



Older active users of ICTs make sense of their engagement

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Abstract

Research on older people's ICT usage tends to focus on either the ways in which they go about learning to use these technologies or the impact that ICTs have on their lives. This research seems, in other words, to take for granted that older people are 'digital immigrants' as the digital divide debate proposed. Research that specifically looks at the ways in which older ICT users make sense of their engagement with these technologies is still limited. This article explores therefore – through focus group interviews – how a group of older people who are active ICT users make sense of their 'digital nativeness'. The analysis shows that the interviewees are well aware that their ICT proficiency differentiated them from their peers, which is why they make sense of their ICT usage by making reference to the issues that make them 'exceptional' older people. These include the fact that they have used computers for many years and therefore made ICT usage an everyday habit early on; the fact that most older people do not have the skills that they themselves have, which is why they feel the need to share them with others; and the fact that their lifelong experience means they can use these technologies in judicious ways. By bringing attention to how older active ICT users make sense of their engagement, this article contributes to the notion of the digital spectrum and the debate on the inequalities that ICT proficiency brings about.

Keywords: *ICT usage, older people, digital divide, digital immigrants, digital natives, digital spectrum, digital inequalities*

Introduction

One of the most persistent assumptions within media and communication research has been the idea that age and belonging to a specific generation are useful sources of information about ICT usage. Prensky (2001), for example, distinguished between 'digital natives' and 'digital immigrants' when describing what made people ICT-savvy. He described the former as "native speakers of the digital language" and the latter as "those of us who were not born into the digital divide" (Prensky, 2001:1). Although this distinction has been criticized on numerous occasions (see e.g. van Dijk, 2006), the criticism has focused mostly on nuancing the notion of 'digital natives' (e.g. Bennet, Maton & Kervin, 2010; Hargittai, 2010) since evidence that the digital divide

exists is actually not contested (e.g. Gilleard & Higgs, 2008; Niehaves & Plattfaut, 2014). Over the years, however, the debate has become more nuanced as scholars have recognized that there is a difference between the divide that access creates and the one driven by skills. Studies on access, for example, have confirmed the existence of the divide (e.g. Brandtzoeg, Heim & Karahasanovic, 2011; Cruz-Jesus & Bacao 2012) but have distinguished between countries that can be described as ‘digital leaders’ and those that fall behind, namely ‘digital laggards’¹. Hargittai (2002) has also proposed that when we shift focus from access to skills we will inevitably draw attention to the ‘second-level digital divide’ – the term she uses to differentiate between knowing how to retrieve information from the Web and doing it in an efficient manner. There are also some scholars that have introduced the idea that socio-demographics affect the divide (e.g. Silver, 2013) and others who have shown that we should focus on age cohorts rather than age per se (e.g. Gilleard & Higgs, 2008).

Thus, although the notion of the digital divide continues to be highly contested, this is a notion that policy-makers have taken to heart and one that some scholars still argue should remain an important point of departure for inquiries into ICT usage (e.g. Sparks, 2013). It was against this backdrop and because studies on ICT usage tend to focus on either those who are ‘digital natives’ or ‘digital immigrants’ (also known as ‘non-users’ or ‘have-nots,’ who are usually members of the older segments of the population), that we decided to focus on older *active* ICT users. Therefore, this article explores how a group of older people that can be regarded – by virtue of their age – as ‘digital immigrants, make sense of their use of digital technologies considering that they can, because of their active usage, also be regarded as ‘digital natives’. The reason we explore this is threefold. First, as will be shown in the next section, there is still relatively little research on how older users of ICTs make sense of their ICT use (Loos, Haddon & Mante-Meijer, 2012). Second, studies on older users have yet to focus on *active* users since most of the research on older users has focused on those whose usage is believed to be representative of the older segments of the population (i.e. either limited or moderate usage as far as scope and frequency are concerned; cf. Selwyn, 2004b). Third, because a recently completed study of older active users of ICTs has shown that this group of older people regard themselves as the exception to the rule (Kania-Lundholm & Torres, 2015), it seemed interesting to explore how they make sense of their use of these technologies. Worth noting with regards to active usage is that we regard the informants in our study as active users of ICTs because they use *digital platforms*, such as smartphones, computers and tablets, on a daily basis. This must be noted since research shows that older users are generally more likely to use traditional rather than digital platforms on a daily basis (Ofcom, 2015). With regards to the volume of activities performed online, it seems also worth noting that older users (55+) are most likely to stick to a limited number of performed activities (1-6) and “tried and tested websites” (Ofcom, 2015: 168).

To this end, it seems important to draw attention to Selwyn (2004b), who argued that researchers should focus on older people’s actual use of ICTs and the circumstances that give rise to meaningful use/ engagement, instead of studying the possibilities of access or the motives for usage/non-usage.

Although he argued this over ten years ago, his suggestions seem to have gone unnoticed. This is why Loos, Haddon and Mante-Meijer (2012) have recently proposed that qualitative research that grasps the *understanding* and *meaning* of older people's use of digital technologies is needed if we are to understand the perspective that old age provides for the digital divide debate. This article aims to contribute to this research gap by placing the question of older people's *active* use of these technologies (i.e. computers and mobile telecommunications) at the center of the inquiry. In doing so we follow Ofcom's (2015) report's definition of active ICT usage in old age as usage that brings attention to frequency as opposed to number of activities engaged in².

Overview of research on older users of ICTs

Research on older people and ICT usage tends to focus on the ways in which they go about learning to use these technologies (e.g. Campbell, 2004; Cody *et al.*, 1999; Russell, 2011; Seals *et al.*, 2008; Turner *et al.*, 2007); the reasons they use these technologies and what they use them for (e.g. Mathews & Hughes, 2009; Morris *et al.*, 2007; Selwyn *et al.*, 2003; Sum *et al.*, 2010); the ways in which ICT usage can enhance their everyday lives (e.g. Kanayama, 2003; Khvorostianov *et al.*, 2011) and the effects that usage has on many issues often studied when focusing on older people [such as well-being (Blit-Cohen & Litwin, 2005); self-efficacy (Erickson & Johnson 2011; Karavidas *et al.*, 2005); intergenerational relationships (Dickinson & Hill, 2007); loneliness (Sum *et al.*, 2008); social capital (Russell *et al.*, 2008) and work/ leisure boundaries (Buse, 2009)]. The vast majority of research on older people's ICT usage focuses, in other words, on either the ways in which they go about learning to use these technologies or the impact that their ICT use has had on their lives.

Thus, although the debate on the digital divide nowadays takes for granted that we must understand older people's ICT usage as practices that are socially shaped and locally situated, research that specifically looks at the ways in which older ICT users make sense of their use is still very limited. To the best of our knowledge, the few studies that have addressed this angle are the ones by White and Weatherall (2000); Selwyn (2004b); Blit-Cohen & Litwin (2004) and Kania-Lundholm & Torres (2015) who have mostly addressed this question on the basis of older people whose ICT usage resembles that of 'digital immigrants'. White and Weatherall (2000), for example, used grounded theory to explore how six older individuals that used computers described their use of them, and showed that usage was connected to other interests (such as genealogy) which is why they deemed computers to be useful tools that, among other things, made keeping in touch with their families and friends easy. Selwyn's (2004b) qualitative study of 35 older individuals who had participated in a larger survey on ICT usage and agreed to be interviewed about adoption, non-adoption and use of ICTs in later life is also one of the studies that focused on the ways in which older ICT users make sense of their use of these technologies. It is worth noting that most of the older users interviewed by Selwyn (2004b) were people that were not using ICTs on a regular basis. Instead, these were people that were using computers for a specific project or use. Selwyn's interviews highlighted that older ICT users regard their usage as a given, due to the fact that the 'information society'

required that people were proficient in these technologies. As such, they used these technologies because they thought ICT proficiency was necessary if one wanted to remain independent in old age.

Another study that explored how older ICT users make sense of their ICT use is the study by Blit-Cohen and Litwin (2004) which compared how 10 older ICT users and 10 non-users made sense of their participation (or lack of) in cyberspace as well as the implications this had for their social capital. In this study, the older users interviewed were found to uphold ideas about old age and aging that differed from those held by those that did not use ICTs. The ICT users were also found to be more oriented toward the future than the non-users and to have greater opportunities to increase their social capital as a result of their involvement with these technologies. Finally, with regard to studies of older ICT users, there is the study we conducted ourselves which explores how older *active* ICT users try to differentiate themselves from younger users and older non-users (Kania-Lundholm & Torres, 2015).

When reviewing the research available on how older ICT users make sense of their ICT use we note a few points. First of all, with the exception of our own study, all of the studies focused on older users whose ICT use was either limited or moderate. Thus, the research that is available on older people's ICT usage which specifically focuses on their ICT use is research that has focused on older people whose usage resembles that of 'digital immigrants'. This is one of the reasons we designed the study upon which this article is based. We wanted to draw attention to older people whose ICT usage resembles that of 'digital natives' and who are therefore not really characteristic of what the literature on the digital divide assumes about older 'digital immigrants'. Something else worth noting is that the few studies available on older ICT users have not explored how they make sense of their 'digital nativeness'. Instead, the little research that is available tends to explore *why* they use these technologies and not necessarily *how* they make sense of their use of them. This is why this article explores how a group of older active ICT users make sense of the fact that their active use of these technologies is not common among their peers.

Method

The data for this article comes from a project that relies on focus group interviews (cf. Vaughn *et al.*, 1996) since the main interest is in how older active ICT users share and compare their understandings and experiences of these technologies with each other (Breen, 2006). A total of 30 people (14 men and 16 women) between the ages of 66 and 89 were interviewed through six focus groups. They were recruited through local organizations for seniors. Sampling-wise, we looked for people that were 65 years of age and older, and who used digital technologies daily (although for different reasons). Thus, the sample could be described as homogenous in some respects but also as an extreme or deviant sample (cf. Cresswell, 1998) since the focus was on older people who could be considered an anomaly as far as the digital divide debate is concerned.

In terms of the specific national and local context of our study it must be noted

that Sweden is one of the world's leading ICT nations with very high (86%) household Internet penetration via broadband (Findahl, 2013). Digital infrastructure is widespread since ICT policies began pushing for basic access to Internet in the mid-2000s. However, as it has been noted in numerous occasions, the question of ICT usage is not only a question of access since class, gender, ethnicity, education and income are all relevant when it comes to who uses these technologies. In our study, for example, we noted that most of our informants are well-educated, white, middle class professionals living in one of Sweden's largest cities. They are, in other words, a privileged group (cf. Kania-Lundholm & Torres, 2015).

Table 1 summarizes the sample characteristics with reference to demographics, as well as the type of digital technologies and frequency of use that each of the older people interviewed used.

	Name	Age	Edu.	Sex	Information						Communication						Entertainment						Services						
					News			Medical info.			E-mail			Facebook			Blogs			Games			Banking			E-commerce			
					D	S	N	D	S	N	D	S	N	D	S	N	D	S	N	D	S	N	D	S	N	D	S	N	
Group 1	Ulrika	68	U	F	•				•			•				•				•			•				•		
	Ewa	77	U	F	•				•			•				•				•			•				•		
	Kalle	77	U	M		•			•			•				•				•	•			•				•	
	Anders	70	U	M	•				•			•				•				•	•			•				•	
Group 2	Gunilla	70	U	F		•			•			•			•				•			•				•			
	Lena	73	U	F			•		•			•				•				•			•				•		
	Göran	70	U	M			•		•			•				•				•			•				•		
	Bengt	74	E	M	•					•			•				•				•			•				•	
Group 3	Gunhild	81	U	F		•			•			•				•				•			•				•		
	Elisabet	69	U	F	•					•			•				•				•			•				•	
	Gudrun	72	U	F	•				•			•				•				•			•				•		
	Pelle	72	-	M	•					•			•				•				•			•				•	
	Arne	77	U	M	•				•			•				•				•			•				•		
	Jan	78	U	M		•			•			•				•				•			•				•		
Group 4	Anna	72	H	F	•				•			•				•				•	•			•				•	
	Mia	77	H	F		•			•			•				•				•			•				•		
	Marcus	68	U	M	•				•			•				•				•			•				•		
	Nils	78	U	M		•			•			•				•				•		-	-	-				•	
	Per	72	U	M	•				•			•				•				•			•				•		
Group 5	Cecilia	89	U	F		•			•			•				•				•			•				•		
	Britta	68	U	F		•			•			•				•				•			•				•		
	Maria	67	E	F		•			•			•				•				•			•				•		
	Johan	67	E	M		•			•			•				•				•			•				•		
	Åke	66	U	M	•				•			•				•				•	•			•				•	
Group 6	Kerstin	73	U	F		•				•			•			•				•			•				•		
	Anna-Lena	68	U	F		•			•			•				•				•			•				•		
	Maja	83	E	F	•				•			•				•				•			•				•		
	Marianne	76	U	F		•			•			•				•				•		-	-	-				•	
	Alvin	81	U	M		•				•			•			•				•			•				•		

ICT use in later life: a given and a future investment

One of the themes discussed during the focus groups was the idea that ICT was something one used because society had become digitalized. Some of the informants emphasized that their ICT experience, competence and skills allow them to keep up with the rapid technological advancements that have taken place. When asked to comment upon the results of research showing that some older people think that ICT use is an investment in their future, one of the informants explained why it had been important for her to “keep up with the society”:

Interviewer: There is research about older people/.../ And some of them say that they see it as sort of investment in their future. What do you think about this?

Britta: Well I don't know...it is actually more about keeping up with society, that it is actually important...one can actually get problems...Yes, this is a good example...When they started with computers in the shops...you know when you have to go round and...

Åke: Yeah, yeah, yeah...scan by yourself.

Britta: Yes, scanning, exactly. It was many years ago when they started that in some shops and there were many that said, no, yikes, I don't want to deal with this shit. But I thought, no, I should be able to shop when I retire so I think it would be good if I learn this/.../. One has to keep up...with such things, otherwise one can run into trouble when one has to pay bills or anything else one has to do. So in this way it is an investment in the future, so you are actually ...more or less forced to keep up with society. (Focus group #5)

The ability to keep up with the ongoing digitalization of society was one of the factors that the informants alluded to when trying to explain why they used these technologies. As such, ICT use was something that seemed to be regarded not only as a given but also as a future investment (which in this case is framed as skills one should acquire before one retires). Some talked about having no choice but to keep up, since failing to do so placed them at risk of being incapable of dealing with basic aspects of everyday life, such as shopping or running other errands. Thus, although the people interviewed were active users of ICTs whose use resembled – at least in terms of frequency – that of ‘digital natives’, there were some that seemed concerned that use of these technologies had become a prerequisite for keeping up with society.

In other words, this group of older people regarded ICT competence as comprising skills one needed in order to remain independent in old age. This is in line with Selwyn's (2004b) findings since the moderate to limited users of ICTs that he interviewed also thought that engaging with these technologies was a given because of the rapid digitalization that society was experiencing. However, our informants – who were *active* users of these technologies – described their use of digital technologies also as something they did because they were, in some ways, obliged to if they wanted to “keep up with society”.

ICT use in later life: the continuation of a habit acquired earlier in life

We initially asked our informants about their first contact with digital technologies and the main reasons they used them. The majority claimed to have begun using these technologies two or three decades previously, which is when they were first introduced in most Swedish workplaces. Irrespective of how they had learned to engage with these technologies (i.e. whether they had attended courses in order to learn how to use a computer or had been the ones that introduced these technologies to their workplaces), it was clear that it was mostly work-related demands that had prompted them to begin using digital technologies. Thus, when asked how and when they had started to use these technologies, it was not uncommon to allude to ICT use as something that had started very early on and had therefore become a natural part of life. The following excerpt alludes to this:

Interviewer: Do you remember when you started [using digital technologies for the first time]?

Åke: No, I don't know when, but it was at work when they had just come out, so to speak .

Interviewer: But why, what was the reason...was it a must or was it curiosity? Why did you start?

Åke: I don't know, but it was obvious that one had to start using this. Because...before that we had been dealing with faxes and things like that .

Britta: It was so much easier...when we switched from fax to e-mail. It was a big difference.

Åke: But it was a bit of a step-by-step transition, I think, some things were still there, such as fax and some had just come out like e-mail and such, so it went in stages, I think.

Johan: As we are speaking, I am thinking of the year /.../ And it was at the beginning of the 1990s, so it was actually 20 years ago/.../Time flies...It was 20 years ago and it was at work when I first came into contact with...I don't think that we, I had one at home then [he means a computer] which I bought rather quickly because I thought it was fun.

Interviewer: In what way was it fun?

Johan: Well...one could search for so many things and I was curious and then it became practical because I could send home what I had done at work and could then keep on working from home and so on.

Åke: True

Johan: So it was very practical too. But above all because I was curious and thought that it was exciting. (Focus group #5).

In the quote above, Åke, Britta and Johan describe their first contact with ICTs at their respective workplaces. When asked why they began using these technologies, Åke mentioned that it had been an obvious step since he had previously been using fax machines. Thus, for some older active ICT users, using ICTs is a habit they developed while at work and one that continues to define how they live their lives after retirement. This resembles what White

and Weatherall (2000) refer to as cyclic usage (i.e. that one uses ICTs because one has previous experience of them, which makes using them a given).

Something else worth noting is that the focus group discussions touched upon the fact that some informants talked about ICTs as advancements that they regarded not only as useful but also as exciting. As Britta and Johan both pointed out, the switch to digitalization at work was an opportunity to experience “the difference” that computers brought with them, and this was “exciting”. So, unlike the older ICT users in Selwyn’s (2004b) study who inherited their computers from younger members of their families, the active ICT users interviewed in this study were people that acquired the ICTs they use on a daily basis on their own.

Something else we noted was that the informants talked about these technologies as advancements that seemed useful from the start. As some of them phrased it, ICTs “made the difference” because they saved time and resources:

Interviewer: But you know, I am also thinking about what you said Ulrika, that you know, that you can decide more...do you also feel this about the internet...that you have more perhaps...that it makes things easier?

Ulrika: It becomes a freedom in a different way.

Interviewer: Freedom, yes, okay, yes. Can you say a bit more?

Ulrika: No, I don’t know. One does not need to plan ahead when you go to the movies (for example). If you have made the arrangements, you can just go and put your [credit] card and get the tickets out.

Interviewer: Do you agree? What do you think about what Ulrika just said about freedom?

Ulrika: I like freedom.

Anders: Freedom is comfortable, it is.

Ulrika: One can also reserve [books] at the library quite easily... extend one’s loan and so on. (Focus group #1)

Thus, when explaining why they used ICTs as often and as naturally as they did, the informants talked not only about the fact that these technologies make life easier and can be quite practical but also about the freedom that active use of them can bring. In doing so they alluded to the fact that they appreciated the time-saving benefits that these technologies offer partly because they knew what life without them was like.

ICT use in later life: social capital that must be shared

Something else that became clear was that the informants were aware that their ICT knowledge surpassed that of the “average user” in their age group, and they talked about wanting to share that knowledge with others. The reasons they were knowledgeable varied but were partly related to their experience of working with digital technologies for many years and, for some, the fact that they had been asked to teach computer courses for seniors. The

following are some illustrations of the latter:

Interviewer: /.../ what do you think about such initiatives where older people teach...other [older people].

Mia: Yes, just the other day at the Senior University. I had a lecture, a Tuesday lecture about using computers and the Web and such things. And people seemed very interested. There were a lot of questions at the end, but of a technical nature, so I had to finish it (laughs).

Anna: Yes, exactly, there is Senionet, which deals with exactly this. I found them on the internet and spoke to them...And they have a motto that those of us that know a little bit more can teach those who know a little less. And I think this is quite good. (Focus group #4)

In the exchange above, Mia and Anna employ the pronoun “we” when describing older people who are helping their peers improve their computer literacy. This can be interpreted as a way of acknowledging that active older users have knowledge and skills that should be shared with those who “know less”. Thus, the informants seemed very much aware of the fact that their active use of ICTs was a kind of social capital that was coveted by some.

Remaining on top of ICT development seemed therefore to be something they regarded as a must. As one of the informants pointed out, it is important to make sure one remains updated on these developments even though one must remember that society should take responsibility for enabling people to become ICT proficient:

Interviewer: Yes, what do the rest of you think about this...social development? /.../ Some say that we are living in such a digitalized society that more and more centers around these new technologies too.

Åke: No, it is as Britta says, it is about keeping up. And that is enough, there is also societal responsibility that I think is missing to some extent too.../.../Society should take greater responsibility in this case.

Interviewer: What could it do, what do you think is needed?

Åke: Yes, to make sure that we all keep ourselves updated. (Focus group#5 (

In this exchange we see that Åke thought that it was society’s responsibility to make sure that people stay updated on technological developments. Computer courses and facilities that cater to older people’s needs were mentioned as ways that society can enable the older segments of its population to remain updated. But, as mentioned earlier, the informants unanimously regarded digitalization as a given, and believed that there are aspects of it that we should all learn to handle. Therefore, our informants seemed to think it was their own responsibility to ensure they constantly stayed updated as far as ICTs are concerned, even though they also thought that society should assist older people who are unable to become ICT proficient on their own.

Something else worth noting is that the informants were very eager to discuss their knowledge with each other. It was not unusual for the focus group discussions to detour into an exchange of how-to-tips, resources one could access (books or websites) to learn more about an aspect of technology that some did not know about, short how-to-lessons in which they discussed how to

solve a tech problem they had experienced, or know-how concerning online security, which seemed to be a topic that preoccupied some of them. The impression we got from witnessing this repeatedly was that our informants were well aware of their slight advantage as compared to others in their age group. They knew that their ICT proficiency was social capital that they were privileged to have, which may explain why they felt obliged to share their know-how with others.

ICT use in later life: a judicious activity thanks to one's lifelong experience

One of the aspects that several informants mentioned was that their age and experience made their ICT use a prudent activity. The idea that common sense was something older people have was discussed at length during the interviews, particularly in relation to online security. When asked about the risks that come with ICT usage and what one can do in order to protect oneself, the informants mentioned common sense as something that gave older users an advantage over younger ones:

Interviewer: How can one know what one should not do...because it is so easy to share information with others? /.../

Åke: Common sense.

Maria: Yes, common sense.

Interviewer: What does it mean?

Maria: To think a little beforehand...where, where might this end up?

Åke: Think beforehand.

Maria: But this also has to do with the experience that you have, right?

We have more of this than the younger generation perhaps. (Focus group # 5)

In this excerpt, both Maria and Åke agree that common sense is something that implies thinking a few steps ahead. Here – and in other excerpts like this one – the informants seem to want to convey that the capacity to think in this way comes with older age. Their discussions went something along the lines of: the older you are, the wiser you are because longer experience leads to common sense. This is an interesting point because earlier in the course of the interviews the interviewer mentioned that older people are sometimes depicted as vulnerable when the digitalization of society is being discussed. Although the quote above does not directly illustrate this, when asked about the portrayals of older people as prone to exclusion from 'the information society', the older active users interviewed distanced themselves from these stereotypical representations and pointed out that although they were old they did not fit that stereotype. Instead, they argued that old age gave them an advantage over the younger generation since their life experience meant that they were not as gullible about ICTs (cf. Kania-Lundholm & Torres, 2015).

It is also worth noting that common sense is handy when addressing the threats that come with the digitalization of society. For instance, when talking about the people who permanently stay online, some of the informants

expressed skepticism:

Johan: And this thing with being connected all the time. But this is actually something else...this has nothing to do with technology. This is common sense in some way.

Interviewer: Okay, yes...What do you mean?

Johan: No, but this thing that one, yes, socializing with others via computer...we have seen those who each sit in their own corners...

Cecilia: Exactly, yes, yes.

Johan: And text-message and e-mail to one another.

Cecilia: And play [games] and...

Johan: Yeah, games

Cecilia: So one can only imagine how the generation that is doing so today, how it is going to be for them in 40 years (laughs). (Focus group #5)

It could be argued that by being skeptical or even critical of those who constantly stay online, some of the informants presented themselves as “reasonable users” and, as people who had control not only over the technologies they use but also over their lives. Being in control means therefore that one uses ICTs in a judicious manner, which also entails opting to disconnect when necessary, for instance while abroad. Therefore, it can be suggested that being in control is an important aspect of the ICT use that the older active users interviewed described.

Discussion

This article started with allusions to the scholarly debate on the digital divide and the constant eagerness to differentiate older people from younger ones that has characterized it (cf. Brandtzoeg *et al.*, 2011; Loos *et al.*, 2012; Prensky, 2001; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2010). This focus has left us with a research gap since little research has in fact focused on older active ICT users’ actual engagement with these technologies. Against this backdrop, this article drew attention to a group of older users that have not been studied before, i.e. active ICT users whose usage resembles – in frequency at least – that of ‘digital natives’. In this respect, it seems necessary to reiterate that the few studies that have been conducted in order to draw attention to how older ICT users make sense of their usage are studies that have focused on the most common groups of older users (i.e. older people whose ICT usage can be described as either moderate or limited). By drawing attention to a group of older people who are actively involved with ICTs, this article has corroborated some of the findings that research on older ICT users has highlighted. For example, just like the older moderate to limited users who Selwyn (2004b) focused on, the older active users interviewed in this study regard digitalization as a given, and view ICT proficiency as a skill that can enable people to remain independent in old age. The fact that our study also showed – just as White and Weatherall’s (2000) study also has – that older users of ICTs make sense of their use of

these technologies against the backdrop that their earlier life involvement with them offered is also something that must be mentioned. In these respects, this study has corroborated findings of previous research.

However, by focusing on older active users of these technologies, this study has shed light on the fact that older people who are highly engaged with these technologies, seem not only to be aware of the second-level digital divide that media scholars talk about (cf. van Deursen & van Dijk, 2010) but also concerned with what this divide means in terms of older people's exclusion from 'the information society'. In other words, they make sense of their ICT use by alluding to their exceptionality as older people and the responsibilities to their less fortunate peers that they feel they have. In a way, they seem to be reasoning as follows: the digitalization of society is happening at an incredible speed and those of us that are keeping up with these advancements (i.e. those who are 'digital natives' by birth or have been fortunate enough to becoming "naturalized" later in life) have a moral duty to make our expertise available to those who risk being left behind (i.e. those who are still digitally excluded). Because of this, we would argue that their active use of these technologies needs to be considered against the backdrop of their awareness of the privileges that come with their social position (they are, after all, not only well-educated older people but also experienced users). In other words, their awareness resonates well with the argument that "increasingly, all familiar social and cultural differences in society are reflected in computer and internet use" (van Dijk, 2013: 45).

In this respect it seems important to note that the main concern of the digital divide debate nowadays is not access to the internet, but rather the differences that socio-demographics bring about in terms of skills and interest which lead to differences between the information "haves" and "have-nots". These differences are creating new inequalities while simultaneously exacerbating the ones that already exist (Ragnedda & Muschert, 2013). In a recent study of non-users and ex-users in the UK and Sweden, Helsper and Reisdorf (2016) argue that digital exclusion is increasingly concentrated to the most disadvantaged groups. Their results show that old age along with social and economic disadvantage are strong predictors of digital exclusion of the new emerging digital underclass. They suggest that in a few generations, the group of non-users in Sweden will be considerably smaller yet potentially severely excluded and that "(...) overall non-users in Sweden and Britain are increasingly older, less educated, more likely to be unemployed, disabled and socially isolated" (Helsper & Reisdorf, 2016: 15). These changing patterns of digital exclusion also mean that the demographics of digitally privileged groups could also change in the future. The present study provides insight into how older active ICT users themselves navigate the landscape that is 'the information society'. Our informants seemed to be well aware that their ICT proficiency differentiated them from their peers and they seemed to make sense of their use of these technologies by making reference to the issues that make them 'exceptional' older people. These include the fact that they have used computers for many years and therefore made ICT usage an everyday habit early on; the fact that most older people do not have the skills that they themselves have, which is why they feel the need to share them with others; and the fact that their lifelong experience means they can use these

technologies in judicious ways. The latter differentiates them from younger active users (i.e. those that are often referred to as ‘digital natives’) and was one of the core themes regarding how they made sense of their ICT use: we are older active ICT users and are, as such, wiser ICT users (see also Kania-Lundholm & Torres, 2015)

It is also worth noting that this study’s findings draw attention to the idea of the *digital spectrum* (cf. Loos *et al.*, 2012), which is the latest development in the debate on the digital divide as far as older people are concerned. Some scholars have suggested that instead of focusing on how the new media landscape is dividing different generations of users into categories such as ‘digital immigrants/ digital natives’ or ‘haves and have-nots’, research should focus on furthering our “insight into the everyday new media practices” of older adults. This study shows that the older active ICT users interviewed spoke about their ICT use against the backdrop that their peers’ lack of ICT use entails. Thus, the older active ICT users who participated in our focus groups were not only concerned with differentiating themselves from the younger generation but also with differentiating themselves from *other older people*, i.e. the non-users. The focus group discussions drew attention not only to the differences between groups that the older active ICT users interviewed were well aware of, but also to the differences *within* groups to which the recent debate has drawn attention. This finding points to the importance of differentiated usage (Hargittai, 2002; Hargittai & Walejko, 2008) and emphasizes the diversity of the older user group that the debate on the digital divide has yet to acknowledge. In short, our findings provide insight not only into how older active ICT users make sense of their use of these technologies, but also into the fact that they – because they regard themselves as ‘exceptional’ older people – are engaged in the creation of a “digital divide” of their own (the one between older active users and older non-users).

In following Loos, Haddon and Mante-Meijer’s (2012) recommendations to focus on older people’s actual use of ICTs, and also by considering the ends rather than the means of ICT use and its implications for inequalities as Selwyn (2004a) has urged media scholars to do, we have shed light on how older active users of these technologies make sense of their ICT use. We have done this by drawing attention to the fact that they seem aware that their active ICT usage resembles that of ‘digital natives’ (even though they belong, generationally speaking, to the group known as ‘digital immigrants’). Thus, although they actively tried to differentiate themselves from older people whose usage and use of ICTs resembles that of ‘digital immigrants’, the older active users interviewed in this study seemed to want to draw attention to the inequalities that digital literacy bring about and the fact that lack of ICT proficiency can lead to the exclusion of their less fortunate peers from ‘the information society’.

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¹ The data presented in this article comes from a country that is considered to be a digital leader. Sweden is namely one of the forerunners of digitalization, both in Europe and worldwide. This is despite the fact that recent statistics show that about 1 million people in Sweden do not use the internet and the vast majority of these non-users are over 65 (about 80%) (Findahl 2013). Older adults are, in other words, still regarded in Sweden as one of the most vulnerable groups as far as the digitalization of society is concerned.

² According to a recent Ofcom report (2015) users who are 55+ have generally lower weekly volume of use compared to other Internet users. The average number of usage hours for people between 65-74 is 9,7 for this group. Our informants engage with various digital platforms on a daily basis (some for up to eight hours per day) which means that their weekly use is higher than the average use volume for their age group.