Ageing in a Digital Society
An Occupational Perspective on Social Participation

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Abstract
Background: For older adults to continue being healthy and active participants in an evolving digitalized society, there is a need to support their social participation through engagement in occupations that they need, want, or are expected to do in accordance to the roles that they assume. Occupational therapists together with other professionals face emerging challenges to promote older adults’ engagement in occupations mediated by digital technology. It is therefore relevant to acquire an understanding about how older adults continue to participate in their daily lives and engage in the occupations within their particular contexts. It is also relevant to explore ways to tailor supports for engaging in contemporary occupations and to measure the outcomes of such supports. Aim: The overall aim of this thesis was to develop knowledge to support older adults’ social participation through engagement in occupations mediated by digital technology. Developing knowledge entailed an exploration of older adults’ engagement in occupations mediated by digital technology (Study I), their contexts surrounding social participation (Study II), and tailoring supports for engagement (Study III). Additionally, part of developing knowledge also entailed an investigation of how outcomes of tailoring – specifically ability to perform occupation mediated by digital technology and ability to manage technology – could be measured and related (Study IV). Methods: Study participants were selected from rural and urban municipalities in Northern Sweden. In Study I, data was gathered through concurrent think aloud protocol and observations of ten older adults, aged 66–79 years, while they engaged in occupations that involved digital technology. Narrative inquiry was used to illuminate features in their occupational engagement and participation in daily life. In Study II, focus group interviews of eighteen older adults, aged 66–81 years, were conducted and analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Study III used a multiple case study methodology that included nine cases. Each case involved one adult who participated in a collaborative process to tailor supports for engagement in occupations mediated by digital technology. Data was gathered through questionnaires, observations, fieldnotes, memos for tailoring, and interviews, and then analyzed through cross-case synthesis. Nine older adults, aged 74–95 years, participated. In Study IV, twenty-five older adults, aged 71–93 years, were observed in their performances of digital technology-mediated occupations. The scheme included various intervention strategies tailored to persons in their specific contexts. The findings suggested that facilitating satisfactory use of digital technologies and co-creating usable digitalized services could support older adults’ social participation through occupations that they find relevant in their lives, and subsequently, might enable them to live longer at home. Study III resulted in a proposed scheme for tailoring to support older adults’ engagement in digital technology-mediated occupations. The scheme included various intervention strategies tailored to persons in their contexts, such as adapting visual settings on the device and forming instructional materials based on the older adults needs and preferences. Tailoring interventions require collaboration with other professionals. Results in Study IV indicated preliminary evidence of internal validity and reliability in two aforementioned instruments on a small sample of older adults. Results also showed that there is a significant and strong positive correlation between the ability to engage in digital technology-mediated occupations and the ability to manage digital technology. It implies that an older person who is more able to engage in digital technology-mediated occupations will likely have more ability to manage digital technology and vice versa. In the same manner, an older person who is less able to engage in digital technology-mediated occupations will likely have less ability to manage digital technology and vice versa. Conclusions: In the contexts of ageing, narrowing social networks, and expanding digital possibilities, participation through satisfactory digital technology use can provide older adults opportunities to continue being active members of society. A scheme has been proposed to tailor supports for older adults’ occupational engagement, which needs further testing in various practice settings. Instruments for measuring outcomes of tailored supports have also been identified but needs further validation in studies with older people.

Keywords
computer, digital competence, digitalization, digital literacy, digital technology, information and communication technology, internet, intervention, occupation, occupational therapy, occupational therapy informatics, older adult, older people, social activities

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