

8 The impact of digitalisation in everyday life

Citizens' perspectives on the rise of digital media

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1. Introduction

Over the past decades, digitalisation has shaped the way people interact with each other, with culture, and with the world around them. The increased use of digital media and the rapid pace of technological change have prompted researchers to investigate how individuals engage with digital media and how digitalisation affects society. This chapter will take a closer look at perceptions, judgements, and negotiations of contemporary digitalisation. To get new insights into the role of digital media in Europeans' lives, we explore their perceptions of digitalisation at the level of their everyday life and society through a bottom-up research design. Although interrelated, we conceptualise digitalisation on two levels: individual everyday digital media use and societal digitalisation in the sense of the "information society" (Webster, 2006). We refer to Hepp (2022) in our understanding of digital media as devices such as smartphones, tablets, and computers, which facilitate all possible forms of connection and communication via the internet and whose modes of production, distribution, and use rely on algorithms. We approach individual everyday media use in present-day societies as a central mode of orientation towards questions of societal and political relevance (Ytre-Arne, 2023).

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We outline citizens' experiences of how digitalisation has shaped their lives and society by combining data from the INVENT survey and interviews (cf. Methodological Appendix of this book). We aim to answer the following questions: (1) How do Europeans perceive digitalisation in relation to society on the one hand and their everyday lives on the other? (2) What kind of variation is there across countries and according to sociodemographic divisions? (3) What affordances and meanings are attributed to digital media?

First, drawing on a literature review by Kristensen et al. (2022), we briefly discuss previous research, integrating the literature on everyday media use and affordances, digital disconnection, and digital inequalities. Thereby, we seek to address a gap in the literature concerning citizens' perceptions of the influences of digitalisation at the individual and societal level with a mixed-methods approach. Second, we describe our methods and present our empirical findings. While we use the quantitative survey analysis to highlight findings from all nine countries, the qualitative interviews allow us to analyse individual perceptions more in-depth. Third, we draw overall conclusions based on both types of material, highlighting how citizens negotiate the perceived influence of digitalisation in their lives. Identifying these perceptions and their variations can thus enable taking action to bridge emerging digital divides.

2. Studying digital media use and perceptions of digitalisation across cultures and time

The concept of digitalisation bears a plethora of meanings and technological developments on both the individual and societal levels. Brennen and Kreiss define it as “the way many domains of social life are restructured around digital communication and media infrastructures” (2016, p. 1). Deuze (2012) stresses that life is lived *in* rather than *with* media, referring to an ongoing convergence of media and our everyday lives. Digital media are pervasive and ubiquitous and play a key role in people's private lives as well as in how societies are structured. Individuals create a connection to their environment via media, which adds value to their relationship with society (Couldry et al., 2010; Swart et al., 2017; Ytre-Arne, 2023). While people's media repertoires (Hasebrink & Hepp, 2017) depend on many sociodemographic factors, such as age, education, income, or geography, people must nevertheless navigate different technologies – old and new – all at once.

New conditions in society shape the possibilities and habits attributed to media. Scholars have pointed to the central role of disruptive events, or tectonic shifts, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, that shape the use and perception of technologies (Hasebrink et al., 2015; Ytre-Arne, 2023). Moreover, the perception of new media gains significance in comparison to their predecessors, and people make sense of new media by reflecting and comparing them to other types of media. How people understand those media changes is described with the help of the concept of remediation, the representation of one medium in another (Bolter & Grusin, 1998).

Within a constantly changing media environment, the concept of affordances (Bucher & Helmond, 2018) plays a key role in understanding how human agents

are situated at the centre of and in a relational perspective to (the materiality of) digital media. How technologies are used and with what motivations and needs depends partly on the personal experience of the individual. Media have their affordances built into the design (also called low-level affordances). We understand media affordances as relational because of the needs that the individual seeks to meet and what communicative practices they enable or constrain (high-level affordances) (boyd, 2010; Bucher & Helmond, 2018).

Earlier studies have demonstrated individual strategies and understandings of affordances that people attribute to digital media and through which they meet their needs for connection, participation, socialisation, and identity building (e.g., Baym, 2010; boyd, 2010; Jenkins et al., 2015). People's engagement with culture is increasingly in media; cultural consumption, for instance, is shaped by steadily developing formats such as gaming (Hjorth & Richardson, 2020), live streaming (Brewer et al., 2023), streaming video and audio content (Arditi, 2021), digital reading practices (Engberg et al., 2023), and social media platforms (Kaye, 2022). By using and being surrounded by digital media, people encounter and must navigate (societal) power structures that they may perceive as problematic and overwhelming (Chia et al., 2021; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). This phenomenon of positioning oneself in a growlingly digitalised world is captured by recent scholarship on *digital disconnection*, which in turn can be considered "a critical response to mediated conditions that characterise our societies and permeate our everyday lives" (Lomborg & Ytre-Arne, 2021, p. 1529). Digital disconnection bridges the ongoing digitalisation on the societal level with the individual's response to this transformation and identifies people's practices and strategies for opting out and disengaging. As Moe and Madsen have found in a review of research within and beyond media studies, "disconnecting is held forth as clearly positive: whether digital disconnection is seen as an answer to health issues, the lack of productivity, a loss of direction in life, an unjust society or a dying Earth, it is presented as normatively superior to connection" (2021, p. 1596). These five categories, again, reflect the notion of perceptions of both personal and societal (dis-)connections.

However, the skill to decode and understand the affordances provided by digital media is unevenly distributed in societies and across countries. The literature on digital divides has focused on identifying inequalities arising in digital societies, arguing that those who inhabit a low social position tend to be excluded in the digital realm and possibly vice versa. Socio-digital inequalities consist of a combination of economic skills and learning inequalities, as well as inequalities in power, access, and participation in digital societies (Van Dijk, 2020; Helsper, 2021). Thus, the ability to navigate the digital could be seen as a new and reinforced level of divide.

There is a gap in the literature when it comes to studying people's perceptions of digitalisation comparatively (Kristensen et al., 2022). Existing cross-national and cultural comparisons (e.g., Baron & af Segerstad, 2010) predominantly focus on media use. Cross-national studies have emphasised that the societal appropriation of digital media is no linear process, as diffusion differs across and within countries. Substantial differences between user types within and across countries emerge from equally distinctive social and cultural contexts (Hasebrink et al.,

2015). Recent studies have, for instance, identified age, education, and income as important factors in the social stratification of people's media repertoires (e.g., Heikkilä et al., 2022; Vandenplas & Picone, 2021) and digital cultural participation (Janssen et al., 2024). While the gravity of these factors can differ from society to society, age seems to be a crucial factor globally. Through a cross-cultural study of China, Europe, and the United States, Jensen and Helles (2022) found that cultures of communication are increasingly converging among nations. This trend is particularly noticeable among younger individuals, who, despite diverse national and cultural backgrounds, appear "virtually indistinguishable" (p. 163) in their everyday online activities.

The common denominator of everyday media use as a theoretical and conceptual frame, emerging from this existing research, is the possibility of understanding the individual's perspectives on mundane and societal aspects of digitalisation. The research presented in this chapter adds to the literature on the individual's perception of digitalisation beyond media use metrics.

3. Methods

The mixed-methods approach employed in this chapter involves analysing survey data from nine countries and interviews from four countries. Both methods contribute to answering the introduced research questions. The first question about how Europeans perceive digitalisation in relation to society and their everyday lives draws on data from the INVENT survey and interviews. The second question, addressing variation across countries and sociodemographic divisions, is mostly answered by the quantitative survey analysis. The third question about affordances and meanings attributed to digital media relies on interview data analysis.

We explore citizens' perceptions of the impact of digitalisation by focusing on three items included in the INVENT survey: the degree to which the respondents agreed with the items' statements, how the items are associated with actual internet and social media usage, and how the items are related to major sociodemographic divisions in and across the nine countries. This comparative and descriptive bird's-eye perspective, based on comparing means and calculating correlations, gives us a suitable background for analysing the qualitative interviews to examine the meanings and valuations of digitalisation more in depth. The four items all represent Likert-scale statements (here coded as 1 = strongly disagree, . . . , 5 = strongly agree) and are formulated as follows: "The internet has enabled me to make contact with people who share the same cultural interests as me"; "I often lack the skills to find the information I need on the internet"; "The increased use of the internet has created more problems than solutions in [the country of survey]"; and "It has become very difficult to live your life without using the internet in [the country of survey]". The first two statements probed the degree of agreement as the "descriptions of yourself", while the two last statements concerned agreement "on how the situation in [the country of survey] has changed in the past 5 to 10 years". Thus, the first two items can be considered to measure the perceptions of the impact of digitalisation at the individual level and the last two as focusing on societal-level impacts.

As for the other survey variables, we utilise, besides the country of the respondent, information on the usage of the internet and social media, both of which asked about the frequency of usage along five response categories ranging from “(almost) never” (here coded as 1) to “(almost) daily” (5). The sociodemographic factors included in our analysis are age (grouped into four: 18–34, 35–49, 50–64, 65–80); gender (female, male); place of residence according to city size (grouped into four: big city of 150+k inhabitants, medium-sized city with 80–150k inhabitants, small city with 10–80k inhabitants, and country/town with less than 10k inhabitants); migrant background (binary), with “yes” meaning that either of the parents of the respondent was born outside the country of the survey; and education (categorised into three levels: low, including lower secondary degree or less; medium, including upper secondary general or vocational; and high, including vocational tertiary or university).

One hundred qualitative interviews were analysed for this chapter, including all interviews collected in Croatia, Denmark, France, and Spain with both local and migrant interviewees. The Methodological Appendix of this volume provides more details about the interview data collection. The four countries represent different states of digitalisation across Europe and can thus serve as exemplary cases to be explored in depth (see the Introduction of this volume and Table A1 in the Methodological Appendix). To give indications on the overall digital infrastructure of the countries, as of 2022, the internet penetration rate was 99% for Denmark, 94% for Spain, 93% for France, and 85% for Croatia (Statista, 2023, July). Further, according to the composite DESI index (European Commission, 2022, 18 July) – considering more variables and ranking countries by five digital dimensions – Denmark scores the highest (70), followed by Spain (60), then France (53), while Croatia’s score (48) is below the EU average of 52.

The complete interview transcripts in national languages were coded and analysed for each country. The interview guide contained several questions regarding people’s digital media use. Moreover, interviewees also mentioned changes in usage and attitude in relation to the COVID-19 lockdown, as the interview data was collected in the summer of 2022 in the aftermath of the pandemic. Following the principles for content analysis set by Mayring (2014, 2015), we applied a deductive approach to the interviews in the initial analysis, guiding the structuring and coding. Further, an inductive next step added relevant themes that arose through the coding process. For this chapter, we only coded segments related to digitalisation and digital media use. In line with the research questions, our analysis focused on affordances, judgements, and the role of digital media in people’s lives. Therefore, we coded the interview segments according to whether the judgements were positive, ambivalent, or negative. The coding guidelines included the following categories: judgement and valuation of the role of the digital in people’s lives; affordances and uses of digital media in people’s lives; everyday media use specific themes, namely COVID-19, migration, and digital divide; digital media’s perceived role in relation to culture; judgement and valuation of digitalisation on society in general. Some themes proved more prominent than others and thus guided the analysis. Limitations concern the generalisability of the interview analysis, as the sample is not fully representative in terms of income and education.

4. Findings

Perceptions of the impacts of digitalisation across countries and socio-economic factors

Figure 8.1 illustrates how the mean scores of the four survey items on digitalisation vary across the nine countries. We observe an even distribution in the responses regarding the internet enabling contacts with those sharing similar cultural interests and the increased internet use causing more problems than solutions in the respondents' country: about the same number of respondents agree and disagree with both. In contrast, the distributions of the two other statements are very skewed. Most respondents disagree with the statement regarding a negative perception of one's ability to find useful information on the internet, whereas in the case of the statement measuring the "overall" perceived significance of the internet by stating that it is difficult to live your life without using the internet, the majority of respondents agree, and only very few (less than 8%) disagree at least somewhat.

There are some differences between the nine countries, but apart from some exceptions (e.g., the highest score of Spain for the internet enabling contacts, especially if compared to the lowest scoring country, Switzerland, which multivariate analysis shows is not attributable to the somewhat different age and educational profiles of the samples), they are not very substantial in terms of magnitude, and the means are relatively consistent. In all the countries, most respondents agree that it is difficult to live your life without the internet (in Serbia, slightly less than in other countries, which is partly because Serbia has most respondents not using the

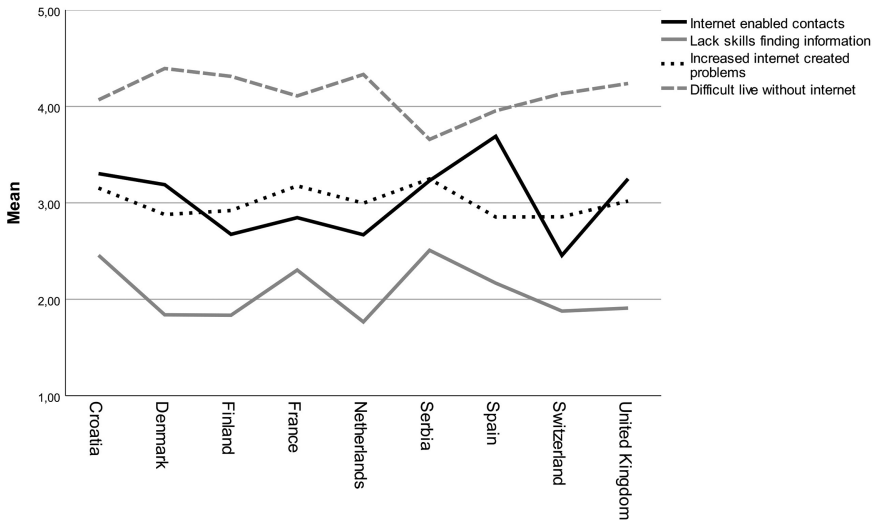


Figure 8.1 Perceptions of Personal-Level and Societal-Level Impacts of Digitalisation According to Country (Mean Scores per Item; Total *N* Ranges Between 13,631 and 13,869)

internet at all). Few respondents agree that they lack the skills to find information (slightly more in Croatia, France, and Serbia than in other countries). Agreement with the two other statements is somewhere in between those two.

Calculating correlations among the four items and with actual internet and social media usage produces interesting findings (see Table 8.1).

Table 8.1 Associations Among the Four Items Measuring Perceptions of Personal-Level and Societal-Level Impacts of Digitalisation and With Actual Internet and Social Media Usage

	1	2	3	4
1: Internet enabled contacts				
2: Lack skills finding information	-0.02*			
3: Increased internet created problems	-0.07***	0.21***		
4: Difficult to live without internet	0.13***	-0.14***	-0.02*	
Internet usage	0.22***	-0.20***	-0.12***	0.24***
Social media usage	0.32***	-0.12***	-0.08***	0.16***

Notes. Pearson correlation coefficients. Total *N* ranges between 13,162 and 13,837. * $p < .05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed tests).

Acknowledging oneself as lacking skills in finding information is positively associated with agreeing that the increased internet usage has created more problems than solutions in the country the respondents live in. Thus, a personal-level negative perception of internet usage (“lack of skills”) is linked with a negative societal-level perception of internet usage (“more problems”). Furthermore, agreeing that one lacks the skills needed to find information is negatively associated with agreeing that it is difficult to live without internet use. Thus, a negative perception of one’s digital skills is, interestingly, in contrast with acknowledging that living without using the internet might be difficult. Agreeing with the difficulty of living without using the internet is positively associated with agreeing that the internet has enabled contact with people with similar cultural interests. This suggests that most respondents did not interpret the assumed difficulty of living one’s life without the internet negatively, at least not in any straightforward way.

The most positive personal-level perception of internet usage – enabling contacts – is slightly negatively associated with agreeing that the increased internet use has created more problems than solutions. Finally, all four statements are associated with actual internet and social media usage in intuitive ways: the “negative” perceived impacts of items 2 and 3 are negatively associated with the actual usage, and the “positive” (1) or more neutral (4) items are positively associated with the actual usage. A particularly strong association can be found between the internet enabling contacts and the actual usage of social media.

How, then, are the four items associated with major sociodemographic divisions? Table 8.2 presents mean scores for various sociodemographic factors. Age and education are the most powerful sociodemographic predictors of the perceived impacts of digitalisation. In contrast, gender, place of residence, and migrant

Table 8.2 Mean Scores of the Four Items Measuring Perceptions of Personal-Level and Societal-Level Impacts of Digitalisation According to Sociodemographic Factors

	<i>1: Internet Enabled Contacts</i>	<i>2: Lack Skills Finding Information</i>	<i>3: Increased Internet Created Problems</i>	<i>4: Difficult to Live Without Internet</i>
Age group (F)	323.77***	55.74***	5.96***	37.50***
18–34	3.55	1.99	3.00	4.26
35–49	3.26	1.96	2.97	4.21
50–64	2.89	2.02	3.00	4.14
65–80	2.61	2.30	3.09	4.01
Gender (F)	2.54	0.86	11.97***	48.39***
Female	3.03	2.06	3.05	4.20
Male	3.07	2.08	2.98	4.08
Place of residence (F)	56.61***	18.29***	14.50***	34.46***
Big city	3.22	2.05	2.94	4.20
Medium-sized city	3.06	2.01	2.99	4.19
Small city	2.88	2.04	3.07	4.15
Country/town)	2.90	2.26	3.11	3.92
Migrant background (F)	124.75***	19.17***	1.67	2.05
Yes	3.29	2.16	2.99	4.17
No	2.99	2.05	3.03	4.14
Education (F)	31.00***	382.24***	175.97***	122.55***
Low	2.89	2.55	3.29	3.90
Medium	3.06	2.13	3.09	4.14
High	3.13	1.80	2.83	4.26

Notes. *F*-values in bold. Total *N* ranges between 13,382 and 13,851. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$ (*F*-test for the significance of the differences between categories).

background seem to matter less, even if they also have significant associations with some items.

Young age is strongly associated with the view that the internet has enabled making new contacts. Young age is also associated with agreeing that it is difficult to live your life without the internet, while old age predicts acknowledging that you lack digital skills for finding information. Gender differences are minimal overall, but female respondents agree slightly more often than males that it is difficult to live without using the internet. Living in big cities is associated with agreeing that the internet has enabled contacts and that it is difficult to live without using the internet, whereas living in small towns or the countryside is associated with negative perceptions about lacking digital skills and the internet creating problems at the societal level. Having either parent born abroad is associated with agreeing that the Internet has enabled contacting people with similar cultural interests. Finally, a high educational level is associated with agreeing that the internet has enabled contacts and that it is difficult to live without it. The strongest associations, however, are found between having a low education and the lack of skills to find information and the view that increased internet use has created more problems than solutions.

These findings are in line with the literature on digital inequalities, which has found access to, skills for, and benefits from using the internet to be patterned in

favour of younger, urban, and highly educated population groups (e.g., Van Dijk, 2020; Heikkilä et al., 2022; Helsper, 2021). However, because these groups are also the ones most often agreeing that it is difficult to live your life without using the internet, it is likely that despite all the benefits, their relationship with the internet is still ambivalent and not entirely positive. This is one reason the theme merits closer scrutiny by qualitative interviews.

To close our section utilising survey data, we respectively look at the most important associations – those with age and education – country by country to see whether they vary across the nine countries (see Figures 8.2 and 8.3, respectively).

Figure 8.2 demonstrates that age matters regarding the perceptions of digitalisation more in some countries than others. First, agreeing that the internet has enabled contacts, drops particularly clearly with old age in Croatia, Finland, and Serbia. In these three countries, older individuals are much more likely to agree that one lacks digital skills. Finally, in Croatia and Serbia, agreeing with the statement that it is difficult to live your life without using the internet most clearly decreases with old age.

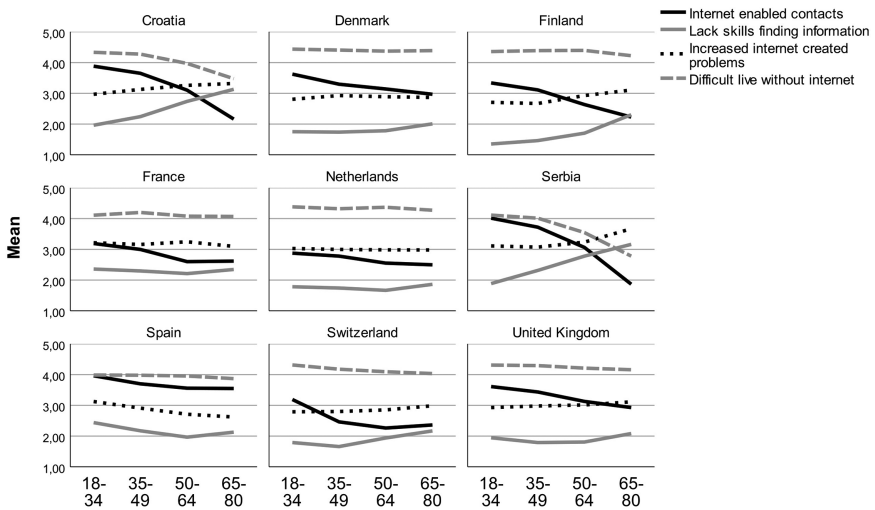


Figure 8.2 Perceptions of Personal-Level and Societal-Level Impacts of Digitalisation According to Age Group and Country (Mean Scores per Item; Total N Ranges Between 13,485 and 13,706)

Figure 8.3 shows that the associations with education are consistent overall but more pronounced in certain countries. Most notably, the link between high educational level and agreeing with the statements that the internet has enabled contact with people with similar cultural interests and that it is difficult to live your life without using the internet seems strongest in Serbia. Then again, agreeing that one lacks the skills to find useful information online is relatively consistently associated with low education in all countries. Figure 8.3 demonstrates that the associations

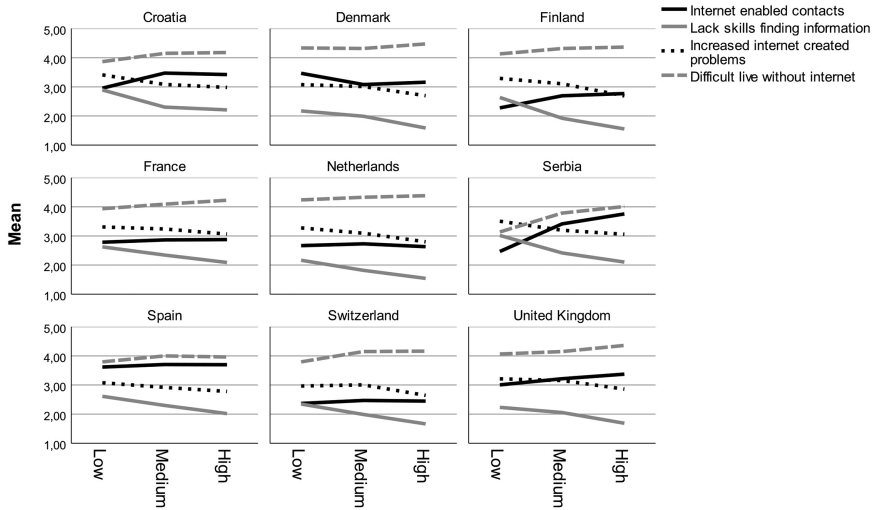


Figure 8.3 Perceptions of Personal-Level and Societal-Level Impacts of Digitalisation According to Education and Country (Mean Scores per Item; Total N Ranges Between 13,610 and 13,848)

with education are relatively systematic across the countries, but the magnitude of the associations somewhat varies.

The analysis of the survey statements shows that age and education are the most powerful sociodemographic predictors of the perceived impacts of digitalisation, whereas gender, place of residence, and migrant background seem to matter less, even if they have significant associations with some statements. Furthermore, the negative perception that increased internet use has created more problems than solutions is strongly associated with a lower level of education. The overall salient factors are more related to age and education and the state of digitalisation in each country. However, these factors can be more pronounced in some countries than others.

Everyday negotiations of digital media and digitalisation

In the following, we highlight the themes that have emerged in the interview analysis, focusing on people's internal tensions as well as tensions between individuals and societies. We explore perceptions of everyday media use, the digitalisation of culture, and the digitalisation of society.

The interviews overall confirm many of the findings from the survey: the digital plays a big role for European citizens; this is perceived as positive, especially by individuals with migrant backgrounds, high education, and young age. This applies to interviewees across countries. Almost all interviewees attributed a major role to digital media, particularly smartphones. Many also asserted spending much of

their day using digital media, as this example highlights: “In the end, I spend more than ten hours a day in front of a screen, between working and using my mobile phone, and then if you watch a series or something, that’s fine too” (woman from Spain, 24, higher education, SP15).

Yet people expressed a general ambivalence, and tensions characterise the perceptions of the role of digitalisation in their lives. In most instances, people showed mixed, multifaceted attitudes towards digital media, attributing both an important enabling role and drawbacks. Digitalisation is negotiated on an everyday basis, as the following interviewee expresses: “Too much now. Too relevant. Sometimes I’ve noticed I’m on the bus and I’m writing a work email, and you realise it’s like a computer. It has changed the way we all communicate” (woman from Spain, 43, higher education, SP08). Another interviewee says:

I am using it a lot [referring to digital media], maybe too much, but what role, I think, in many ways I got used to the fact that there’s so many things digitally that help me to. . . . organise my life, organise my entertainment and culture around it, so. . . . I find them also in a way kind of addictive, but . . . without that it would probably be hard to participate in all those things in the same way.

(woman from Denmark, 31, higher education, DK14)

Most interviewees perceived the influence of digitalisation on their everyday lives as positive and named a plethora of uses. They used digital technologies for private and work purposes, related to, among others, personal interests, maintaining friendships, family ties, and a connection to events on a global scale, searching for information, gaming, and streaming digital content. For the interviewees with a migrant background, digital media play a central role in maintaining relationships with family, friends, and culture of origin (for a more in-depth analysis of migrants’ digital participation, see Marquart et al., *this volume*).

Concerning the digitalisation of culture, the interviews reflect on the tensions that arise concerning the multifaceted affordances. While most view accessing information about onsite cultural events and a vast supply of digital cultural content positively, people prefer cultural experiences and atmospheres (e.g., concerts) to digital ones, crystallising the perception among some of the interviewees of “the real cultural experience”. These tensions could point to differences in the conception and notion of culture and cultural experience or a redefinition of symbolic boundaries.

It’s not bad, although it is a medium. You know, when you reduce the big screen to this size, it’s not much of a feeling. It’s just you pretending you have now experienced what you wanted to experience, but I think that a deep part [of us] . . . want to live for real. Let’s go back to when they asked Miles Davis: “How do you see music in two thousand years?” And he said: “It will be just the way it started. One man, one drum!” Do you understand me?!

(man from Croatia, 57, higher education, CRO24)

Tensions and ambivalences surface once people start drawing a line between digital experiences and “the real experience”. Research on live-streamed online concerts has found that the difference between “large-scale factors” afforded by physical, collective experiences and “small-scale interaction” can explain this feeling of “not the same, not enough” (Vandenberg, 2022). In one interview, a parent described their child’s online gaming, highlighting the positive social and cultural gains of participating in international online communities while also expressing doubts about the unawareness and connected parental concern about what exactly “happens in there”, meaning in the online realm (woman from Denmark, 41, higher education, DK11).

Some interviewees expressed concern about how digital media change their perception of other cultural practices, especially reading. The notion of remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 1998) captures this comparison of “new” digital media to other types of media. In this sense, one interviewee stated, “Reading is a sector that I deeply regret, but I’ve lost it due to technology, and it even bores me. I need something more impactful, more direct, and faster” (man from Spain, 59, higher education, SP02). Recent studies on the digitalisation of reading support this change in people’s habits and perceptions of certain cultural activities (e.g., Spjeldnæs & Karlsen, 2022). This shift in habits can also be seen in prolonged time spent consuming cultural products with phenomena such as *binge-watching* increasing (e.g., Castro et al., 2021), which in turn creates concerns for the individual.

You watch the whole series in one day and I fall into this sometimes too. Some [series] that I really like, I spend all day Saturday. So, this is heavy because it gives you control over the media that you didn’t have before, and you binge-watch some that you couldn’t before. We are not ready for it.

(man from Spain, 37, higher education, SP05)

In all countries, COVID-19 was described as a clear driver of digitalisation. People reported an increase in use and a change in habits, also in connection with culture. This is in line with recent studies on cultural experiences (e.g., Ytre-Arne, 2023). The increase in and reliance on digital media again comes along with tensions. For instance, the dependence on video call technologies for socialising was often mentioned as “better than nothing”, but as the following example shows, it also left people unsatisfied.

I also think that when we had to start being virtual in school, we used Microsoft Teams, where they also, the school itself, organised that we had the opportunity to have a Friday bar, where we could talk to each other and some drank a beer, I still think it was a bit crazy to sit alone and sit and drink a beer.

(woman from Denmark, 19, medium education, DK15)

Many of the examples of how COVID-19 increased people’s digital media use show that it did not necessarily lead to a more positive perception of the affordances. Yet, many cases of positive changes are related to the type and selection of

content such as podcasts or movies. Digital experiences that could be considered more social by nature, including cultural experiences, were perceived as “less” valuable, however.

Describing the downsides of everyday digital media use, interviewees mention that excessive use of media can also lead to a decrease in well-being, both mentally (i.e., perceived addiction) and physically (i.e., in terms of stiff neck), concluding that they need to stay away from “screens”. One interviewee notes: “I once experienced not having it for a few days. I felt like hell, where the hell is my phone? To keep it all organised. So yes, it runs my life. It does, I must admit!” (man from Denmark, 63, higher education, DK09). Another says:

I have the impression that all my friends and I are divided between the idea of having a bit of the Old World and the New World: We try to purify ourselves from the digital; at the same time, it’s something indispensable today.

(woman from France, 23, higher education, FR02)

In these examples, people exclusively describe the need to disconnect or the failure of self-control. Criticism is directed at themselves, not the digitalisation of society. This can also be seen in concerns about the reliability of information due to the prevalence of fake news and misinformation.

A lot, a lot. Before I used to read newspapers, read the news, watch TV. . . . Now you can look for information everywhere. . . . You don’t rely on a single channel or entity anymore. With this technology you can look for information quickly and easily. You don’t get tricked quickly like before. . . . It’s a good thing and a bad thing at the same time, isn’t it? If you don’t know how to filter and use, you can also be tricked.

(man from Spain, 52, lower education, SP19)

In this quote, the interviewee quickly shifts from reflecting on positive affordances to critically mentioning the need for the individual to “filter and use” digital technologies appropriately to navigate them safely. As highlighted by digital disconnection research, this again puts the individual at the centre of steering the influence of digitalisation. Syvertsen and Enli, for instance, argue that we are witnessing the “rise of a self-regulation society, where individuals are expected to take personal responsibility for balancing risks and pressures” (2020, p. 1269). In our interview data, predominantly the younger generation directed this digital criticism towards themselves.

The perception of digitalisation at the societal level played only a minor role in the interviews, presumably because it was not directly addressed in the interviews. However, in contrast to the previous themes of perceived affordances and the role of digital media at the individual level, digitalisation on the societal level was dominantly perceived as negative. The interview quotes point to an understanding of digitalisation on an external, societal level that includes infrastructures such as banking and changes in interpersonal communication, habits, and behaviours. In

Denmark, Spain, and Croatia, especially the older segment of the interview samples added their personal, very critical opinions. These patterns are also reflected in the survey data, pointing towards a general connection between perceptions and age.

Things have moved fast in Denmark, and it hasn't benefited everyone. I don't think so. Not because I feel left out. But I couldn't sit down and sign your request [digital interview consent forms] without help. So, I think, no, should I be able to do that? I can do it for the bank, well, yes, all that other stuff, yes.
(woman from Denmark, 65, higher education, DK20)

Reservations about this technological development are related to personal perceptions of lack of skills, which is a correlation we also find in the survey data. However, this person also clearly states that she does not consider it a problem for herself, as she does not feel left out of the life she is used to.

Criticism of the digitalisation of society was often connected to health-related negative consequences for younger generations and perceived online threats. Again, this demonstrates a weighing of the pros and cons of digitalisation, where personal affordances such as ease might come hand in hand with perceived societal problems.

It has made things a lot easier, but on the other hand, I see that people are becoming dumber nowadays. I'm sorry, but they are getting dumber. I don't know if people in their twenties nowadays have ever read a book in their life, I don't think so.

(woman from Spain, 38, lower education, SP01)

Reservations about issues related to the handling of data privacy played a bigger role in France, Croatia, and Spain, especially amongst highly educated interviewees. The lack of transparency and thus mistrust in data use by authorities is criticised in terms of data collected by both companies and public institutions: "And the facial recognition they're doing in [city], on the one hand, for delinquency, that's all very well, but whoever comes next, how they're going to use it, we don't know. And we have no control" (man from France, 60, higher education, FR14).

5. Conclusion

This chapter aimed to understand how Europeans perceive digitalisation on two levels: in their everyday lives and in society. The survey provided cross-national data on European citizens' perspectives of digitalisation, highlighting similarities between countries and identifying salient factors such as age and education, reflecting findings from existing international studies (e.g., Jensen & Helles, 2022). Personal-level perceptions of digitalisation are correlated with societal-level perceptions. This means that individuals' media use and (self-perceived) digital skills – which are determined by variables such as age, level of education, and income – shape their perception of societal developments. The survey also revealed

more surprising correlations. People with a negative perception of their digital skills do, for instance, not consider living without the internet difficult, while they agree that the internet has created more problems than solutions. This again demonstrates the complexities related to the perceptions of digitalisation. While this study could not further ask about the reasons behind these answers, we can point to two ways of approaching this seemingly contrasting finding. Combining background information about the state of digitalisation and internet access in every country with how people perceived the role of digital media and the internet in their lives suggests that digitalisation, among others, bears the meaning of an infrastructure. For instance, we tentatively interpret the survey statement that it is difficult to live your life without using the internet as a perceived neutral fact in people's lives and not mainly as a negative factor. Future research could build on this tentative insight. On the other hand, people's everyday negotiations, based on a perceived lack of skills and perceived societal problems, might lead to the decision to disconnect from the digitalised sphere. The interview material supports this interpretation by providing examples of people describing negative consequences for future generations but, at the same time, not considering it a disadvantage to lack certain digital skills.

While people's navigation of digital media has been revealed in different ways, the interviews pointed towards a predominance of digital disconnection. When asked about the role of digital media in their everyday lives, people promptly started describing strategies of avoidance, (lack of) self-control, or distancing. After several techlashes worldwide, people are reckoning with the media in their environment, echoing recurring themes in the literature about disconnection (e.g., Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). As previous studies have shown, such perceptions of digitalisation might also be framed by public discourse (e.g., Vanden Abeele & Mohr, 2021). Some of the concerns regarding dependency and loss of control uttered in the interviews reflect what people have read in the news, following the narrative of *smartphone addiction* and notions of *screen time* presented in popular media (Livingstone, 2021). Thus, *how* these perceptions are constructed needs further in-depth empirical analyses.

In conclusion, this chapter has shown that digitalisation is crucial to European citizens' lives. People attribute a major role to digital media, but this role is constantly negotiated, as both positive and negative elements are at play concurrently, creating tensions. The survey shows that personal-level and societal-level perceptions are related, especially when considering the lack of digital skills. This means that the less confidence people have in their personal interactions with digital media, the less potential they see in a digitalised society. According to our findings, digital inequalities and the digital divide persist while digital media have become a crucial part of Europeans' lives. Policymakers must prioritise efforts to ensure that citizens with low digital literacy, particularly those with lower educational levels and older adults, are not left behind. On a personal level, this can involve offering digital literacy courses and maintaining non-digital options for essential services. On the societal level, to counteract concerns about privacy and commercialisation, politics should send strong signals protecting citizens' rights and security in the digital age.

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