service in Finnish was generally considered to be of better quality and resulted in better care experiences. In the following citation, Lovisa describes how receiving service in Swedish requires more time and patience:

So if you are in a hurry and want to deal with the issue quickly and positively, it is safer to take it in Finnish. It goes quicker, and you will get a more positive result. Mostly. [...] If I call the health centre for example and ask to get a time for a dentist appointment or a doctor’s appointment [...] If I ask to get it in Swedish, I get to queue forever, it disconnects, and there are no times available. But if I switch to Finnish and humbly request and so, [...] then I can get an extra time squeezed in. But it never happens if I speak Swedish. (Lovisa, 75)

Occasionally, services were received in broken Swedish. Maj (aged 81), amongst several other bilingual participants, considered information on COVID-19 to be lacking in Swedish in the initial phases of the pandemic and described the Swedish information as a short summary compared to the Finnish information. Bilingual groups might perceive the linguistic

availability of services more critically since they have access to services in both languages and are thus able to make comparisons between Swedish and Finnish services (Nyqvist et al. 2021b). Cases in which epicrisis and other important papers were received in Finnish only were occasionally reported. This is further illustrated as follows:

One can get service in Swedish here in [city], but one can sometimes get epicrisis or such, even if one speaks Swedish, one can get them in Finnish [...] That bothers me sometimes when one gets, like my wife who is quite [...] has been quite sickly from time to time, and gets epicrisis, and they are only in Finnish. (Björn, 86)

The participants' narratives indicate that language plays a key role in high-involvement services, and that the significance of language in such services should not be underestimated or ignored. The next section addresses the availability and adequacy of low-involvement services.

### *Language Incongruity in Low-Involvement Services*

Generally, low-involvement services in Swedish were described as much less available than high-involvement services. This was understood to stem from the service providers' lack of proficiency in Swedish but also from a lower willingness to use Swedish amongst service providers. The participants described low-involvement services as predominantly Finnish and discussed a general and gradual decline in Swedish over time. Such a change could be attributed, at least in part, to the declining size of the Swedish-speaking population; in the early twentieth century, Swedish speakers made up 13% of the population compared to about 5% today (Saarela 2020). Elvira (aged 79) described the lack of Swedish in low-involvement services as problematic and disheartening, as these services play a key role in the construction of the everyday lives of older adults. She further expressed how the lack of Swedish in said services caused feelings of discomfort, frustration and irritation. The availability of written information (advertisements, announcements, etc.) was described as especially poor by the participants. The lack of Swedish information in public spaces was perceived as bothersome and neglectful.

Not only did the participants consider these services to be unavailable in Swedish but also more or less inadequate. Encounters with service

providers in which simple answers, such as greetings or prices, were given only in Finnish were frequently reported. In these situations, the absence of Swedish was more often attributed to a pure unwillingness to speak Swedish than to an actual inability to speak the language. Such experiences, albeit linked to services, can also be understood as a form of sociocultural exclusion, namely, the exclusion of identity. This dimension of social exclusion entails experiences of identity exclusion and language-based discrimination, involving a failure to recognise one's cultural or linguistic identity (Walsh et al. 2017). In some cases, these circumstances would make the participants feel burdensome or unwanted customers, which triggered feelings of discomfort, injustice and discrimination. Brita described her experience of such situations as follows:

I remember last summer when I bought coffee at an outdoor café at the market square, where they maybe have ten products, and she was telling the price, and I had already spoken Swedish and she says (in Finnish "two euros and forty cents"), so I said, "excuse me?!", and she repeats (in Finnish "two euros and forty cents"). She refuses to say it in Swedish, and at this point my own tone turned a bit cold already. But [...] but I was ashamed afterwards, but I do really think that in a town like [city] with Swedish tourists, one CAN learn to say the prices of ten products in Swedish. (Brita, 68)

In the context of low-involvement services, language switching was widely reported by the participants. When service was not available in Swedish, it was received in Finnish or English instead. When service was provided in Swedish, it was deemed to sometimes be of poor quality, deficient or incorrect. This was perceived to apply particularly to written information, which is in line with the findings from a previous interview study by Törmä et al. (2014). Informational texts and written instructions in public spaces have been reported to be lengthier and better written in Finnish, and poorly written or misspelled Swedish information has been experienced as offensive or ignorant (Törmä et al. 2014).

The general perception was that the use of Finnish led to more positive service experiences, whilst the use of the Swedish language could cause difficulties and foster undesirable reactions. Brita (aged 86) described how, in her opinion, she was better seen and heard when using Finnish and thus used Finnish when contacting service providers. It was discussed how the negative attitudes of the service providers affected the participants' service experiences and further deemed that speaking

Swedish was directly linked to negative behaviour and attitudes. This is exemplified by Annette:

[...] What I have reacted on is when I have been in [...] in [a Finnish city] sometimes, at [names a store] [...] when I have been there, I think the shop assistants have been [...] I have experienced that they have been audacious, when they have noticed that I am a Swedish speaker. And I do think that they could say, if they do not know more Swedish than "thank you" and "you're welcome," then they could at least say that. [...] But the good will in people, the good will is missing. That's when I notice, and that's when I can get annoyed. When I notice that they probably could, but the good will is not there. They have simply decided that in Finland we speak Finnish, period. (Annette, 71)

### *Linguistic Identity and Emotional Levels of Exclusion Within a Service Context*

As the findings above show, the participants' experiences of service exclusion were shaped by inconsistent availability of services, the service providers' failure to address the needs of the subgroup and a lack of language sensitivity in services. Service exclusion was also indirectly distinguishable in the interviewees' tendency and preference to switch to Finnish when the use of Swedish was not considered possible. Furthermore, from an identity exclusion perspective, these feelings of exclusion were strengthened by the inability to fulfil and maintain one's linguistic identity in service situations and sometimes encounter discriminating behaviour.

Moreover, uncertainty regarding future language skills and future service availability contributed to a sense of social exclusion. Bilingual participants who considered themselves included in the present expressed worry about being excluded in the future. This was due to general suspicions of declining Swedish services and disappearing second language skills, which earlier research has mentioned to strengthen the discrimination and exclusion that the subgroup faces (e.g. Törmä et al. 2014). Furthermore, type of service also influenced the intensity of experienced social exclusion since the use of a preferred language was understandably considered more crucial in high-involvement services than in low-involvement services.

Aspects of identity exclusion were more prominent in the interviews with bilingual respondents. Identity exclusion was highlighted in situations where the importance of language was downplayed or where one's linguistic rights were not fulfilled. The attitude of the service providers was deemed a central factor that influenced the intensity of exclusion. Most participants reported that service personnel generally tried their best to offer Swedish services, but situations in which service providers refused to speak Swedish were also considered frequent. Scenarios in which the service provider would not even communicate small pleasantries in Swedish were perceived as particularly negative. Gunvor described this as resulting in an inferiority complex of sorts, where one's opinions and needs were disregarded or considered insignificant:

It is just the feeling that [...] that you don't count somehow, it creates a sort of feeling of inferiority. [...] Like "come on, it is not that important." (Gunvor, 86)

Generally, the attitude and behaviour of the service provider were also described as affecting the emergence and depth of exclusion. Feelings of hurt and discrimination were reported in situations where the service provider would seem indifferent and disinterested about providing linguistically congruent services and in situations where the provider would express ill-mannered or rude behaviour. This is exemplified by the following citation:

There are some rude ones, and [...] I visited [a restaurant] with my grandson, you know up there [...] We went in to eat there, and I had some questions for the girl behind the counter, but (in Finnish "I don't speak Swedish") she said immediately. Yes. So, it was a matter of attitude for her. (Henrik, 80)

The bilingual participants in the study shared their experiences of how they were able to receive services in Finnish, but such an outcome was not comfortable or desired. This was at least partly rooted in the participants' perceptions of how receiving services in Swedish was their fundamental right and how having to switch to Finnish compromised this. Additionally, being able to speak Swedish was perceived not only as using a desired language but was also experienced as carrying a cultural value. These reflections of linguistic rights and cultural values added to the emotional level of language use, illuminating how language use entails

so much more than just sufficient communication; it comprises nuances, emotions, a sense of community, culture, history and legality. Such contemplations are further illustrated in the citation as follows:

I had an old aunt who spent the last year of her life in a bed ward in [city], and I thought it was so terrible when it was Christmas, and they all always had some Christmas carols on the radio and such, you know, and she did not know a single one of those Christmas carols because they were in Finnish. So, it is those kinds of things, that people do not think about the fact that all that stuff is also part of it. (Gunvor, 86)

## Concluding Discussion

Considering linguistic aspects in old age social exclusion is of great importance, not only due to globalisation and international migration causing increasing linguistic diversity but also due to the gradually diminishing use of a second language in old age (e.g. Bialystok et al. 2016; Schmid & Keijzer 2009). Social exclusion amongst older adults has been deemed to consist of, amongst other dimensions, exclusion from services and sociocultural exclusion (Walsh et al. 2017), both of which national and/or official linguistic minorities are particularly vulnerable to (e.g. Nyqvist et al. 2021a). In the case of official linguistic minorities worldwide, exclusion from services involves both having inequitable access to services and facing language discordant services (Zhao et al. 2021). Similar issues were addressed by the participants in the present study, as various shortcomings in both the availability and quality of services were discussed. Furthermore, experiences of social exclusion in service settings seemed to stem from a mixture of service exclusion in itself and identity exclusion, with experiences of indifference and dismissal exacerbating feelings of exclusion.

As pointed out by Walsh et al. (2017), how the various experiences, processes and outcomes across the life course combine to generate exclusion remains a fundamental question. Older adults currently experiencing social exclusion may have encountered varying degrees of exclusion across different stages of their life trajectories. These cumulative experiences may in turn contribute to shaping their present perception of exclusion, potentially distinct from how other age cohorts perceive and manifest social exclusion. In the Finnish context,



the proportion of older Swedish speakers within the Swedish-speaking population has notably increased (Saarela 2021), leading to an increased demand for Swedish services. Simultaneously, especially older Swedish speakers perceive the language climate in Finland to be deteriorating, and the Swedish-speaking minority is generally more dissatisfied with services compared to their Finnish-speaking counterpart (Lindell 2021). How Swedish-speaking older adults perceive seeking Swedish services today may be influenced by earlier life conditions and experiences. For example, the contrast between earlier periods with more widely available Swedish services and the subsequent decline in the prevalence of Swedish speakers over time could significantly contribute to the sense of exclusion amongst this group. In the present study, shortcomings in the linguistic availability of high-involvement services became apparent in the bilingual older adults' tendency to switch over to Finnish and the unilingual older adults' experiences of longer waiting times and having to go an extra mile to receive services in Swedish. As expressed by the study participants, the particularly poor availability of long-term care services and mental health services in Swedish is concerning, as the importance of language is emphasised in these services (de Moissac & Bowen 2019; Zhao et al. 2021). Low-involvement services were rated more negatively concerning availability, yet linguistic disparities in said services were deemed less detrimental. However, the inability to receive these services in Swedish could cause feelings of inferiority and discrimination. This discouragement was strengthened by the fact that these services play a key part in the everyday lives of older adults.

Concerning service adequacy and quality, both high- and low-involvement services can be considered to have distinct shortcomings. Amongst bilingual older adults, language switching was used as a strategy partly to avoid misunderstandings but also due to the perceived better quality of services when Finnish was spoken. However, both uni- and bilinguals alike expressed a reluctance to switch languages, especially when facing situations that involved feelings of distress or vulnerability. The inability to communicate nuances of health concerns and other second language communication barriers, such as those arising from communication anxiety, play a crucial role in healthcare quality (Zhao et al. 2021). Regarding low-involvement services, using Finnish was associated with more positive service experiences, whilst speaking Swedish was linked with

negative reactions and attitudes from service providers, making some participants feel like burdensome and unwanted customers.

Situations in which the importance of language was downplayed fostered experiences of identity exclusion. Based on the participants' stories, using one's preferred language is not only merely about communication but also about identity expression. According to Pitkänen and Westinen (2018), Swedish speakers consider their native language to be of great importance to them more often (58%) than Finnish speakers (49%), reflecting the particular importance of the minority's language use (Polanowska 2015). Other core components of what constructs the identity of Swedish speakers include identifying as a minority as well as self-identification with other Swedish-speaking Finns (Pitkänen & Westinen 2018). Such a deeper identification, reaching beyond language and into a sense of cultural and social belonging, could explain the sense of comfort when receiving services in Swedish. The findings of the present study further suggest that the ability to use the Swedish language also carries cultural value, adding to the depth and meaning of language use in services. It is crucial to acknowledge that exclusion is not solely based on one's self-perceived identity; it can also be influenced by the stigma and stereotypes imposed by the Finnish-speaking majority onto the minority group. One prevalent stereotype regarding the Swedish-speaking minority is the perception of them as being "better" (often in terms of socioeconomic status) and more "successful" (Heikkilä 2008). This stereotype might still influence the majority's perceptions and attitudes towards Swedish speakers today. Despite the persistence of such stereotypes, Heikkilä (2008) discovered that the culture and lifestyle of the minority group does not significantly differ from that of the majority. Additionally, Swedish speakers hold strongly negative attitudes towards these stereotypes (Heikkilä 2008).

It is worth noting that older unilingual adults were more likely to discuss the poor availability of services, whilst their bilingual peers gave more negative ratings of service adequacy. One explanation for this could be that older unilingual adults lack the lifeline of switching between languages, thus limiting their service access. Furthermore, it has been suggested that the anticipation of having to use language discordant services is associated with reluctance to use these services (Zhao et al. 2021). In turn, bilingual older adults can more easily approach Finnish services,

granting them better service access, but also better possibilities to perceive linguistic gaps and defects in services in higher detail, offering them a heightened insight of service inadequacy. In this sense, bilingual older adults can function as intermediaries who raise more critical perspectives on whether the needs of the Swedish-speaking minority are being met (Nyqvist et al. 2021b). The bilingual older adults participating in the study presented dynamic bilingualism (Garcia 2014), employing linguistically flexible practices to manage service situations and further strengthen their service access. These practices involved language switching, combining and mixing languages and a reciprocal correction of language errors and gaps with service providers.

Finally, based on our findings, it can be argued that older adults' experiences of accessing services in Swedish indicate that Finnish language legislation is not fully realised and implemented in practice when it comes to high-involvement services. In contrast to many other Nordic contexts, Finland has exceptionally binding and robust language legislation (Saarinen & Taalas 2017), with a constitutionally defined societal bilingualism of two national languages (Saarinen 2020). However, these linguistic rights and policies are put into jeopardy when linguistic availability and the quality of services are insufficient and when the significance of linguistic identity is overlooked. Simultaneously, the participants in this study live in one of the most bilingual areas in Finland (Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities 2020), raising questions about what a similar linguistic reality looks like in more Finnish-speaking areas. This raises a wish for further research so that official linguistic minority older adults populating areas dominated by the majority language could also get their voices heard.

## Limitations

Although the present study offers perspectives to the existing knowledge on service exclusion from a linguistic perspective, it has several limitations that need to be considered when interpreting the results.

After the pilot interviews, some methodological changes were made as a result of the prevailing pandemic situation. The structure of the intended face-to-face interviews had to be reshaped into a format suitable for phone interviews. Whilst phone interviews proved to be a suitable

data collection method for the present study and can offer a range of potential advantages for qualitative research projects (such as increased anonymity), some challenges and disadvantages should also not be ignored. One of these challenges relates to the loss of visual or nonverbal cues, which are thought to influence communication and convey more subtle layers of meaning (Irvine 2010).

Although the findings of this study are highly regional and context-bound, it is possible that they are also, to some degree, applicable to other official linguistic minorities. Thus, these results could be used as guidelines for further research on official linguistic minorities in different settings. In Finland, the Swedish-speaking population cannot be considered to form a homogenous group since they live in very diverse linguistic settings: some of them live in areas where Swedish speakers constitute a majority, some live in bilingual settings and some live in almost exclusively Finnish-speaking areas (e.g. Kalland & Suominen 2006). Thus, the experiences of older Swedish-speaking adults may also differ on a regional level. Although the findings cannot be generalised to describe the experiences of all official linguistic minorities, they give an indication of possible difficulties that similar groups may also face. Further research is needed, especially regarding nonofficial linguistic minorities who might lack the legal position and vitality that official minorities possess.

It is important to note that the present study focuses explicitly on the perspectives of older linguistic minority service users. For future research, it could be of interest to include the perspectives of service providers as well. Whilst professional perspectives have been taken into consideration in previous research (e.g. Drolet et al. 2014; Irvine et al. 2006; Törmä et al. 2014), national and regional studies with such perspectives remain scant in the Finnish context.

### Acknowledgements

The qualitative data presented in this paper were collected as part of the AgeMin project (2019–2021), an interdisciplinary project by Åbo Akademi University in Finland focusing on social inclusion amongst older adults from a minority perspective. The project was financed by Högskolestiftelsen i Österbotten and the Swedish Cultural Foundation in Finland.

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## Contextual barriers to artistic practices among older people: how do older artists perceive them?

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### Abstract

Research on older people's artistic participation has mainly focussed on its benefits. Fewer studies have addressed the antecedents of older people's artistic participation, especially barriers to artistic practices, and particularly those related with contextual factors. In this study, we examined which contextual barriers older artists perceive when they are carrying out their artistic practices from a socioecological perspective. We conducted semi-structured individual interviews with 30 older visual artists and craftspeople. We found four themes relating to contextual barriers to artistic practice: value of arts and crafts, financial difficulties, discrimination against women, and the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Our study expands on previous research on antecedents of artistic participation among older people, and specifically on barriers. Finally, our study suggests the need to decrease these barriers by implementing programmes aimed at older artists to maintain their artistic and meaningful practices for as long as possible.

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Keywords: artistic participation, barriers, older artists, older people, socioecological model.

## Introduction

In recent decades, there has been increased interest in older people's artistic participation (Reynolds 2015). Research on this topic is significant, since participation in artistic activities among older people is related to numerous individual benefits, such as better cognitive function (Gray & Gow 2020), enhancement of physical health (Reynolds et al. 2011), and contribution to quality of life (Ho et al. 2019). Participation in artistic activities in later life has also been linked to several benefits at social level, such as the preservation of close social networks (Jeffri 2005) and less isolation (Southcott & Joseph 2015).

Research has predominantly focussed on the benefits of artistic practices (Chacur et al. 2022; Gallistl 2021). This emphasis, particularly concerning health promotion and prevention, positions artistic practices as a panacea for potential issues associated with ageing. This overshadows the understanding of artistic practices as a form of self-care and meaning-making (Swinnen 2019). Consequently, there is a need to explore older people's artistic practices beyond a utilitarian perspective that is solely aimed at obtaining specific benefits.

In this context, fewer studies have addressed factors that promote or hinder older people's artistic participation (Chacur et al. 2022). Existing studies in this area are mainly focussed on factors that promote artistic practices, known as facilitators. Examples of this emphasis are studies about motivation (e.g., Fisher & Specht 1999), interpersonal influences that promote artistic activities (e.g., Reynolds 2009), and contextual facilitators of artistic practices (e.g., Keaney & Oskala 2007). Few studies have examined aspects that could hinder older people's artistic participation, particularly those related with contextual factors (Chacur et al. 2022). Understanding these obstacles may contribute to identifying broken or unfulfilled trajectories of artistic participation and suggest factors that help to sustain the participation of older artists and integration of those who do not currently participate in this type of activities.

### *What Do We Know About Barriers to Artistic Practices among Older People?*

As stated above, barriers to artistic practices among older people have not been widely studied. These barriers could be broadly classified considering a socioecological framework (Sallis et al. 2008), which includes a wide range of influences at multiple levels. These influences are not limited to psychosocial variables (McLeroy et al. 1988; Sallis & Owen 2002). They also include environmental and policy elements that could influence an individual's behaviour.

Numerous socioecological models have emerged over time to explain an individual's behaviour and/or to guide behavioural interventions. For instance, Bronfenbrenner (1979) identified four levels of environmental influences. These were the microsystem, a pattern of activities, roles and interpersonal relations experienced by the person in a given setting with specific physical and material attributes; the mesosystem, which consists of the links between two or more settings in which the individual actively participates, for example relations among home, school and neighbourhood peer groups or among family, work and social life; the exosystem, which is comprised of one or more settings that do not include the individual as an active participant but in which events happen that influence, or are influenced by, what occurs in the setting of the developing person; and the macrosystem, which refers to consistencies of lower-order systems (micro-, meso- and exo-system) that occur, or could occur, in the subculture or the culture's level as a whole, with any belief systems or ideology underlying such consistencies. Through their ecological model of health behaviour, McLeroy et al. (1988) recognised five sources of influences on health behaviour: intrapersonal factors, interpersonal processes and primary groups, institutional factors, community factors, and public policy. In contrast, the more recent structural-ecological model proposed by Cohen et al. (2000) identified four categories of structural influences: the availability of protective or harmful consumer products, physical structures, social structures and policies, and media and cultural messages. Although the levels identified by the various socioecological models are not identical, all of them agree on at least three basic levels: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and contextual.

Socioecological models have been used in studies about public health promotion (Stokols 1992), social participation (Gallardo-Peralta et al. 2022) or competitive sports among older adults (Cannella et al. 2022). These frameworks enable us to understand older people's artistic practices at an individual's environment level, including intrapersonal, interpersonal and contextual elements. The primary emphasis on benefits, as outlined in the initial paragraphs of this article, has limited the space for examining context. Context is a crucial aspect, particularly to understand what artistic participation means for older artists themselves (Goulding 2018a). Few studies have addressed barriers at contextual level, with scholars frequently overlooking the collective and social dimensions of creativity (Gallistl 2021), and often analysing artistic practice as an individual phenomenon. In this regard, Becker (1974) described how the creation of an artwork is the culmination of orchestrated actions and interactions among various participants who assume distinct roles at specific points in the creative process. Consequently, the artwork can be considered the result of a collective endeavour that spans production, evaluation, and consumption levels.

Another relevant element is related to the conventions involved in arts practices. Conventions prescribe the abstractions used to convey specific ideas or experiences, and shape the dynamics between artists and their audience by establishing the commitments of both. Furthermore, conventions can shape what constitutes a good work of art and what is accepted in that sphere (Becker 1974). In this context, a study conducted by Gallistl (2018) revealed that creativity in later life is intricately grounded in prevailing norms and conceptions of old age, and that by knowing specific artistic skills older artists distinguished themselves from other agents who were not important in the creative field. The artists' field appears as a social sphere characterised by inherent conflict and competition, where artists engage in ongoing struggles to demarcate the boundaries that distinguish art from non-art (Bourdieu 1996).

In contrast to the aforementioned complexity, research on barriers to artistic practice among older people has mainly focussed on obstacles at intrapersonal level and, in second term, at interpersonal level. The intrapersonal level involves knowledge, attitudes and skills that are directly related to the individual (Sallis et al. 2008). At intrapersonal level, Keaney



and Oskala (2007) found that the influence of poor health, particularly among older adults with a limiting disability, could restrict participation in artistic activities. Even though this study did not examine the motives for this decrease in artistic participation, poor health could visibly act as an obstacle (Keaney & Oskala 2007).

The interpersonal level concerns connections and relations within an individual's network; both primary, for example, with family and close friends, and secondary groups that are larger and broader (Sallis et al. 2008). Some barriers have also been examined at interpersonal level. For example, a lack of social networks could diminish participation in artistic leisure activities, especially in the oldest-old people. While there is no clear age-related tendency in lack of social networks as an obstacle, more older people than younger people cited this as a difficulty (Keaney & Oskala 2007).

In line with interpersonal influences, it has been argued that artists' lives are rooted in relationships with other people and are thus affected by them (Bengtson et al. 2005; Elder 1998). In this respect, life course transitions could influence the artistic trajectories of older adults, particularly among professional artists. For instance, having children can lead to the transitory cessation of artistic practice and the choice of a career in a non-artistic area, to provide greater economic stability (Mullen et al. 2012). Another study among older artists showed that some life course transitions related with the family domain, such as the care of relatives, could hamper artistic practice. It could either decrease the number of hours dedicated to the creative activity or lead to a halt in the artistic activity during a long period (Chacur-Kiss et al. 2023).

In contrast, contextual barriers have been examined to a lesser extent. Contextual level can comprise community aspects, such as workplaces and neighbourhoods; and broad societal aspects including cultural and social norms, and economic and social policies (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2007; Krug et al. 2002). In addition, it can include elements that are inherent to the artistic field, namely valuation in late-life creativity or artworks (Gallistl 2021), and social and cultural capital (Goulding 2013). For example, regarding barriers related to community aspects, a lack of transport may hamper participation among older people in artistic leisure activities by hindering access to creative activities

outside the home (Keaney & Oskala 2007). In the case of professional artists and concerning societal factors, economic aspects could jeopardise the professional career of artists and lead them towards other non-artistic careers (Mullen et al. 2012).

These studies mostly addressed contextual barriers to recruiting older people to participate in artistic activities, and contextual barriers that led to a temporary or definitive cessation of artistic practices. In contrast, few studies have focussed on older people who are actively artistically engaged, and the contextual barriers that they perceived, even if these restrict but do not necessarily halt the artistic practices.

### *Justification and Purposes of the Study*

Notwithstanding scholars' increasing attention to older people's artistic participation, there are some gaps in the study of barriers to artistic practices among older adults that need to be explored to understand them more comprehensively.

Firstly, most studies are linked to the outcomes of artistic participation, specifically to its benefits. This "benefits focus" has some risks. It may show the artistic participation of older adults in a biased way, as it does not examine the potential costs of such participation at different levels. Secondly, research on the antecedents of artistic participation is largely centred on facilitators. Few studies address the barriers. The study of barriers could help to promote the involvement of older adults or sustain their artistic practices. Thirdly, research on barriers has preferably examined obstacles at individual and interpersonal levels, and ignored barriers at contextual level. A better exploration of the context in which older people's artistic participation takes place could help to identify barriers linked to accessibility or the influence of the community on older adults' participation in artistic activities. This would help to promote a friendlier environment for artistic practices and the design of interventions and policies based on the real context that would enable older artists to face these obstacles.

In this sense, the study of barriers to artistic practices in the older population is particularly interesting, because older artists may have had a longer artistic journey, have developed an expert view of the

matter, and have experienced a wider variety of barriers throughout their life. Studies that contemplate larger age ranges and older age could support the construction of a more inclusive, realistic approach to barriers to artistic practices. In addition, due to their long artistic trajectories, only older people can provide a more complete life-course view of contextual barriers, through a retrospective cross-sectional study. For the aforementioned reasons, this study seeks to examine what contextual barriers older artists perceive while they are carrying out their artistic practices.

## Methods

### *Participants*

For this study, three main inclusion criteria were considered: (a) participants were aged 60 years or above, (b) participants carried out an artistic activity, and (c) the artistic activity was valued as significant by the participants. Artistic activity was understood as a voluntary and active artistic practice, at professional or non-professional level, including visual arts and crafts. The purpose of these disciplines is to create tangible items regardless of the level of expertise (Reynolds & Lim 2007). Artistic practices in an intervention or therapeutic context, or training courses were not considered, since these formats might potentially affect the characteristic of voluntary, significant activities. The sampling technique was intentionally kept broad, which is appropriate for examining the perception and meanings of artistic practices as valuable for the participants. In addition, to achieve its purpose, this study did not require the analysis of a specific group of artists, whether professional or non-professional. However, the use of a more focussed sampling strategy might have reduced the study's sample to older people with a legitimate position in their artistic disciplines (Gallistl 2018).

The sample comprised of 30 artists (16 women and 14 men) living in Catalonia (Spain), with a mean age of 68.63 (standard deviation [SD] = 5.3; range = 60–79). Participants actively carried out at least one visual arts or crafts discipline, including painting, sculpture,

photography, drawing, illustration, engraving, jewellery, enamelling, ceramics, embroidery, textile art, basketry, collage, recycled art and woodcraft. In addition to the visual arts or craft discipline, five participants practised another artistic discipline, such as literature, music, poetry and performing arts. Participants were asked if they considered themselves to be professional or non-professional artists, and 20 defined themselves as professional and 10 as non-professional artists. Table 1 shows other sociodemographic characteristics of the sample.

**Table 1.** Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample (in frequencies and percentages) ( $N = 30$ )

Sociodemographic characteristic	Participants	
	<i>n</i>	%
Marital status		
Married	20	66.7
Divorced	7	23.3
Widowed	2	6.7
Single	1	3.3
Educational level		
Primary studies	2	6.7
Secondary studies	16	53.3
University studies	12	40
Self-rated health (compared with one year ago)		
Much worse	0	0
Worse	6	20
Same	21	70
Better	1	3.3
Much better	2	6.7

### *Instruments*

The authors of the study designed a semi-structured interview with open questions to be applied in individual mode. This interview covered the following main topics: life course transitions and relevant events during the artistic trajectory, meaning of ageing and artistic practice, and the influence of life domains on artistic trajectory (and vice versa). The last part of the interview included a thematic section about contextual barriers regarding artistic practice. In this paper, we analyse answers to this section.

### *Procedure*

Participants were contacted in two ways. The first was through formal contact by e-mail with numerous arts and crafts institutions in Catalonia. Three institutions decided to collaborate. Subsequently, an online or face-to-face meeting was held with the manager of each institution, who agreed to distribute information about the research project and invite those interested to contact Author 1 by phone or e-mail. Twelve participants were recruited in this way. The second way was through informal contact with artists living in Catalonia through the researchers' networks or through new contacts given by other participants. Eighteen participants were recruited in the second way.

Twenty-nine interviews were conducted face-to-face and one via video call. Participants chose the setting for the interview, which was most often the artist's residence or studio. Interviews were conducted individually and in a single session by Author 1. She had previous experience in qualitative research and was trained to carry out the interviews in this study. As part of her training, she conducted one interview with a person who met all the inclusion criteria, and the results were discussed with Authors 2 and 3. This interview was not considered for the final sample.

The Ethics Committee of the University of Barcelona (IRB00003099) approved the study. All participants received and signed a written formal consent form, which included exhaustive information on the purposes of the study, data collection methods, confidentiality and

anonymity aspects, and the right to refuse to answer any questions and to abandon the study at any time. Regarding the video call interview, the information document was sent by e-mail and informed consent was given verbally and audio recorded. The image of this interview was not recorded. We pseudonymised data before analysis and use pseudonyms to quote interviews in this paper, to maintain the participants' anonymity.

### *Data Analysis*

Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed through thematic analysis with the support of ATLAS.ti 9 software. The interviews took between 46 and 170 min. We based the analysis of the interviews on the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021), following an inductive process. This process allows data coding without incorporating it into a pre-existing coding framework. Six stages of analysis were included. Firstly, we became familiar with the data through reading and re-reading it, and we registered our preliminary ideas. Secondly, we created the initial codes from the data. Thirdly, we ordered the codes into possible themes and gathered all important data for each theme. Fourthly, we revised all the themes by evaluating their link with the coded excerpts and with the whole data set. Fifthly, we determined and named the themes, by analysing them to refine aspects of each one, and the overall narration that the analysis states. Lastly, we revised all the themes by analysing examples (excerpts) and connecting the analysis to the research purposes and literature. All authors contributed to the data analysis.

### *Findings*

We identified four themes or categories regarding contextual barriers to artistic practice among older people in the participants' narratives. These were value of arts and crafts, financial difficulties, discrimination against women, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the participants revealed at least one contextual barrier to artistic practice, and some of them described two or more barriers.

### *Value of Arts and Crafts*

The value of arts and crafts refers to other people's recognition of the artistic discipline or artistic work and how relevant they think it is, and is linked to the manner in which 'others' attribute value (or not) to their artworks or artistic disciplines. This could be expressed in different ways. For instance, Juan, a professional craftsman, described how the perception in his family and social context of being a craftsman acted as a barrier to engaging in basket weaving at the beginning of his crafts career.

I don't find barriers now, but I did find them then as... I was dedicating myself to something that... this guy is a bit... crazy, right? because... I mean... socially, when I started, socially it was not well considered [being a craftsman]. And here, I'm not sure if everywhere or in some places, but here in Catalonia, 'what will they say', in Catalan, what will the neighbours say if you do this. I didn't care, but my parents cared a lot about this, I've never cared about this (...) Well, it's not true that I don't care about their opinion, of course I care... because we live socially, right? (...) I prefer it now, that in any case, when people come here [to the basket weaving studio], they say 'oh, great!' (Man, 64 years old)

In Juan's narrative, some ambivalence is evident in his contemplation of the value that others attribute (or not) to his craft trade. He highlighted the social context in which crafts practices unfold. Additionally, it stands out that 'others', namely the audience, non-artists and other artists, play a significant role in the artistic process, by contributing to the recognition bestowed, or withheld, from the creative endeavour. In some cases, a lack of recognition of arts arose from the artistic circle's attitude towards certain artistic disciplines. The conflict between 'fine arts and applied arts' was the focus of professional textile artist María's narrative on contextual barriers to artistic practice.

(...) there was the fact of making... let's say an applied art, right? I have no problem with that, I mean, they say to me, 'well, you don't do art, but applied art' and I say 'well, so what?' [Interviewer: Uhm, I understand...] I mean, but... I realise that although I don't care much, it is still a negative thing. Because it is [negative]. Because... art... I mean, the famous, the famous dividing line, the famous boundary that separates arts from crafts, or applied arts... It is something that is there. And those who are involved in art with a capital letter, take great care to ensure those who according to them are involved in 'less important' art, we never cross the border, right? (Woman, 73 years old).

Later, she added that “I currently have, and I have had, many artist friends, and within this group of artist friends there were few who really didn’t consider that you were below them, instead you were on the same level....” This dynamic meant more challenges in the incipient stages of her artistic career. However, in later life, she feels comfortable with her identity as a craftswoman. More experience in the craft field gave her confidence: “I have already accepted this, I think that with all the work I have behind me I don’t have to be ashamed anymore [laughs].”

Other artists pointed out that new generations have undergone a transformation in terms of the recognition and value ascribed to artistic practices today. This topic was mentioned by Julio, a professional painter, who talked about new generations’ lack of interest in arts, which was influenced, from his point of view, by changes in values.

Of course, if that [art] is not promoted, finally people... they lose the... I don’t know... the interest, and I think that a long time ago, you would see the father, the mother and the child [in art] galleries, and now in galleries or museums, recently I haven’t seen any children (...) I think society has changed, now you can order what you want online, and instead of a painting painted at home, you have a poster or you have a photograph that costs... ten or fifty times less... (Man, 70 years old)

Ageing as an artist has given Julio the opportunity to discern and compare the diverse audiences his artwork has garnered throughout his artistic journey. In his opinion, these audiences have changed over the years. Similarly, narratives about the dissemination of artistic work were associated with difficulties in obtaining a public exhibition. Sometimes these obstacles were specifically related to the way art galleries handle the dissemination of artwork. Jordi, a professional painter explained his experience and point of view regarding how art galleries tend to manage them as a business.

The galleries when they became a movement of... ‘snobbism’, eh, this was common, it made a good impression to have a gallery, and they had a gallery in the same way people had a shoe shop, a clothes shop, a fashion shop, anything (...) And the real business was done with the... with the artist. When it should be the other way round. (...) But... the galleries that... say ‘hey, you can exhibit here, but you must pay’ (...) they are living off the painters. (Man, 71 years old)



In line with Jordi, Salvador, a professional artist (sculptor, painter and jeweller) highlighted how in the context of art galleries, artists are often relegated to being perceived as 'just another element' in a production chain. Furthermore, he stated that galleries express disdain for artists who seek fair pay for their artworks. He was of the view that galleries primarily prioritise the unique objective of selling.

At this time, galleries don't believe in artists, but they take advantage of them. You must sell, and you are a manufacturer... underappreciated, if they want, they don't pay you... that feeling of... where they should value you, where they should appreciate you... where they should support you, it's a place where they hate you, because you want to get paid. (Man, 72 years old)

Obstacles linked to the dissemination of artistic work were perceived by professional and non-professional artists. Pablo, a non-professional painter and craftsman, owner and designer of a furniture store in the past where he had exhibited his artwork, described a lack of access to ways of exhibiting, and how retirement had reduced the spaces available to exhibit his work.

(...) if I want to exhibit for... I've done a whole... a series of paintings because I've been on a journey (...) so I have a collection of works that I've painted, twenty paintings... where will I exhibit them? If I want to sell my paintings, for example, I can't... before I could... now I'm retired, but if I want to exhibit, I mean, I'm not an artist, then... in galleries, the first thing they ask you (...) what curriculum do you have, what exhibitions have you done, with whom... (Man, 71 years)

Beyond the role that the art galleries play in the dissemination of artistic work, access to opportunities for exhibiting can be complex. This was described by Ximena, a professional costume designer who is currently dedicated to painting. She described the obstacles for some artists to enter a well-known artistic circle and revealed that in later life this issue becomes more complex. She stated that it is more difficult for her to join these artistic circles than in the early stages of her artistic journey.

(...) It is very difficult. Because... let's see, those who sell and who have... those who have a 'name', it is because they have people who... well... naturally, they have been interested and they have moved before to... to obtain, to have these contacts. But, of course, these people... are the ones who sell, and they are the ones with 'names'. There... there

are thousands of... artists who are in the dark, nobody knows us (...) we haven't had the way to... to be able to integrate... to enter this world. (Woman, 72 years old)

The identification of a lack of resources, specifically at a social level, opens the topic of other obstacles in terms of resources in later life. This topic encompasses potential challenges related to material and financial resources that may have a negative impact on artistic practices.

### *Financial Difficulties*

Some interviewees stated that financial aspects act as barriers to the development of artistic activity, an element that could take different forms. For Rita, a non-professional painter, the difficulty lay in the high cost involved in painting, for example to pay for materials and tuition fees for taking classes to improve her artistic technique.

Well, I think there is also a barrier that is the economic aspect. Because it is a hobby that isn't cheap, it isn't cheap... and if now he [her husband, an artist too] goes once and I go twice, maybe without this economic barrier, we could go almost every day to spend some hours on it. And we would progress much more. (Woman, 68 years old)

Rita mentioned that economic difficulties tend to increase in old age, and potentially contribute to a more complex ageing process. Despite this, she stressed that ageing as an artist (regardless of the difficulties) is different from 'other types of ageing': "these [artistic] goals are illusions... and well, I believe that we lengthen our lives. You don't stay there on a couch, you don't stay there in front of the TV, you don't have the typical conventional retirement." According to other artists, financial barriers acted at macro level: the fact that there were economic problems at country level meant that people acquired fewer artworks, with the consequent negative effect on artists. This is the situation described by Teresa, a professional illustrator and engraver:

"Well, there isn't... there's no money... that... that... that people [artists] don't sell. The youngest illustrators don't have a job (...) Now there is a total crisis. Economic, total, total, total. And people are now concerned about repairing the house, being able to eat..." (Woman, 79 years)

Alberto, a painter and photographer, highlighted that as a non-professional artist starting his creative practice in later life (post-retirement) the economic element is challenging. In his opinion, his situation contrasts with that of well-established professional artists who have enjoyed lengthy artistic careers. He pointed out that although “I would like this artistic activity to be part of my life on an economic level, the barrier is total.” Alberto noted that “it is impossible to make a living from painting if you are not a guy who has already set up a structure from years of work.” In his view, ageing is a complex issue, as “a retired person or an older person who has dedicated himself to doing this [from this stage] has very little economic opportunity. You go to exhibitions, you set up, you pay for everything.”

The age at which creative practice begins to be considered an obstacle, prompts reflection on other social constructions and their potential interference. One of these is gender in artistic practices; a topic that is referred to by some participants.

### *Discrimination Against Women*

The narrative of María showed how gender aspects, in her own words “being a woman” along with other types of barriers, such as recognition inside the artistic circle of her artistic discipline, acted as an obstacle to developing her art in an ideal way.

Well, being a woman, of course. I mean... without any doubt, right? I mean, but this is so obvious that it almost does not need to be said. [Interviewer: No, it is equally important to verbalize it, because...] Yes... yes, yes, no, no, evidently... as I told you before, I've always been able to live from my work, I've been... very lucky at the level of recognition and at the level of dissemination... at the level... I've been in a lot in magazines, in... so... but, but... on the one hand, on the one hand... there was the fact of being a woman, and on the other hand, the fact of making, let's say, an applied art, right? (Woman, 73 years old)

In contrast, Sophia, a professional sculptress and ceramist, spontaneously stated that neither old age (“[at my age] this work, which is a very considerable physical effort, does not affect me”), nor the fact of being a woman has been a barrier to her artistic practice.

The fact of being a woman has not caused me many problems either. I have been quite... well... my work has... been recognised. If I had been a man, I would have been recognised more maybe? Well, I don't have any problems with this. I have many [male] friends who are ceramists and sculptors, and well, they have also had their problems like me, so I don't... I haven't noticed that because I'm a woman I've lacked something, right? (Woman, 77 years old)

While it is important to consider the social constructions of the particular moment in which an artistic practice takes place, it is equally relevant to acknowledge broader contextual factors that have a global influence on the execution of these practices. A pertinent example is the COVID-19 pandemic, a circumstance that was mentioned by some of our interviewees.

### *COVID-19 Pandemic*

This study was conducted in the global context of a pandemic. A few artists mentioned the outbreak as a factor that hindered their artistic practice in some way. Teresa explained the harmful consequences of the pandemic linked to a decrease in sales of artworks: "This year, our workshop has been almost empty of people. People haven't come here to buy, 'look, I'm going to a dinner, I want to bring a cup [artistic piece], I don't know what.' No, that was all over".

In the case of Julio, the consequences are related to the search for inspiration for his creative work since he was used to photographing landscapes on his travels that he would then use in his paintings. He explains how due to lockdown and travel restrictions, this aspect has been disrupted: "I can't travel anywhere to... to... look for topics, right? because I'm running out of relevant topics that... motivate me a lot, I can continue painting because there are always things, right? But those topics that you go to look for and that you find (...) are what I miss". He added: "I have an exhibition in October in León, which was already organised last year, I have had to cancel it..."

While Salvador observed: "now I have an exhibition in Paris that cannot take place, the paintings are there, everything is ready to start the exhibition and it is actually closed, Paris is closed". In addition to affecting the level of sales and exhibition of their artworks, the pandemic and its restrictions reduced the possibilities of meeting with others, as arts

workshops and learning spaces were shut. Concerning this, Martín, a non-professional photographer and painter stated: “Now, due to COVID, that has remained ‘dead.’” (Man, 70 years old)

## Discussion

This study aimed to examine which contextual barriers older artists perceived in relation to their artistic practices, to contribute to previous studies on barriers to artistic participation (e.g., Fancourt & Mak 2020) through the use of retrospective narrative data, and the employment the socioecological model as a reference framework (Sallis et al. 2008; Stokols 1992). It also helps to problematise the contexts where creative production among older individuals takes place (Gallistl 2021). A range of contextual barriers to artistic practice were identified by the participants, related to the value of arts and crafts, financial difficulties, discrimination against women, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Considering a socioecological framework, framed by insights from arts sociology, this study showed that contextual barriers perceived by older visual artists and craftspeople make up a complex system of diverse community, societal, cultural and economic influences. Importantly, the findings show that contextual barriers are experienced as closely linked to the social sphere. They operate in the most immediate context (e.g., family and the close artistic circle), and in the broader one (e.g., the audience, gallery owners and consummate artists). These insights are in line with Becker’s approach (1974) in relation to the collective nature of artistic creation.

The value of the arts is still an underexplored topic in research on the field. Older artists and craftspeople considered the theme of the value of arts and crafts, and described an environment where values have been altered. For our interviewees, this concept refers to the intrinsic (or symbolic) value of the arts, which is linked to, and shaped by, the perceptions of other people – that is, the extent to which other people recognise their artistic practices and products as being valuable. In this way, the present study shows that a large amount of research on artistic participation in later life has considered older people’s artistic activity to be valuable due to its tangible or material benefits, especially on health. This reaffirms the biased vision of older people as fragile, and therefore in need of

health interventions, beyond other values that can be attributed to artistic practices.

Older artists and craftspeople made various distinctions in terms of what is valuable or not. For instance, they addressed the struggle between 'fine arts' (valuable) versus 'applied arts' (not valuable); 'the rapid, disposable, mutable' (valued by new generations) versus 'traditional arts and crafts' (not valued); and the 'older, active, creative, entrepreneurial artist' (valuable) versus the 'passive older person' (not valuable). These findings fit perfectly with previous research conducted by scholars on late-life creativity that showed how creativity is currently commodified in terms of productivity and innovation. Furthermore, it illuminates the challenges that older individuals face in terms of their perception and evaluation of the ageing process (Gallistl 2018).

Additionally, many older artists explained that a common concern is the difficulty in accessing channels of artistic diffusion, and some of them experienced this as particularly challenging in old age. These narratives reaffirm that there is still a lack of equality and diversity in the artistic field. This was reaffirmed by Oakley et al. (2017), who examined the role of space and place in relation to social inequalities in the artistic field. They suggested that artists who live in cultural hubs tended to come from privileged backgrounds, in terms of class, gender and ethnicity. The current scenario shows us that nowadays creativity is valued in terms of entrepreneurship, innovation and constant production. Indeed, innovation (mostly related to the young) is appreciated for the ability to produce creative content that is commercially successful (Bal et al. 2019); an element that inevitably shaped the participants' perceptions and understandings.

Their narratives alluded to a "new" society where products can be requested online and delivered (and discarded) immediately, where art does not fit with the new ideals. Technological dominance was also a topic addressed by the interviewees in that context. Policies tend to seek a balance between technological changes and artistic tradition. Although artistic tradition is not in a position of disadvantage, older artists could build a new type of artistic participation, one that values legacy. At a time when technology could both isolate and facilitate connections, subjective experiences can offer access to new forms of learning for younger generations (Jeffri 2011).

The theme of financial difficulties, particularly the topic about the ‘impossibility’ of living from art, was in line with previous research that showed that even though strong evidence shows the impact of arts and culture on national and local economies, there is substantial evidence that artists can face a precarious personal economy (Arts Council England 2014). In fact, in many cases creative work was distinguished by insecurity, reflected in frequent freelance work, and short-term work with little or no salary (Lindström 2018). In line with this, Jeffri (2011) pointed out that the irregular nature of an artist’s career, with multiple jobs, arts jobs versus day jobs and documentation on major career turning points, frequently distinguishes artists as contingent workers or freelancers. Visual artists are exposed to occupational risk, with the lowest income in the group of general artists (Lindström 2018). Even if these experiences are common throughout artistic careers regardless of age, our study revealed that in later life some aspects were amplified, for instance due to the increase in financial obstacles after retirement, and because of the difficulty of creating new networks in old age. In this sense, although artists have long experience with self-sustaining mechanisms, ageing creates specific challenges, which range from establishing health and retirement cover to dealing with the loss of a community of colleagues and finding an inspiring setting where artistic creation can be cultivated at a moment when older artists are maturing in their art (Jeffri 2011).

In this context, resilience is intricately tied to the artists’ capacity to adjust to changes at any stage of their life. In our study, participants continue to develop their artistic practices despite encountering barriers. In addition, they frequently mentioned how they overcome these obstacles. This adaptability not only enables them to navigate challenges but also contributes to the evolution of their artistic practices. While strategies developed by artists to get around obstacles could be considered an inspiration for new paradigms for ageing (Jeffri 2011), this could be risky. Exalting artists’ resilience in the face of contextual barriers, for instance economic difficulties or a lack of recognition of their artworks, may obscure finance-related struggles. Therefore, it could reinforce the oppressive mechanisms of the market (Arslanovic et al. 2019). Furthermore, beyond being an individual trait, resilience can be defined as a complex, dynamic concept that is shaped by the life course, whose resources vary

over a lifespan, and it is intricately interwoven with psychological, social and cultural dimensions (Goulding 2018b).

The topic of discrimination against women appeared in some female narratives, showing again that there is still a long way to go to achieve equality and diversity in the artistic field. Closely related with previous themes, some scholars argued that if artistic success is defined in strictly neoliberal and economic terms, then there is discrimination in terms of gender and class. This is especially true considering that lifestyle and cultural resources could increase class inequalities in contemporary, post-industrial societies (Bennett et al. 2009). Miller (2016) noted that “the ideal artist” should be completely committed to their work. This commitment matches traits that are more socially acceptable for men than for women. Indeed, women are underrepresented in artistic fields, such as contemporary art, fashion and popular music. Identities intersect: white men are overrepresented in numerous artistic disciplines and most other gender-racial/ethnic groups are almost absent (Topaz et al. 2022). This finding underscores the need to expand and diversify contextual barriers studied by scholars, and the relevance of exploring in an inclusive manner in terms of age, gender and race.

Finally, the theme concerning the COVID-19 pandemic described by our interviewees showed that the global pandemic did not leave the artistic field unaffected. The COVID-19 pandemic can be classified into broad societal factors, which involve not only health, but also economic and social consequences. A study by Radermecker (2021) showed that since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, a paradoxical condition has affected the art and culture sector. Even though the requirement for cultural and creative subjects increased during the lockdown period, including digital access, economic indicators expected that the cultural and artistic sector would be one of the most impacted, and possibly one with more obstacles to recovery. In this aspect, the role of cultural and artistic organisations will be crucial. Policies to help recovery in the field of arts and crafts could highly benefit from ageing artists, who may have extensive professional experience and have developed in diverse artistic roles, as trainees, mentors and master artists (Jeffri 2011). However, beyond all the knowledge, skills and experiences that older artists and craftspeople can teach, a more valuable legacy is the ability to express themselves through



their creative practices during their life course in a meaningful way (Bal et al. 2019). Therefore, intergenerational exchange among visual artists, craftsmen and craftswomen that considers these issues may be an important vehicle for learning, meaning-making and support. In addition, it could be interesting to explore in greater depth the symbolic value of arts and crafts as another axis of artistic participation among older people.

Despite the variety of contextual barriers depicted by our participants, they did not mention public policies as an obstacle to their artistic practice during their careers. In this sense, it could be relevant to investigate this topic in a more specific way, to assess whether current public policies related to culture and artistic field work as facilitators or obstacles to artistic practice, and consequently promote significant improvements. For instance, programmes that encourage intergenerational exchange between younger and older artists, advocating for the conservation and dissemination of their creative work, and facilitating joint artistic projects could prove valuable. Such programmes have the potential to foster a view of the arts that goes beyond valuing it for its benefits and can deconstruct the pervasive association of “creativity,” “emerging” and “innovative” with youth. However, it is important to exercise caution against instrumentalising artistic practices and uncritically incorporating them into neoliberal policies that seek to encourage activity in older people for economic reasons. Neoliberal agendas may seek to leverage older individuals’ engagement in artistic activities to reduce healthcare costs (Swinnen 2019) and simultaneously ignore policies that pursue the promotion of meaning of artistic practices in later life.

### Limitations

This study was exploratory, and its design has some implications for the interpretation of the findings, and for future research on the topic, which should be noted. The condition of a small cross-sectional study, including only 30 Spanish older artists, craftsmen and craftswomen living in Catalonia, limits the generalisation of the findings to other artistic disciplines, such as music, theatre or literature that could present other types of obstacles to older people. Future research on other types of artistic disciplines or cultural contexts would add useful, valuable comparative data.

Furthermore, the criteria of being active artists at the time of the interviews restricted our conclusions, since we did not include participants who had ended their artistic career due to the contextual barriers they might have perceived. Thus, other obstacles that could potentially cause a definitive end to artistic practice may have been omitted, since we only examined “successful cases” in which potential contextual barriers were overcome by older artists and did not imply the cessation of the artistic practice. Finally, the selected sample included professional and non-professional artists, craftspeople and visual artists. However, certain barriers mentioned by the participants may be experienced differently in each of these groups, given that the contexts may contain distinctive elements and affect people differently, depending on the level of expertise and the artistic discipline that is practised. Therefore, future studies that focus on specific groups may be necessary to delve deeper into these nuanced aspects.

## Conclusion

Despite these limitations, our study expands previous research on antecedents of artistic participation, particularly by analysing contextual barriers to artistic practice among older people, using a socioecological model as a reference framework. Our study helps to understand that contextual aspects are key to promote the permanence of artists who are currently engaged in artistic practices and to overcome the obstacles they face, and consequently continue to benefit from their artistic, meaningful participation throughout later life.

## Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the participants who generously offered their time and shared their life stories during this research. The authors are grateful for the valuable feedback from the anonymous reviewers.

## Funding

This work was supported by the National Agency for Research and Development, Becas Chile PhD Scholarship Program 2019 to Karima Chacur under grant number 72200226.

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