

Researching with Communities at the Margins: Exploring Lived Experiences of Social, Digital and Cultural Participation with Minoritised Older Adults

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Connecting Through Culture as We Age is a three-year UKRI Healthy Ageing Challenge funded project, which brings together researchers across the University of Bristol from the fields of Education, Computer Sciences, Health Sciences and the Arts. It's a co-produced research project that tackles the complex problem of how to increase participation in social and cultural life as we age, which has been shown to make a vital contribution to raising quality of life. It responds to inequalities related to the accessibility and content of arts and cultural provision, including digital exclusion, addressing the fundamental issue that participation drops dramatically in older populations who are disabled and/or racially and socio-economically minoritized.

We research with a group of co-researchers comprised of 'next generation' older people (aged 60-75) who identify as disabled, and/or socioeconomically and racially minoritized. In the first year of the project, we developed a range of creative and participatory methods to understand more about co-researchers' daily lives, social connections, digital participation, and experiences of social exclusion and marginalization. Adopting a life-course approach [1] has been central to understanding more about experiences of marginalisation across co-researchers lives, and how these mediate access to arts and culture, and digital participation. The knowledge generated in the first year of the project is now shaping a co-design process, with co-researchers working alongside community partners, artists and creative technologists to co-design digital cultural experiences that support social connections.

Working with community partner organisations

We work collaboratively with a range of partner organisations across the ageing, voluntary and community, cultural and digital sectors. This includes three community partner organisations, Black South West Network, Wellspring Settlement, and The West of England Centre for Inclusive Living, who support with recruitment and to ensure co-researchers inclusive participation in the research and co-design process.

Inclusive participatory methods for researching with communities at the margins

We have developed a tool kit of creative and participatory methods to work with co-researchers, including those with visual, hearing or cognitive impairments, and that accommodate diverse literacies, including digital literacies. In keeping with the visual research methods literature [2], this has helped us understand more about experiences of ageing, embodiment, everyday life, and digital and cultural participation.

- **My Album + Diary Interview Methods:** We provided co-researchers with an album, creative materials, a camera and a list of prompts or questions about their daily lives. Finding the approach that suits them best, co-researchers worked with different visual mediums (*i.e.*, *photography, collage*), and/or written media, to create an album about their lives. We also asked them to keep a visual or written diary over a three-week period. Following this we interviewed the co-researchers about their album and diary, using its contents as a prompt for the discussion.
- **Creative Workshops:** We ran a range of creative group activities (*e.g.*, *fabric collage, DIY filming-making and micro-photography*) some of which were co-facilitated with co-researchers. We held workshops at the Knowle West Media Centre to introduce co-researchers to the collaborative design process. The arts-based methods enabled us to explore their interests and hobbies, build relationships across the cohort ahead of the co-design process, and generate ideas for digital cultural products/artefacts based on their own lived experiences.
- **Digital Literacies Sessions:** We have run a series of one-to-one and/or small-group in-person support clinics for digital literacy development throughout the project. Our co-researchers were offered a mobile-data enabled iPad at the beginning of the project as a tool to facilitate their digital inclusion. We have subsequently taken a person-centred approach to supporting their learning and use of these devices by attempting to understand how digital technology may fit within their daily lives, as well as attempting to address individual accessibility barriers to their digital participation. It has led to widespread adoption of the devices by our co-researchers, with daily engagement in digital social and cultural activities, and increased agency over their learning.

References

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Findings

We have learnt about the significance of 'everyday creativity' [4] for transitioning into older age. This encompasses the myriad of creative activities that take place in and around the home, including in virtual settings, that are embedded into people's daily lives (*e.g.*, *crafting, making, sewing, cooking, collecting, and gardening*). These sorts of day-to-day creative doings have an important impact on co-researchers' wellbeing and quality of life. For instance, they spoke about enjoying passing time this way, how they offer opportunities of social connection (*i.e.*, *finding online crafting communities or gardening with grandchildren*), and a space to express and explore their identity (*i.e.* *age, sexuality and gender*). Yet, the home is not always a viable, safe or inspiring space for creative engagements, such as in the case of co-researchers who live in damp, cold or over-crowded conditions, or who are digitally excluded.

Engagement with cultural spaces like galleries and museums, and participation in organised activities such as art classes, choirs or dance classes, can have a positive impact on wellbeing and offer meaningful experiences of social connection. For example, co-researchers spoke about how participating in organised classes can forge friendships that stretch beyond the course of the activity itself. However, co-researchers also shared experiences of disconnection, alongside a range of barriers to participation that result in exclusion. For example, finding it hard to access and navigate cultural spaces in the city, not having wi-fi or a digital device at home, or because the cultural provision on offer caters to white middle-class tastes.

Our research emphasises the role of Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) organisations in opening and maintaining pathways to cultural participation and ensuring inclusion of marginalised older adults. Crucially the VCS play a key role in addressing some of the barriers, such as through supporting older people to engage online and broadening the provision of cultural activities on offer. However, there are challenges when it comes to the VCS creating and maintaining creative and cultural activities, such as the limits imposed by short-term funding cycles. Some co-researchers spoke about the grief they experience when these organised activities come to an end. In summary, the project has developed deeper understanding around the inequalities related to accessibility and content of digital arts and cultural provision, and raised important questions around inclusion and 'whose culture' counts.

The relevance of the 'everyday' is also central to our co-researchers digital participation. For instance, digital tools and services are most relevant where they support co-researchers' daily lives (*i.e.*, *aiding transportation using digital bus ticketing and timetabling and taxi services, as well as online shopping and price comparison services*). The desired support for digital literacies expressed by our co-researchers has also been motivated by the retention and expansion of their social connections (*i.e.*, *using email, telecommunication apps, instant messaging, social media, and even games with friends and family*) and cultural interests (*i.e.*, *leveraging digital media services like YouTube and streaming platforms*).

Despite the opportunities digital participation can offer older adults, they also present risks that can result in their exclusion. While digital spaces can afford convenience, our co-researchers report that they do not always feel safe - particularly in places where they have limited experience or knowledge. Another reported theme is that digital spaces can sometimes lack the richness of the real world. This is exacerbated at times by a frustrating lack of accessible technologies that are sensitive to the non-homogenous physical, cognitive, social, and economic situations and experiences that exist for all people across their life course [5]. Thus, in order to further digital participation, there needs to be a greater emphasis on the design of more inclusive technologies that take account of nuanced accessibility needs, and aim towards creating richer and more trustworthy digital spaces.



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Our Project Partners

