

## POLICY BRIEF #76

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# Digital inclusion and age

## More than a number.

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The image of an older individual receiving assistance while using digital technology is quite recognizable for many of us. Maybe it is from personal experience or from exposure through popular media. However, this is not just an innocent picture of someone supporting an older person, it also conveys cultural meaning. This picture is an example of how older people and digital technology are perceived. The perception is that of digital illiteracy and dependent use. This is a form of age discrimination or ageism. Robert E. Butler<sup>i</sup> coined the term ageism to explain the discrimination of older people in the 1960's. According to him the societal norms and unequal chances experienced by those above the middle age resulted in discrimination based on age. According to the World Health Organisation ageist beliefs are widespread and go unchallenged. Ageism is negatively influencing the quality of lives of older people worldwide. This was evident during the response to the global Covid-19 pandemic as older people were stereotyped in the media, age was used as a (sole) criterion to determine access to life-saving medical care and the age-based physical isolation policies<sup>ii</sup>.



**Image 1: Picture of an older man receiving assistance with digital technology**

*Source: Photo by Andrea Piacquadio on Pexels*

### Highlights

**Old age** itself is not a predictor of non-use rather it is reflective of the many deviations a long life can have. There is a lot of diversity in the digital inclusion support needs of older users.

Older adults use **ageist stereotypes** to explain their own level of digital inclusion in comparison to others. Stereotypes such as 'digital technology has no benefits for older people' or 'older people are incapable of learning to use digital technology'.

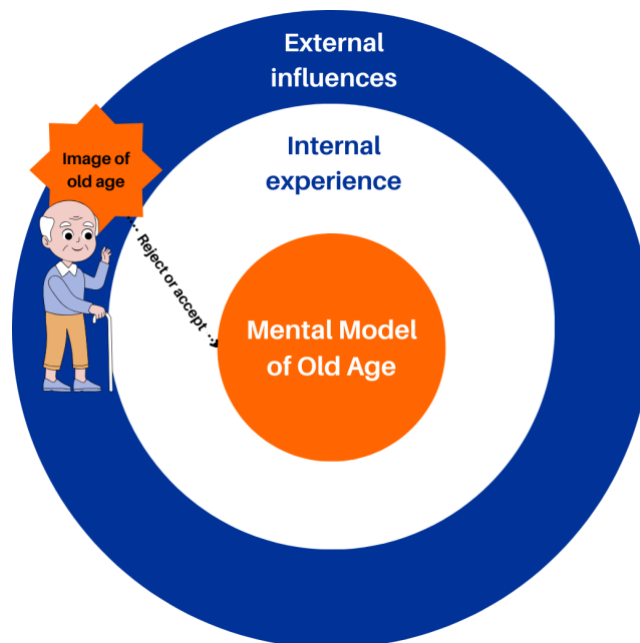
To understand the role of digital technology and ageism in the lives of older adults, it is important to treat old age as a **social construct**. This construct represents more than just the biomedical processes that cause the body to age; it reflects the expectations, obligations, and imagery associated with certain life stages.

In terms of digital technology ageism is present in all stages from design to use. To give some examples, UX designers do not imagine an older user as a possible end-user while creating their product. This means that age specific accommodations are not considered. Age cut-offs in data collection result in uncollected data of older adults, which is key when datadriven services become ubiquitous. And finally, older adults self-censor their use of assistive technologies to avoid confirming a certain image of ageing. This policy brief presents the findings of the SBO Digital Ageing on the role of ageism and digital technology in the ageing experience of older people.

The ubiquitous nature of digital technology results in an intertwining of digital technology with every aspect of our lives. Even if you do not use the technology yourself, your data will be collected within Smart Cities or other data settings. This means that every ageing experience has a digital technology component.

## 1. What is old age?

What do we mean with ageing experience? This is how ageing receives meaning; it consists of the mental model of ageing that we have created based on the social imagery of old age and our own perceptions.



**Figure 1: Dialogue between the external and the internal to create a mental model of old age**

*Source: van Leeuwen, 2024*

Consequently, this means that age is more than a chronological fact: it carries cultural significance and organizational value. Examples can be found in our society in turning eighteen and sixty-five. The first signifies the ability to fully and independently participate in

society, while the latter traditionally means the transition from working to retirement. These milestones illustrate how age can structure society.

Society places expectations, responsibilities and societal influence on the age of an individual. These contribute to the social construct or social imagery of old age of an individual next to their own agency. The often negative co-construction of later life within the European context results in implicit and explicit beliefs about what it means to be old. These can in turn result in discriminatory practices based on age. Where people are excluded from participation or confronted with stereotypes based on a chronological number.

A social construct is ever changing, as television shows, such as Netflix's "Grace and Frankie" illustrate: altering how old age is perceived. Furthermore, changes in life expectancy, health, and socio-economic power have shifted our expectations of old age. Some argue that these shifts have led to a redefinition of old age. This redefinition is evident in the distinction between those perceived as **old but active** and those considered **truly old**. The latter group is often defined by what they lack - youth, independence, health - rather than by their attributes. In terms of digital technology, they are seen as lacking the affinity and skills to use digital technology competently.

Due to this negative conception of true old age, researchers have found that older people seek distance from being seen as truly old<sup>iii</sup>. This is done by comparing themselves favourably to others that they deem to be less fortunate in avoiding the stigma of 'truly old'. This needs to avoid the stigma results in avoidance of certain assistive technologies or digital technology all together<sup>iv</sup>, as using these would risk confirmation of the truly old-stereotype. Furthermore, negative stereotypes affect the skills of older adults as research has shown that older people perform worse on tasks after being confronted with negative stereotypes<sup>v</sup>.

## 2. Ageing differently

To understand how Flemish older people make sense of the digitalisation of their daily lives, and the role ageism plays within this, a series of interviews were organised. The interviews commenced by exploring the technological history of older adults. It became evident that most of the older adults who identified as users had a long history of technology engagement. An example can be found in the description of Hendrik (70, M)

*So, I did indeed have contact with computers at the university in the 1960s and 1970s. And when the first personal computers came onto the market, I was already familiar with them. The companies I worked for in the 1980s and 1990s were IT companies. So yes, I remember the internet from around 1998, when we could access it through providers... well, I was already connected to other network technologies earlier through companies.*

This history of technology use was often accompanied by an intrinsic interest in all things technical. Digitalisation for these older adults was not experienced as jarring or unnatural as it was a continuation of their normal activities. Their digital skills are a result of the historic engagement. While older non-users argued that they had never expressed any interest in technology or had never needed to learn how to use it, for example Christina (85, F) states "I have never worked, so I never needed it." These and similar expressions show that the life course and its deviations are an important aspect in understanding the role of digital technology in the ageing experience of older adults.

Age, as a representation of accumulated decisions and life events, significantly influences the digital inclusion of older adults. Viewing age not as a single factor but as a cumulative result of the life course helps explain how age affects digital inclusion. This counters the prevalent image of the 'grey divide', or the assumption that all older people will have similar digital engagement levels due to homogenous life events<sup>vi</sup>.

### 3. Beyond chronological

The life course approach transforms age into a marker of identity, conveying more than just the biomedical process of ageing; it encapsulates an individual's entire life journey. Older users themselves employ this perspective to explain the differences they observe in their own experiences compared to those of non-digital others. Stereotypical narratives play a role in this sensemaking process. **By associating digital incompetence with old age, they can assert that they are not old.** Thus, older users see digital technology use as a means to avoid stigma. It allows them to approximate youth or at least middle age as they show through their digital engagement that they are not old old. Often digital technology use is associated with continued cognitive function and demonstrative of their continued participation in society. Not participating would mean being left behind. As Annelore (66, F) argued with her friend, "We need to keep up. We need to stay informed, or in 20 years we will be hopeless."

The digital inclusion narratives used in the interviews often incorporate ageist language and stereotypes. Older users apply ageist stereotypes to describe older non-users, using such language to explain why others are not digitally included. **Non-users, on the other hand, apply these same ageist stereotypes to themselves to explain their digital exclusion**, often expressing the belief that technology is not beneficial for them. The impact of ageism on older adults (both users and non-users) differs: users are empowered by distancing themselves from an undesirable ageing experience, avoiding the social imaginary associated with true old age—dependence and burden (see Higgs and Gilleard, 2016). In contrast, non-users absolve themselves from blame and show self-compassion. As their non-engagement is due to their age, something that they cannot avoid.

The interviews illustrate that older users have created identities in which digital engagement is an important intersection. Older adults use digital technology use as a means to connect with society and to show that they are active participants. As a consequence it is important for older adults to be able to maintain their current skills and learn new skills where necessary. This means that learning opportunities geared towards older users need to be available and where possible co-created with the target group. Currently, the educational offers are mostly geared towards the novice user. This means that older user who want to maintain their skills or obtain new ones do not have a suitable alternative for their particular existing skillset. To ensure that the heterogeneity of old age is made more explicit it is necessary to ensure that the representation of older adults using digital technology also includes older people easily using technologies as well as those who receive assistance. And finally, it can be concluded that age alone cannot explain the differences encountered in digital engagement. Chronological age represents the result of the many deviations life can take.

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