

A Dignified Old Age in the Digital Welfare Society: Navigating Digital Inequality among Older Adults in Denmark

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Abstract

This paper investigates the intersection of digital inequality and disinformation among older adults in Denmark, drawing on preliminary findings from the research project "A Dignified Old Age in the Digital Welfare Society." Through ten in-depth interviews, we collected rich qualitative data on the challenges faced by older adults in navigating digital environments. The study reveals that older adults encounter significant digital barriers due to a lack of digital literacy and disinformation on social media and online news platforms. These barriers exacerbate their vulnerability to digital and social exclusion. Our findings underscore the critical need for targeted interventions to enhance digital literacy and resilience among older adults. We advocate for a holistic approach that combines efforts to bridge the digital divide with strategies to combat disinformation, thereby promoting more inclusive and equitable participation in the digital society for older adults.

1. Introduction

In the rapidly evolving digital landscape, older adults are increasingly encountering new challenges that impact their ability to engage with digital information effectively. The project "A Dignified Old Age in the Digital Welfare Society," conducted in collaboration with Ældresagen, aims to address the critical issue of how older adults in Denmark navigate and respond to digital inequalities in various digital environments. This study leverages qualitative data from ten in-depth interviews with older adults, offering a nuanced understanding of their experiences and strategies in dealing with digital exclusion and misinformation. Digital inequality, defined as the disparity in access to, use of, and impact from digital technologies (Van Dijk, 2020), poses a significant threat to democratic systems and societal cohesion (Brashier & Schacter, 2020). Older adults often face substantial barriers in accessing and using digital technologies, leading to digital and social exclusion (Schou & Hjelholt, 2018; Seifert et al., 2021).

The digital divide exacerbates their susceptibility to disinformation, as many lack the digital literacy skills necessary to critically evaluate online content (Lythreatis, 2022; Frennert, 2021). While the European Commission has implemented action plans to combat disinformation (De Cock Buning, 2018), these efforts have predominantly focused on younger populations, overlooking the unique vulnerabilities of older adults (Chiluwa & Samoilenko, 2019; Shu et al., 2017). Furthermore, the digital transformation of welfare states introduces new digital inequalities, complicating the landscape for elderly care and increasing their exposure to misinformation

(Hjelholt and Papazu 2021). By integrating literature on digital inequalities with research on the digital divide, this paper emphasizes the need to view these issues together. Misinformation and disinformation disproportionately affect those in vulnerable positions. This demographic is at higher risk of being deceived or even defrauded online, making it crucial to develop strategies to protect and empower them. The preliminary findings from this study not only highlight the specific challenges faced by older adults in Denmark but also underscore the importance of targeted interventions to enhance digital literacy, awareness, and resilience among older adults.

This research aims to address the following questions:

How do older adults in Denmark experience and navigate digital inequalities? What are the primary sources and types of misinformation encountered by the elderly? What strategies do older adults employ to manage digital challenges and misinformation? How can targeted interventions enhance digital literacy and resilience among older adults?

The structure of this paper includes a comprehensive background on digital inequalities and their impact on older adults, a detailed methodology outlining the mixed-methods approach, findings from the qualitative data, a discussion of the implications for digital welfare policies, and a conclusion summarizing the study's contributions and future research directions.

2. Background

The digital divide and the propagation of digital inequalities are two critical challenges that intersect to disproportionately impact older adults. This section synthesizes research on these intertwined problems. The digital divide refers to the gap between individuals who have access to and can effectively use digital technologies and those who cannot (Van Dijk, 2020). This divide is particularly pronounced among older adults, who often face significant barriers in accessing and using digital technologies. These barriers include limited access to digital devices, lower levels of digital literacy, and a lack of confidence in using technology (Schou & Hjelholt, 2018; Seifert et al., 2021).

In the Nordic context, research by Bakardjieva (2005) emphasizes the socio-cultural factors that influence digital engagement among older adults. Haddon (2000) explores the integration of ICT in daily life, highlighting the challenges older adults face due to a lack of skills and confidence. Mosberg Iversen et al. (2017) examined media consumption patterns among older Danes, finding that while traditional media remains a primary source of information, digital platforms are becoming increasingly influential. However, older adults often lack the digital literacy necessary to critically evaluate online content (Hargittai, 2010; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2014), making them more vulnerable to misinformation and disinformation. The digital divide exacerbates social inequalities, as those without access to digital technologies are increasingly marginalized in a

society that is becoming more reliant on digital information and services. This marginalization can lead to social exclusion, which further compounds the difficulties faced by older adults (Hjelholt 2022, Schou & Hjelholt, 2018; Van Dijk, 2020).

Research consistently shows that older adults are disproportionately affected by disinformation. Guess et al. (2019) identified a strong age effect, with older users sharing significantly more fake news than younger groups, even after accounting for partisanship and ideology. The COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted the risks associated with older adults' exposure to unverified information, particularly regarding health (Righetti et al., 2022).

The digital and social exclusion experienced by older adults exacerbates their vulnerability to disinformation. Digital welfare states' care and control mechanisms often leave the elderly more vulnerable to disinformation (Van Dijk, 2020; Hjelholt 2021). Sala et al. (2022) found a grey digital divide in social networking sites across Europe, showcasing how inequalities impact elderly engagement with digital media. This underscores the need for context-specific strategies to address these challenges. Disinformation poses significant risks not only to the personal well-being of older adults but also to society and democracy. It can lead to political disengagement and reduce their capacity for equal participation in societal processes. Therefore, understanding and addressing the unique challenges faced by the elderly in navigating the digital landscape is crucial.

2.1.A Combined Approach

Combining research on the digital divide and disinformation highlights the critical intersection where these issues exacerbate the vulnerability of older adults. Misinformation and disinformation disproportionately impact those already in vulnerable positions, including the elderly. These demographic faces higher risks of deception and fraud online, making the development of protective and empowering strategies essential.

By integrating literature on fake news, misinformation, and disinformation with research on the digital divide, digital inequality, and digital welfare, the project underscores the necessity of viewing these issues together rather than in isolation. Misinformation and disinformation disproportionately affect those already in vulnerable positions, including the elderly. This demographic is at a higher risk of being deceived or even defrauded online, making the development of strategies to protect and empower them even more critical.

Given their higher likelihood of encountering problematic information and their role as a growing, politically engaged demographic, it is concerning that research on this group is limited. The increasing exposure of elderly individuals to disinformation poses significant risks not only to their personal well-being but also to society and democracy. Disinformation can lead to disengagement from political activities and diminish their capacity to participate equally in society. Therefore, it is crucial to develop strategies specifically tailored to this demographic. By focusing on both

digital and traditional channels of disinformation and integrating insights from ongoing initiatives, the project aims to create a holistic approach to protecting and empowering the elderly population in navigating an increasingly complex information landscape. This integrated approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by older adults and informs the creation of effective, inclusive strategies for digital literacy and protection.

3. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to investigate the exposure of older adults in Denmark to digital inequalities across various platforms and environments. By integrating qualitative insights with computational analyses, we aim to develop a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by this demographic and propose tailored interventions to enhance their digital literacy, awareness, and resilience.

3.1. Digital Data Collection and Thematic Analysis

The initial phase of the study involved setting up the infrastructure for digital data collection and thematic analysis. Data collection was performed through multiple sources, including social media platforms, online news portals, and relevant digital content accessed by older adults. The focus was on identifying and analyzing content classified as false, misleading, or undocumented, particularly those relevant to the elderly population.

Data were collected from various social media platforms and online news portals frequently accessed by older adults. This included capturing instances of disinformation and misinformation that were widely shared among this demographic. Conducting a thematic analysis on the collected data helped identify key themes and patterns. This analysis was guided by the methodology outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which involves familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes, and producing the report.

3.2. Qualitative Research: Interviews and Observations

Building on insights from the thematic analysis, in-depth qualitative research was conducted involving participant recruitment, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation. Elderly individuals were recruited from various communities where they frequently interact with digital information, such as IT cafes in libraries, senior centers, and Ældresagen's initiatives. This strategy ensured a diverse sample based on age, digital literacy levels, and previous experiences with online information.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' experiences with digital information, focusing on their awareness, perceptions, and strategies for managing false and

misleading information. Interview guides were developed based on themes identified in the thematic analysis (Kvale, 2012). Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed for further analysis. Observations were carried out in participants' natural settings to gain insights into their daily interactions with digital technologies. Detailed fieldnotes and recordings were used to capture these observations (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011).

3.3.Data Integration and Analysis

The qualitative data from interviews and observations were analyzed to identify key insights and patterns. The qualitative data were coded and analyzed using NVivo software, following the coding methods outlined by Saldaña (2016). This process involved coding the data to identify recurring themes and patterns, which were then categorized and synthesized. Findings from the qualitative analysis were integrated with the thematic analysis of the digital data, providing a comprehensive understanding of the intersection of digital literacy and vulnerability to digital inequalities among older adults. This integration was crucial for developing a holistic view of the challenges faced by older adults in navigating digital environments.

By combining qualitative insights with computational analyses, this methodology ensures a comprehensive and impactful investigation into the exposure of older adults to digital inequalities and their strategies for navigating the digital landscape. This approach not only highlights the key areas of concern but also informs the creation of effective, inclusive strategies for enhancing digital literacy and resilience among older adults.

4. Findings

The findings of this study reveal the intricate ways in which digital inequalities and misinformation intersect to affect the elderly population in Denmark. Through ten in-depth interviews, rich qualitative data were obtained, providing a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by older adults and their strategies for navigating the digital landscape. This analysis is organized into three main sections: Exposure to Digital Inequality, Navigating Digital Inequalities, and the Impact on Well-being and Civic Engagement.

4.1.Exposure to Digital Inequality

The interviews highlighted significant challenges related to digital inequality among older adults in Denmark. Many participants reported limited access to digital devices and reliable internet connections, which hindered their ability to engage with digital information and services, exacerbating feelings of exclusion and isolation. For example, one participant, Karen, a 75-year-old retired teacher, remarked, "It's frustrating because it feels like I'm being left out of the digital world." This observation underscores the digital divide that exists among different demographics. The digital exclusion resulting from limited access not only hampers their ability to stay informed

and connected but also contributes to broader social inequalities. This is particularly concerning as it places older adults at a disadvantage in terms of accessing essential services and information.

Furthermore, many older adults lacked the digital literacy skills necessary to navigate online environments effectively. Participants often expressed frustration with their inability to differentiate between reliable and unreliable sources. Erik, a 70-year-old retired engineer, shared, "I get so confused with all the buttons and options on my computer. Sometimes, I just give up because I don't know what to do." This frustration highlights a significant barrier to digital inclusion. Without the necessary skills to navigate digital platforms, older adults are more susceptible to misinformation and less able to participate fully in the digital society.

The interviews and observations revealed various ways in which older adults navigate digital inequalities. Social networks played a critical role in helping them cope with the challenges posed by digital technologies. Participants relied heavily on family and friends for assistance with digital tasks, indicating the importance of social support in achieving digital inclusion. For instance, Anna, a 72-year-old widow, mentioned, "I always ask my grandson to help me with the computer. He's so good at it, and I trust him."

This reliance on social networks for digital support highlights the role of community and family in mitigating digital inequalities. It suggests that interventions aimed at improving digital literacy among older adults should not only focus on the individuals themselves but also leverage their existing social support networks. Programs that facilitate intergenerational learning and peer support can be particularly effective in enhancing digital literacy and inclusion.

However, the rapid pace of technological change posed significant challenges for older adults. Many struggled to keep up with new digital tools and platforms, which hindered their ability to access reliable information. Lars, a 74-year-old farmer, described his frustration with learning to use his new smartphone: "Every time I think I've got the hang of it, there's something new I need to learn. It's exhausting." This constant need to adapt to new technologies can be overwhelming for older adults, making it crucial to have social networks that provide ongoing support.

The study found that digital inequalities had significant implications for the well-being and civic engagement of older adults. Exposure to digital inequalities and the resulting exclusion had tangible effects on the mental and emotional well-being of participants. The confusion and anxiety caused by their struggles with digital technologies led to stress and mistrust. Several participants mentioned feeling overwhelmed and isolated due to their inability to keep up with digital information. Maria, a 68-year-old former nurse, explained, "I often feel left behind and anxious because I can't keep up with all the digital changes."

These experiences highlight the need for targeted mental health support and digital literacy programs that address the specific challenges faced by older adults. Ensuring that older adults have

the skills and confidence to navigate digital environments can significantly improve their well-being and reduce feelings of isolation.

Digital inequalities also affected the political engagement of older adults. Many expressed concerns about their ability to participate meaningfully in democratic processes due to the prevalence of misleading information and their struggles with digital technologies. This was particularly evident during election periods, where misinformation influenced their perceptions of candidates and policies. Jens, a 65-year-old retired teacher, noted, "It's hard to know what's true or not, and that makes it difficult to make informed decisions."

These findings suggest that improving digital literacy and access among older adults is crucial for their full participation in democratic processes. Many older adults lacked the digital literacy skills necessary to navigate online environments effectively. Participants often expressed frustration with their inability to differentiate between reliable and unreliable sources. Erik, a 70-year-old retired engineer, shared, "I get so confused with all the buttons and options on my computer. Sometimes, I just give up because I don't know what to do". Without the necessary skills to navigate digital platforms, older adults are more susceptible to misinformation and less able to participate fully in the digital society.

4.2. Navigating Digital Inequalities

The interviews and observations revealed various strategies that older adults employed to navigate digital inequalities. A common theme was the reliance on social networks for assistance. Many participants turned to family members or friends to help them verify information and navigate digital platforms. Inga, an 80-year-old widow, explained, "I always ask my granddaughter to check if something is real. She's my go-to person for anything online."

This reliance on social networks illustrates the critical role of social support in mitigating the effects of digital inequalities. However, it also points to a potential vulnerability; those without access to supportive networks may find it even more challenging to manage their digital interactions. The importance of intergenerational learning opportunities becomes evident here, as younger family members can play a vital role in enhancing the digital literacy of older adults.

The rapid pace of technological change also poses significant challenges for many older adults. Participants frequently mentioned struggling to keep up with new digital tools and platforms, which hindered their ability to access reliable information. Lars, a 74-year-old farmer, described his frustration with learning to use his new smartphone: "Every time I think I've got the hang of it, there's something new I need to learn. It's exhausting." This statement highlights the need for continuous learning opportunities tailored to the needs of older adults, ensuring they can keep pace with technological advancements and remain digitally included.

Despite these challenges, the findings also highlighted several strategies that older adults employed to manage misinformation. Some participants actively worked on improving their critical thinking skills to better assess the credibility of online information. For instance, Karen, a 69-year-old retired librarian, took an online course on digital literacy, stating, "I wanted to empower myself to make better judgments about what I read online." This proactive approach underscores the potential for digital literacy programs to enhance resilience among older adults, equipping them with the skills needed to navigate the digital landscape more confidently and critically.

4.3. Impact on Well-being and Civic Engagement

The study found that digital inequalities and misinformation had significant implications for the well-being and civic engagement of older adults. Exposure to misinformation had tangible effects on the mental and emotional well-being of participants. The confusion and anxiety caused by conflicting information led to stress and mistrust. Several participants mentioned feeling overwhelmed and isolated due to their inability to keep up with digital information. Helga, a 73-year-old former banker, shared, "It's so hard to know what's true and what's not. Sometimes, I just feel like giving up on the internet altogether."

This sense of overwhelm and mistrust not only affects their mental health but also their overall quality of life. The isolation experienced due to digital exclusion can lead to a decline in social interactions and a feeling of being left behind in a rapidly evolving digital world.

Misinformation also affected the political engagement of older adults. Many expressed concerns about their ability to participate meaningfully in democratic processes due to the prevalence of misleading information. This was particularly evident during election periods, where misinformation influenced their perceptions of candidates and policies. Jens, a 68-year-old former teacher, recounted, "It seemed like everyone had an agenda, and it was hard to know what was real. I didn't feel confident in making informed decisions."

This finding underscores the broader societal implications of digital inequality and misinformation. Ensuring that older adults have access to accurate and reliable information is essential for their meaningful participation in democratic processes. In summary, the findings from this study highlight the complex interplay between digital inequalities and misinformation among older adults in Denmark.

5. Discussion

This study makes several contributions to the literature on digital inequality, digital welfare, and misinformation, particularly as they affect older adults. By integrating qualitative data from in-depth interviews, this research offers a nuanced understanding of how these issues intersect to impact the elderly population in Denmark. The findings underscore the necessity of addressing

digital inequalities in tandem with efforts to combat misinformation, highlighting the compounded vulnerability of older adults in the digital age.

Previous research has extensively documented the digital divide, focusing on the barriers faced by older adults in accessing and using digital technologies (Van Dijk, 2020; Schou & Hjelholt, 2018). Similarly, the spread and impact of misinformation have been well-explored, with studies identifying older adults as particularly susceptible to false information (Guess et al., 2019; Jack, 2017). However, this study bridges the gap between these two domains by demonstrating how digital inequalities exacerbate the vulnerability of older adults to misinformation. By focusing specifically on the elderly, this research addresses a significant gap in the literature, where the intersection of age, digital literacy, and misinformation has been relatively understudied. The empirical findings from this study provide detailed insights into the experiences of older adults, highlighting how limited access to technology, lack of digital literacy, and exposure to misinformation are interconnected challenges that need to be addressed collectively.

The findings reveal that many older adults experience significant barriers to accessing digital devices and reliable internet connections. This digital exclusion contributes to their inability to engage with digital information and services, exacerbating social inequalities. Participants often expressed frustration with their inability to navigate online environments and critically evaluate online content. This lack of digital literacy increases their susceptibility to misinformation, underscoring the need for targeted digital literacy programs (Lythreathis, 2022; Frennert, 2021). Many older adults relied on family members and friends to help them verify information and navigate digital platforms. This reliance on social support networks highlights their importance in mitigating the effects of digital inequalities and suggests the potential for intergenerational learning opportunities (Haddon, 2000).

The study also found that digital inequalities and misinformation had significant implications for the well-being and civic engagement of older adults. Exposure to misinformation had tangible effects on the mental and emotional well-being of participants. The confusion and anxiety caused by conflicting information led to stress and mistrust. Several participants mentioned feeling overwhelmed and isolated due to their inability to keep up with digital information. Misinformation also affected the political engagement of older adults, with many expressing concerns about their ability to participate meaningfully in democratic processes due to the prevalence of misleading information. This was particularly evident during election periods, where misinformation influenced their perceptions of candidates and policies.

The findings from this study highlight the increased susceptibility of older adults to misinformation and provide a comprehensive understanding of their strategies to navigate and mitigate these challenges. One of the most critical implications of this study is the urgent need to develop and implement comprehensive digital literacy programs tailored specifically for older adults. The data reveals that limited digital literacy is a significant barrier that prevents older adults from effectively

accessing and evaluating online information. Programs should focus on enhancing critical thinking skills, teaching practical strategies for identifying credible sources, and familiarizing older adults with the functionalities of digital tools and platforms. Incorporating such programs into community centers, libraries, and senior organizations can create accessible learning environments for older adults.

The findings underscore the vital role of social support networks in helping older adults navigate digital spaces. Family members, friends, and community groups serve as essential resources for verifying information and providing guidance. Policy interventions should aim to strengthen these networks by facilitating intergenerational learning opportunities where younger family members can support their elders in developing digital competencies. Additionally, community-led initiatives, such as digital literacy workshops and peer-to-peer mentoring programs, can leverage these social structures to enhance collective digital resilience.

Addressing the digital divide is crucial for mitigating the impact of misinformation on older adults. This requires a multifaceted approach that includes improving access to digital devices and reliable internet connections, especially in rural and underserved areas. Policymakers need to ensure that older adults are not left behind in the digital transformation by providing subsidies for digital tools and internet services. Moreover, public awareness campaigns should emphasize the importance of digital inclusion and encourage older adults to participate in digital literacy programs.

Given the significant influence of misinformation on older adults, targeted policy recommendations are essential. Governments and organizations should collaborate to create robust fact-checking mechanisms and promote the use of credible information sources. This could involve partnerships with fact-checking organizations to disseminate verified information widely. Additionally, incorporating media literacy into educational curricula for all age groups, as recommended by the European Commission, can foster a culture of critical evaluation and responsible information sharing.

The study (with its preliminary findings) highlights the negative impact of misinformation on the mental and emotional well-being of older adults. Exposure to conflicting information can lead to stress, anxiety, and a sense of isolation. Mental health services should be integrated into digital literacy programs to provide psychological support for older adults grappling with the effects of misinformation. Furthermore, creating safe online spaces where older adults can share their experiences and receive support can help alleviate feelings of isolation and build community resilience.

Misinformation poses a significant threat to the civic engagement of older adults. Ensuring that they have access to accurate and reliable information is crucial for their meaningful participation in democratic processes. Civic education programs tailored for older adults can empower them to critically evaluate political information and engage actively in political discourse. This study

makes significant contributions to the literature by integrating the fields of digital inequality and misinformation, focusing on the unique challenges faced by older adults. It provides a comprehensive understanding of how these issues intersect and offers practical recommendations for enhancing digital literacy and resilience among older adults. The findings underscore the importance of addressing digital inequalities to mitigate the impact of misinformation and promote a more inclusive and informed society.

Future research should continue to explore these themes, with a focus on longitudinal and comparative studies to further understand the dynamics of digital literacy and misinformation among older adults. Longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into how older adults' digital literacy and susceptibility to misinformation evolve over time. Comparative studies across different cultural and socio-economic contexts would help generalize the findings and tailor interventions to diverse populations. Additionally, experimental studies could test the effectiveness of various digital literacy programs and interventions in reducing the spread of misinformation among older adults.

6. Concluding Remarks

This study offers a preliminary exploration into the complex interplay between digital inequalities, digital welfare, and misinformation among older adults in Denmark. As a work-in-progress, it provides valuable insights that can inform future research and interventions aimed at enhancing digital literacy and resilience among the elderly. The qualitative data gathered from in-depth interviews highlight the multifaceted challenges that older adults face in navigating digital environments, ranging from limited access to technology to the pervasive impact of misinformation.

The findings underscore the necessity of addressing digital inequalities in tandem with efforts to combat misinformation. By focusing on the unique vulnerabilities of older adults, this research contributes to the broader literature on digital inclusion and digital welfare. It emphasizes the need for tailored digital literacy programs that not only enhance technical skills but also foster critical thinking and resilience against misinformation.

For researchers studying misinformation, digital welfare, and digital inclusion, the insights presented in this study underscore the importance of a holistic approach that integrates these interconnected issues. The experiences and strategies of older adults, as revealed through this research, provide a rich foundation for developing more effective and inclusive digital literacy interventions.

Moving forward, it is essential to continue exploring these themes through longitudinal and comparative studies to deepen our understanding of how digital literacy and susceptibility to misinformation evolve over time among older adults. This ongoing research will help to develop

and refine strategies that support the digital inclusion and well-being of this demographic, ultimately contributing to a more informed and engaged society.

The findings and reflections shared in this study highlight the critical importance of fostering digital inclusion and resilience among older adults, making a significant contribution to the fields of digital welfare, misinformation, and digital inequality. As this research progresses, it will continue to provide valuable insights and practical recommendations for addressing the digital challenges faced by older adults.

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