Enhancing access to digital public services for older people – social and societal perspectives

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Introduction

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Digitalizing and aging society

Digitalization shapes the way how we interact and participate in society. In Europe, Finland is one of the leading countries when it comes to digitalization. Additionally, Finland is characterized by an aging population.

Increasing number of digital public services

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Digital public services aim to provide fast transactions, access independent of time and place, and more services at reduced costs.

Yet, not everyone can utilize these services. Thus, understanding issues related to access to digital services is crucial as an inclusive digital welfare society cannot depend on services that some citizens have difficulty accessing.

Older adults using digital public services

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Older people (65+) form a heterogeneous group, and it would be false to generalize them as resistant to digital services and lacking in necessary digital skills.

However, statistics show that older adults utilize digital services in their daily lives considerably less than younger generations.

Research questions

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1) How do stakeholders and peer tutors perceive digital public services to meet the needs of older adults?

2) How should access to digital services be enhanced to cater to the needs of older people from stakeholders and peer tutors perspectives?

Revisiting access in the context of digital public services

Revisiting access

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Digital divides refer to inequalities in access, adoption, use and knowledge of modern technologies (van Deursen and van Dijk, 2019). Due to these inequalities, individuals face obstacles in learning, adopting, and using digital technology as part of their everyday lives (Friemel, 2016; Kuoppamäki et al., 2022).

Revisiting access

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Access has usually had a narrow meaning, mainly referring to physical access to devices and the internet, highlighting the gap between those who have access and those who do not.

Van Dijk (2017) has further expanded the concept of access to describe and explain various types of digital divides. He divides access into four levels: mental/motivational, physical, skills, and usage.

Revisiting access

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To broaden the scope, Clement and Shade (2000) have developed a framework that portrays access as a rainbow that consists of interrelated layers including devices, softwares, content, services, literacy, infrastructure and governance.

Data and methods

Data and methods

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Working name of the article	Data and methods
Article 1: Exploring Stakeholder Perspectives on User Involvement in Designing Digital Public Services for Older Adults	Semi-structured interviews with stakeholders through the Digital Inclusion in Finland project (N=20); inductive thematic analysis
Article 2: Delving into Mental Access of Using Digital Public Services in Later Life	Semi-structured interviews with peer tutors through the University of 3rd Age (N=21); spring 2022; inductive thematic analysis
Article 3: Experiencing digital services as an older user – how do they support digital inclusion?	

Results

One size fits most

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Stakeholders recognized the rapid pace of digitalization as potentially disadvantage for older people. Yet, digital services are designed to serve the needs of the government, rather than the user.

The best approach to designing digital services seems to be "one size fits most," but who are "the most"?

Who bears the responsibility for involving users in the design process?

Delving into mental access

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Peer tutors expressed concerns toward the rapidly digitalizing society and felt pressure to use digital services.

Mental and digital support were key facilitators for mental access, counterbalancing the fear and frustration that older adults may have toward digital services.

Success in using digital services encourages older adults and facilitates mental access.

Conclusions

Conclusions

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The rainbow, as a metaphor, signifies unity and diversity simultaneously (Clement and Shade, 2000), yet access is often not viewed as a unified concept.

More collaboration, support, and continued involvement of stakeholders are needed throughout the acquisition, design, and implementation of digital services.

Shedding light on mental access of using digital services provides information on older adults' varied use of these services.

References

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