

# Distance, Equity and Older People's Experiences in the Nordic Periphery

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Centering the Local

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## Chapter 5

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**Distances and sense of belonging: Older people in Finnish Lapland and digital communication technologies**

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## 5 Distances and sense of belonging

### Older people in Finnish Lapland and digital communication technologies

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#### Introduction

The chapter examines the sense of place and sense of belonging among ageing people in Finnish Lapland, as well as the role of digitalization in their lives. Drawing on interviews of older people and their relatives, we analyze psychological and geographical distance as these figures in respondents' sense of belonging and in digitalization in elderly care and social communication. Digitalization, which here refers to digital communication technologies, social media and digital services, has been offered as a solution that supports older people in living independently at home by shortening social distances, decreasing loneliness and ensuring access to social and health services (Valokivi, 2019; Ågotnes et al., 2020).

Lapland is a region that is often defined as peripheral, or marginal, from the viewpoint of places called “centers”, such as the national capital. Concentration and urbanization of the population have intensified in national policies (Moisio et al., 2020), deteriorating the living conditions in rural areas. The decline of key livelihoods such as the paper industry have weakened employment, and municipalities have closed schools and local services in the name of economic efficiency. Researchers have recognized a political change from the welfare state to neoliberalism and a strategic state in which economic imperatives control policy objectives (Elomäki et al., 2021; see also Harbison; Svensson and Valokivi in this volume). A strategic state no longer acts autonomously but is dependent on different corporations and governs as a corporation would. Economic growth is assumed to be based on globally competitive metropolises and regions, a notion of development in which “core city-regions are emphasized at the expense of state territory as a whole” (Ahlqvist and Moisio, 2014, p. 34). According to Toni Ahlqvist and Moisio (2014, p. 46), digitalization has served as an important tool in this process. Distances become problematic for the concentrated state in competing globally, inasmuch as the state has promised to take care of all of its citizens – even those older people living in rural areas whose ambitions do not include belonging to the digitalized global village.

The margin-center dichotomy has been deconstructed by pointing out that centers and margins exist only in relation to each other and that they may also change places (e.g., Savolainen, 1995). Today, Lapland, like the rest of the Arctic

area, may be seen as located in the center of economic growth because of its extensive tourism industry, natural resources and the increased potential of its ports with the advance of climate change. The people in the region challenge the margin-center mindset through “creative marginality”. Their familiarity with both the dominant and local ways of life – a “double-consciousness” – enables them to maintain a critical perspective (Savolainen, 1995; Keskitalo-Foley and Naskali, 2013, pp. 9–11).

In order to understand older people’s sense of belonging in rural northern Finland, we interviewed older people as well as their relatives. Based on a preliminary examination of the data collected, we chose to focus on the relationships among distances, place and belonging and the role of digital technologies in old people’s lives. These issues have become especially topical during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has shown the impact of distance between people and between people and resources.

While digitalization has been a buzzword for a long time in ageing policies, as in other policy areas, the increasing need for care services has sparked particularly brisk development of “new innovative solutions” to facilitate everyday life, health monitoring and digital communication (Jacobsen, 2015, p. 199). Despite the generally optimistic atmosphere, it merits asking whether distances constitute a problem and, if so, from whose perspective. We address this issue through two questions: What is the significance of place and sense of belonging for older people as assessed by themselves and their relatives; and what is the significance of digitalization as causing or increasing distances for older people?

### **Elderly politics and digitalization**

Digitalization has been an important issue in elder care politics in recent years (Van Aershot, 2014; Valokivi, 2019), and older people actively use the new technologies. The use of digital communication technologies in particular is on the rise among the older population, even if the rate of use is still lower than in other age groups (Marston et al., 2019; Hänninen et al., 2021). According to a report by Official Statistics of Finland (OSF), in the year 2021, 93% of Finns between the ages of 16 and 89 years used the internet, and 82% of this population used it several times a day. The report also noted that daily use of the internet increased in the two oldest age groups surveyed, rising by 6% among those aged 65–74, and by 7% among those aged 75–89 (OSF, 2021).

Technology can become part of life, ensuring smooth daily routines, for example, enabling users to order food from shops and pay bills. Yet, especially for the oldest population outside population centers, it can make it more difficult to access services and thus increases inequality (Kilpeläinen and Seppänen, 2014, p. 3). Due to the rapid change in digital technology and the high cost of equipment and network connections, some older people have negative attitudes toward such services (Pirhonen et al., 2020). Age-related cognitive and physical difficulties also lead to a reluctance to use digital technology (Vaportzis et al., 2017). If the utilization of technology is perceived as challenging, a request to use it may increase a sense of

alienation (Pirhonen et al., 2020). The successful participation of older people in the digital world requires adequate skills, a functioning infrastructure and technological confidence (Gulbrandsen and Sheehan, 2020; Rasi, 2021).

In many studies, it has been noted that factors, such as living in a rural region, having no more than a basic education and being of higher age, may be associated with digital exclusion (Selkälä et al., 2018, p. 333; Kivivirta et al., 2020, p. 256). Research has long since identified the gendered nature of technology, a consequence of occupational segregation and differences in individuals' purpose in using technology, but the importance of gender, among other differences, often goes unacknowledged (Vehviläinen, 2001, pp. 166–167). In this research, both women and men had received vocational training, and thus no class and gender differences were noted.

Information and communication technologies have been widely seen as a means of preventing social isolation and loneliness in the ageing population and thus increasing the well-being of the oldest age groups (Morrow-Howell et al., 2020; Smith and Lim, 2020, pp. 2–5). Loneliness and social isolation are related issues. Social isolation means a lack of relationships and social interaction, engagement and contacts, whereas loneliness is a subjective, emotionally experienced distressing feeling and a perception that one lacks meaningful relationships (Eloranta et al., 2015). Living alone and loneliness are not the same; however, in special circumstances, such as a lockdown during the pandemic, loneliness may be a consequence of living alone.<sup>1</sup>

Päivi Rasi (2021) has analyzed digitalization as a cause of older people's marginalization. She concludes that “[o]lder Internet users were marginalized into the spheres of family and local community” (p.77). This claim assumes that family and local communities are synonymous with margins and that life is not full if it is restricted to those settings. If one accepts the need for multidimensional sensitivity, that is, an ability to recognize different lifestyles in local contexts (Dominelli, 2012), one should acknowledge the heterogeneity of the older population and avoid generalizing. For example, older people may have strong roots in the community and nature. They may not feel that they live in a margin, because they are used to large social and geographical distances.

### **From distances to locality and belonging**

The discussion on digitalization has constructed an image of the world as becoming “smaller” by bringing people together virtually. The term “world village”, developed by Marshall McLuhan and Powers (McLuhan and Powers, 1992) has been used to refer to a situation where means of communication, such as the internet, have made distances irrelevant; the world has seemingly shrunk into a single village. In the discussion on people and their surroundings, the term “place” has been distinguished from the term “space”. Neil Leach (2005, pp. 299–300), for example, considers that places become spaces when they are filled with meanings through habitual processes of movement and everyday practices. As we use these terms in this chapter, “space” is an abstract notion, whereas “place” refers to a concrete,

material context. The term “spirit of place” has also been used, especially in art research, to mean the special significance a place may have for a person who experiences it. In Roman mythology, it referred to a spirit protecting a place; today it evokes the special character or atmosphere of a place (Nikula, 2012, p. 44).

In the case of older people living in remote areas with long distances, the place where one lives – a village, town or neighborhood – is still the center of one’s life. Many of those with a long family history in the villages where they live may have become rooted in them. Marja-Liisa Honkasalo (2004, p. 62) has described how modernization has questioned the value of long traditions; she describes the feeling of old people as facing the threat of “dropping off the edge of the earth”. Chris Phillipson (2007, p. 323) has described the same thing by saying that globalization has “fragmented and distorted the experience of community and place for older people”. However, Phillipson (2007, p. 323) suggests that globalization can also help to re-conceptualize issues concerning community and place in later life. Many older people have taken advantage of this opportunity to not commit to their original place of residence and have migrated partly or wholly abroad, for example, to Costa del Sol, the Spanish Sunshine Coast (Karisto, 2008).

Moreover, it merits pointing out that places and communities are not the same. The same place may include many different communities; that is, the sense of place may be very different for young and old, men and women (Massey, 2008, p. 28). What is more, communities may extend to distant places, and social media may serve as a tool for building and maintaining communities. It has also been suggested that after celebrating globalization and the ideal picture of the global village, a countercurrent has been seen in the form of a “return of the local” (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016, p. 241).

In times of digitalization, the core issue is whether different groups have control over the effects of globalization and digitalization on their lives (Massey, 1994; Morley, 2003, p. 162). Power is not evenly distributed; not everyone can take advantage of the opportunities offered by change. Some have no choice but to accept developments and adapt to the changes they bring. The digitalized world easily comes into older people’s lives in the form of telemedicine, information technology and social media, but they can seldom actively decide themselves what kind of technology, if any, they want to use. Arja Kilpeläinen (2014, p. 12) noticed in her research on older people’s relationship to new technology in Finnish Lapland that older people seldom belong to the “content producers” of information and communication technology.

Today there are older people who have lived a global lifestyle when working or studying abroad for many years. When retiring, they are not attached to one place but have to choose where to live (Zechner, 2019, p. 80). The data in the present study are better suited to the idea that attachment to place is an important aspect of older people’s well-being in that it helps them to “maintain a sense of continuity as well as symbolize independence and social competence” (Degnen, 2016, p. 1648). This attachment, sense of place, feeling at home and process of identification, has been discussed under the concept of belonging, which has become an important theme in social gerontological research and well-being politics (Phillipson, 2007,

p. 326). In psychological research, belonging is defined “as a subjective feeling that one is an integral part of their surrounding systems ...” (Allen et al., 2021, p. 88); it is even seen as something that is “buried deep inside our biology” (p. 88), that can be measured and that evokes individual attributes, such as competencies and motivations (p. 91).

From the sociological viewpoint, our own perspective, the emphasis in understanding the positioning of individuals in their everyday life is on the interconnections of society and individuals (May, 2011, p. 367; Bennett, 2012, p. 11). Two analytical dimensions can be distinguished: a micro-level “*place-belongingness*”, which is a personal and close feeling of being at home in a place; and a macro-level, discursive “*politics of belonging*”, which is a broad discursive resource that “constructs, claims, justifies, or resists forms of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion” (Antonsich, 2010, p. 645). Belonging to a community presupposes access, which explains why the research has mostly focused on vulnerable groups and their having a sense of not belonging. Tuuli Lähdesmäki et al. (2016, p. 240) consider older people to be such a vulnerable group but do not give any empirical research examples. Cathrine Degnen (2016, p. 1646) points out that the research has not been interested in “the dynamics of place and belonging in regards to ageing and later life”.

One working assumption was that digitalization would guarantee contacts to other people, especially relatives, and help older people to live an active life in the society and community. However, when analyzing the data collected from the older people and their relatives, we concluded that digital technology did not play a central role in the older people’s lives. We soon realized that the feeling of belonging, the sense of place through memories and lifestyle, seemed to be paramount. Indeed, Degnen (2016) in particular has stressed the importance of the materiality of belonging in the case of older people: Place attachment is described as embodied and sensuous, meaning that it entails an intimate, embodied knowing of places that has been constructed in everyday life practices. She points out that “memories can be physical, with very specific, embodied details embedded in the memories themselves” (Degnen, 2016, pp. 1655–1658). Tuuli Lähdesmäki et al. (2016) also note that belonging as a material relationship, “relational ecologies of belonging” and an “intimate interaction with nature” are some of the *topoi* discussed in the research of belonging (p. 238).

Locality is important also from the methodological viewpoint. Research that fails to take the importance of place into account bypasses the understanding of knowledge construction as connected to language, corporeality and experiences. Knowledge is always time- and place-bound and it is always created by people who hold particular values. Postcolonial researchers have pointed out that the flow of knowledge has a particular direction – from north to south (Mohanty, 2003) – although in the case of Finland the direction is often from south to north (Keskitalo-Foley and Naskali, 2013). We subscribe to the idea that the researcher’s position is not neutral but connected to power; for this reason, the standard for ethical and valid knowledge is to make clear the position of the researcher and the study (see Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2005).

The importance of local knowledge when developing services has been stressed by feminist researchers in the field of social work. Lena Dominelli (2012) talks about multidimensional sensitivity and the need to develop local theories and practices that are able to recognize the silent experiences of people of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. In the context of Finnish Lapland, Sanna Valkonen and Wallenius-Korkalo (2016, pp. 615–616) emphasize the importance of sensitivity and safe practices for recognizing and listening to the many voices, especially in research involving Indigenous peoples and religious communities. As Anneli Pohjola (2003, pp. 55–57) has noted, “contextual sensitivity is required if one is to understand how people anchor themselves to their environments with complex bonds; while cultural sensitivity directs the researcher’s gaze to the micro-cultural practices of people’s social environments”. We also find this kind of sensitivity to be important as an ethical principle, and especially in a gerontological context.

### **Research process: Data and analysis**

The data collection process was implemented in two phases, the first in 2020 and the second in 2021. In the first phase, as pandemic restrictions prevented our interviewing the older people themselves, we decided to extend the data collection to their relatives and adult children. We first requested stories from the adult children whom we knew and reached the rest with the snowball method (Kumar, 1996). Questions focused on the importance of digitalization in sustaining smooth everyday routines, social relationships and the well-being of their older relatives during the pandemic. These relatives are not connected with the older informants interviewed later. We received 10 stories via e-mail (20 pages when printed out in a standard format) and had the opportunity to conduct 5 interviews. Of the 15 relatives, 14 were women (daughters) and 1 man (a son). The advantage of collecting indirect data was that we also obtained information about the situation of people with memory problems.

In the year 2021, we were able to interview older people, since by this time the Covid situation had improved and older people as well as the interviewer had received two vaccinations. Using the snowball method, we reached 24 older persons (see Table 5.1). All participants were Finnish citizens from Lapland, but the location of the respondents’ residences is not disclosed for data protection reasons. We

*Table 5.1* Older people by age, sex and data collection method.

<i>Informants</i>	<i>Interview context</i>	<i>Total</i>
Women age 64–92	Face to face	11
Man age 75	Face to face	1
Five female-male couples age 64–82	Face to face	10
Woman age 82	Telephone	1
Man age 77	Telephone	1
<b>Total</b>		<b>24</b>



did not ask for their ethnic background but took it into account if the participants wanted to talk about it. Female respondents made up the majority, which also was the case in the research by Jari Pirhonen et al. (2020). The interviewees were retired and for the most part physically healthy with no memory problems. They could be described as belonging to the middle class and having education and work experience in various fields. The informants were numbered and given a pseudonym to improve the readability of the results.

The duration of the interviews varied from 45 minutes to 2.5 hours, and it was our impression that some of the older people really needed someone to talk to. More than digitalization, the interviewees wanted to talk about their past and present as well as everyday activities, an observation also made by Päivi Rasi (2021). The informal environments arranged – interviewees' homes and a gym, where the informants had come for exercise – as well as open discussions helped to establish a good relationship between the interviewee and the interviewer; this, like careful listening, is important for building trust (Mason, 2002; Robertson and Hale, 2011; Lumme-Sandt, 2017). In five of the ten interviews with couples, the power relation between the partners was equal, with the husbands and wives both contributing and the men politely giving their wives the opportunity to speak first. In one of the other five, the husband controlled his wife's contribution; she spoke very little and measured her words carefully although we had open-ended questions. The interviews were recorded, a diary was maintained for important notes, and observations were collected.

Typically, the main reason for telephone rather than face-to-face interviews is geographical distance (Ikonen, 2017), but in the present case, another weighty reason was Covid. The success of a telephone interview depends on how clearly both participants can hear the different nuances, emphases and small words in the conversation (Ruusuvoori and Tiittula, 2017, p. 26) and how natural use of the telephone is (Holt, 2010, p. 118). In this research, the telephone interviews went smoothly, but they were shorter than face-to-face discussions, lasting from 30 to 45 minutes. We noticed that talking on the telephone required a great deal of concentration and caused fatigue on the part of the interviewees.

The principles of age ethics (Nikander and Zechner, 2006; Jyrkämä and Nikander, 2007) have been followed by respecting research participants and refraining from assuming that older people are a uniformly vulnerable group. Each individual informant gave permission either orally or in writing. Participants were informed of the purpose of the interview and were told that the material would be used in publications.

The analyses consisted of classification and interpretation of meanings. First, we classified the contents along the two dimensions described by Marco Antonsich (2010), cited earlier: place-belongingness and politics of belonging (p. 645).

To ensure the validity and ethical soundness of the analysis (Silverman, 2000), we carried out the coding independently before discussing it together. In keeping with an inductive approach, we started to construct the categories based on the meaningful findings and in the light of previous research. We followed the triangulation suggested by Suvi Ronkainen (2004, pp. 65–67) – analysis, interpretation



and close reading – in an effort to view the results of categories and interpretations through a theoretical frame.

## **Place-belongingness of older people in Lapland**

### *Belonging to a place as a resource when ageing*

An important element that defined informants' sense of belonging to a place was nature. Their conception of where they lived was not confined to a house or neighborhood, unlike in the case of those living in big towns (Degnen, 2016). Many of the interviewees described themselves as belonging to the nature around them. Marja (age 72) commented: "This summer I have collected several kinds of berries, which I have enjoyed a lot". Seija, a daughter, stressed her mother's and father's opportunities to walk in nature to pick berries, and 72-year-old Martta described how she goes out into the forest, which is very important for her.

These are descriptions of a quiet and peaceful life without a longing to be somewhere else. Relatives pointed out that this attitude has also protected their family members in villages from the problems that the isolation during COVID-19 could have caused. Hannele noted that the exceptional time of isolation had not affected her 80-year-old mother's life, because "[s]he can take life as it is and does not worry and long for anything".

The older people did not talk about "life management" but described how happiness can be reached when accepting the place and time one is living in, and seeing the positive sides of getting old. They are often realistic about ageing, and also about surprising changes in life (Pirhonen et al., 2020, p. 254). Mari, 82, said: "I am not thinking that much about my future. I am trying to enjoy my present as much as possible".

### *Belonging to an Indigenous people*

In the case of Sámi people whom we interviewed, belonging to a place intersected with being a member of an Indigenous people. In these data, some interviewees brought up their Indigenous background even though the interviewer did not ask about it. Nature, plants and animals are not something "out there" but an integral part of everyday life and culture which old people in particular do their best to maintain, as seen in the following excerpt:

To protect nature, it is very important to stop spreading chemicals ... in nature, which is a threat to "natural nature". The reindeer is part of nature ... it affects our communal practices ... Nowadays administrative officials in reindeer herding emphasize making money; they do not listen to the traditional practices suggested by older people.

(Pentti, 77)

The description underscores the theoretical notion of belonging as embodied in the knowing of places (Degnen, 2016; Lähdesmäki et al., 2016). Pentti talks about his holistic, corporeal connection to his surroundings. His description illustrates how, especially in Indigenous culture, sense of place is connected to material interaction with nature and animals, such as reindeer. In the description, a reindeer is not a passive creature – let alone a production animal – but one that actively “affects our communal practices ...”. This is an example of the holistic worldview of Indigenous peoples, whose cultural heritage encompasses all aspects of life – material, cultural, legal, epistemological and spiritual (Grey and Kuokkanen, 2019, p. 3).

Maija (76) stressed the importance of culture, specifically her being part of Sámi culture. She noted the communality and importance of language and other cultural elements: “I want to speak Sámi as long as I live; I want to die a Sámi”. She emphasized that “Sámi culture is the most important thing for us, and that’s why people need to speak and write Sámi in services, too”. The attachment to the language and culture constitutes a sense of place that cannot be moved elsewhere. In Maija’s words, “People would like to stay in their own place; they do not like to move from the place where they were born and grew up”.

Mari (82) had experienced a different situation, being excluded from the Sámi people in spite of her strong feeling of belonging to them. Her comments reveal the conflicted situation in Finnish Lapland, in which the definition of who is Indigenous has been written in the law<sup>2</sup> in a way that is not accepted by all:

I am descended from Swedish reindeer-herding Sámi and in terms of biological heritage we are Sámi. But they (people in Inari) do not count us as Sámi. It depends on how deeply you feel it; it is my roots. Nobody has the right to say that I am not Sámi. It is very politicized. We called ourselves “Forest Sámi”, a group not accepted as Sámi as defined in Finland.

Mari’s disappointment in being excluded from the group she strongly feels she belongs to can be seen as a lifelong negative experience, because belonging to an ethnic group constitutes a strong basis for life as a whole (García et al., 2021).

Pentti spoke about Sámi rights and was complaining that “everybody living in Lapland is claiming that they are Sámi, which is not true. There is a law saying who can be Sámi”. Referring to the legal definition, he noted: “The Finnish state has declared that those who can speak the Sámi language can claim to be Sámi”. According to the official definition in the Act on the Sámi Parliament (974/1995), a person is Sámi if they or at least one of their parents or grandparents has learnt Sámi as their first language.

#### *Family and friends increase communality and decrease loneliness*

Psychological and social belonging can be described as communality. In these data, the old people talked a great deal about their connections to family members, mostly children and grandchildren, who can be said to form their most important psychological community. Friends living nearby constituted another important

social community, one including meeting in connection with different hobbies. The interviewees listed many hobbies they engaged in, such as sports, going to the gym, social activities for old people, parish societies, walking in nature and handicrafts. For example, Markku noted: “I am involved in three different courses (in the adult education center, author’s comment). I was and still am enjoying these activities. I have quite many friends”.

When discussing contacts with neighbors, the older people compared the current situation to that in their childhood, illustrating how the relationships had changed. Lea (92) noted:

In my childhood, all neighbors had many children. If it was coffee time, we were drinking coffee together. Neighbors could come by anytime. Nowadays, we need to call people if we want them to come over. Earlier, neighbors were nicer and free; they had time to talk with each other.

A couple (Antti, 77 and Inga, 72) shared the same thought that the feeling of communality has decreased: “Earlier, people kept their door open. People felt more secure, but nowadays they don’t feel like that. People are no longer as honest as they used to be ...” (Inga). If trust decreases, a sense of belonging may be hard to achieve. In Lapland, where people have to travel long distances, life has been based on trust in other people and their help. When official help is far away, an individual cannot survive if they cannot rely on others. Even today in some villages in Lapland, doors will not be locked because some people passing by may need shelter or something to eat (Peltomaa, 2022, pp. 113–115). This custom has traditionally contributed to a strong sense of communality and feeling of belonging.

Maija assumed that the change in communality in Sámi culture can be attributed to the increased focus on the individual in society. She described what she considered a good neighborhood, one where people regularly met each other when shopping in the village shop. Today people are moving out of the village, and those who stay do not leave the house.

The most important community for old people seems to be their family members. In the interviews, all participants talked about their children and grandchildren, some even many times, which shows the importance of family relations. Marja, 72, described the intense relationship she had with her daughter’s family and summed up its meaning by saying, “I have everything in my life”. Similarly, Mari remarked how she was “very strongly connected with [one particular] daughter”, with whom she stayed for long periods. In these descriptions, it is possible to sense how the feeling of belonging to the family – where you are also needed when you help them out – serves to sustain meaning in life and fend off loneliness.

Based on the information given by relatives, it appears that an older person can choose a life that involves rather little social interaction yet is satisfying. Paula described her family as a “group of people who get along well”. Paula’s mother told her that meeting up with the family was not always necessary, and she had managed well without them during the pandemic. Similarly, Maiju commented where her father was concerned that “the COVID-19 time was not a problem for

my father. Actually, he was ... very happy that he had a good reason not to go anywhere". However, for many, losing the opportunity for social contacts may cause feelings of loneliness. Anneli described her experience as follows: "I am missing a social community where people eat together and do some activities together". Some interviewees felt that modernization had increased the distance between villagers, making relationships with family even more important. In some cases, having to travel a distance to see others, even family members, was not considered a problem. Establishing and maintaining a distance, feeling comfortable in one's own circumstances, is still sometimes connected to the stereotypical "Finnish state of mind", described as "a peaceful, even an unattainable but profound and thoughtful mind" (Peltonen, 1996, p. 180).

### ***Digitalization as a politics of belonging***

#### *Digitalization as an everyday tool for decreasing distances*

In this research, "politics of belonging" refers to a politics that is trying to use social media and digitalization as a means to create a place of belonging and as a vehicle to construct community. The salient questions to address here are: How do the old people respond to this purpose; and what is the importance of digital technology in shortening distances, constructing communities and creating places of belonging?

The older people interviewed for this research, all of whom were retired, were accustomed to working with digital equipment because of their education and working experience. They could readily use bank services, book tickets, engage with others on social media and, for example, follow their electricity consumption. Harri, 75, said: "I used a smartphone and computer where I worked, so this equipment is a tool for me". He was a very active user of technological devices and social media. For him, the digital world seemed to be a place of belonging. As he noted, "I check my email first thing in the morning; it is a daily routine".

For many, social media had become a normal part of their interaction with others. Inga's and Antti's description is quite typical. Antti, speaking for both, said: "We both use computers. We send e-mails – we are used to it from our work. There are 16 of us living here in four buildings and we have a WhatsApp group".

The most frequently mentioned apps were e-mail, WhatsApp, Skype and text messages; pictures were also sent and exchanged. Terhi seemed to use the computer for quite practical purposes, lending support to an observation found in statistics on the use of information technology that women use it mostly for practical purposes but men use it also as a hobby (Statistics Finland, 2010). Terhi, 70, noted: "I use the computer for banking-related tasks, such as online banking ... I am also always looking for and reading recipes on the net. I also go online if I need to know about some medicines, etc." For both men and women, the most important use of social media was maintaining contacts with family members, especially children and grandchildren. As Harri noted: "We use WhatsApp a lot for sending messages and talking with our grandchildren via video calls, which is very important".

Mari laughed when talking about her digital competencies: “I have a smartphone, [but] I am smarter than the phone ... I can manage everything that I need”. For Antti, who plays games on the computer with his friends, digital equipment constitutes a place for belonging to the virtual world. Mari and Antti are examples of older, retired people familiar with the technology who have found the digital world, and especially social media, to be a place for strengthening their psychological and social belonging.

Some older people may still need help to get started with digital technology. Terhi told how her granddaughter helped her to book train tickets, and Maija pointed out that not everybody is capable of using the technology to the full: “I am using all of the technology – a computer, e-mail and other technical things – with help from my grandchildren. ... Many older people cannot use WhatsApp or e-mail but all our informants have used smartphones”. Raija recalls how her family tried to have a video call with her parents, but “they (parents) did not get excited about the video contact”. Similarly, Helena tells how her father prefers written messages like e-mails; he does not want to have visual contact.

*Traditional technology keeping up a sense of belonging*

The most important way in which the older people kept in contact with relatives and other people was telephone. Tania, 77, and Lea, 92, mentioned that they had a telephone conversation with their children daily. Lea noted: “I use a normal mobile phone; it’s called ‘Grandma’s mobile.’ I can receive messages on the phone but cannot reply. I need to call the sender to reply. It is difficult to reply with my fingers”. Lea commented on technology that is not planned for older people, noting that even on “Grandma’s mobile” the letters are too small. Mari, too, mentioned that “the letters on the telephone are very small” and Sari wrote that “Mother has used WhatsApp a couple of times, but the touch screen is very challenging for her”.

Markku, 76, analyzed communication from a cultural perspective as follows:

We are communicating by telephone about once a week. I hardly ever use the telephone, but if somebody calls me, then I speak with them. When I meet people, I like to talk a lot. This is the Finnish way of doing things: We do not call that much; we call when it is necessary.

All the older people who participated in this study had connections to the world via telephone, TV and radio. The position of the traditional media has been recognized also in statistics concerning the use of media (Saarenmaa, 2020). The users of the new information technology are a heterogeneous group; some equipment may be used actively but phone calls still make up for social media. For example, Hannele noted how her 79-year-old mother eagerly worked on the family genealogy on a computer but used a landline for calls rather than a smartphone. Technology had been adopted as a part of everyday life but limited to uses that serve the person’s own interests.

*Digital services causing psychological distances*

As society becomes digitalized, the choice whether to accept technology as part of one's life is limited. From the point of view of society, the problem is mostly technical and can be solved by developing devices to make them easier to use. This viewpoint ignores the question of whether everyone wants to or is able to adopt a technologized lifestyle. Relatives may also want elderly family members to utilize digital technology. Mika Pantzar (2017) talks about the "creeping obligation and responsibility" that he associates with increasing digitalization in particular: Instead of fundamental freedom of choice, we devolve decision-making to more intelligent and accepted algorithms that gather information about what we do and can be made to do. It is part of the "logic of creeping change" that Raija Julkunen (2003, pp. 186–187) refers to when considering the discourses and rhetoric related to the dissolution of the welfare state. She argues that thinking gradually changes through repetition, with changes being adopted, taken for granted, and even becoming desirable values.

Many services already operate on the assumption that everyone knows, remembers, understands and wants to belong to connected to and part of the digital electronic systems. The "electrification" of services requires learning the language of the digital world. Pirjo described her father as a talented digital user, and her mother as just a phone user. At the end of the interview, she sighed, "If Dad didn't know how to use a computer and various programs, I don't know how Mom would cope; paying bills and other daily tasks would be much more difficult".

Especially, the children of the older people talked about problems with different healthcare and bank services, noting that their ageing relatives were not able to use these even though they had succeeded with some other systems to book tickets or order food from a grocery store. This type of difficulty may be a cause of stress and concern. Studies describe how "security-related services enable people to live in villages, despite the limitations of age" (Kilpeläinen, 2014, p. 17). This is certainly the case, for example, with the use of a wrist-worn alarm, the system that allows a person to contact helpers by pressing a button. Yet when a service requires an understanding of the logic and language of the service provider, and how to act accordingly, it can lead to confusion and reduced security. Technology becomes an active external actor that modifies everyday life and places demands on it, and an older person may feel that they do not belong to that space or understand its language. A distance between the digitalized world, with its strange language, and the lifeworld of older people creates a feeling of alienation. People should be able to control their own technological environment. In fact, Arja Kilpeläinen (2014) argues that the adoption of technology-mediated services among the population of Lapland in general has not always taken place of people's own volition but has been "forced by changes in society". Rejection of virtual (online) calls can therefore be seen as passive resistance and an attempt to preserve sovereignty vis-à-vis technology.

Older people with memory problems are especially attached to their concrete physical environment, to a familiar place and familiar people. One of the daughters, Raija, said, "Unfortunately, due to a memory disorder, father does not have the ability to learn new skills, so digitalization does nothing to contribute to his

wellbeing”. (Raija) The logic of technology that reproduces reality but not in the material sense can be insuperable. The sense of place is important for people with memory problems, and a digital place may cause a conflicted feeling. Erica told how her mother assumed the people on the screen were operating in the same space and found the situation distressing. Digital equipment promised closeness but actually caused distance between the older person and those close to her; their online meetings ended, as the mother was unable to “digest” the wealth of information involved, which impaired her ability to concentrate and caused nervousness. Where this occurs, it strongly challenges a person’s sense of place and may cause them to lose their sense of belonging to the particular place and time.

### Summary and conclusions

Based on the information collected from older persons and relatives, we concluded that the older people participating in this study were loyal to the places in which they had been living for a long time. All of the retired persons interviewed were born in the northern part of Finland, and many of them had moved within Lapland because of education or work. They were used to living “far from everything” and had learned to enjoy life in a place where they felt at home. During their lifetime, they had become used to adapting to long geographical distances and harsh living conditions. Some of the older people interviewed did compare their place to another, but some compared their current situation to their life years ago, which may have been affected by war or serious diseases, such as pneumonia. These experiences were a strong resource for meeting difficult situations and the challenges that old age may bring.

*Place-belongingness* is the personal feeling of being at home in a place, enhanced by an opportunity to be, act and engage in various activities in the nearby nature. In particular, the people who defined themselves as Sámi emphasized holistic belonging to the cultural-material surroundings, a feeling reflecting a spiritual connection that is difficult to understand from outside the culture. Belonging to an Indigenous people was an important factor determining the feeling of belonging. This consideration turned out to be a very intimate and sensitive one, because it aroused feelings of inclusion and exclusion. Another central factor contributing to a feeling of belonging was the connection to family members, friends and one’s neighborhood. Here, a cultural change was noted by the informants: Daily, direct interaction has decreased and been partly replaced by digital contacts.

From the viewpoint of a *politics of belonging*, which constructs the places and feelings of belonging, we have discussed older informants’ relations to digitalization, especially to social media. First, social media turned out to be an everyday partner or tool not only for managing everyday life, by booking tickets, paying bills and searching for recipes, but also for decreasing distances to family members and friends. Second, traditional technology, such as telephone calls, maintained a sense of belonging. Third, the sample also included informants who felt uncomfortable about the demand that they belong to the technological world. Technology, especially social media, figured strongly in the background of the interviewees. Those participants in this study, who were well-educated and familiar with the technology from



their work, considered it so mundane that they did not find it an engaging topic of conversation.

From the viewpoint of belonging, we suggest that togetherness is possible despite distances. It can even be said that there would not be a place called Lapland without long distances and extensive tracts of forest and hills with natural products to collect. Distances do not cut off belonging, and in many cases, the new technology helps in maintaining and broadening communality. Distances should not be seen only in a negative light; one may choose to live far from the centers and even from other people. Living a good life in nature, within one's own culture, challenges the dichotomy of center and margin. Researchers should recognize dichotomies such as margin-center that may easily be taken for granted. Moreover, lifestyles with a continuous presence in social media should not be taken as a normal state of being. Instead of either-or thinking, we should view technology as an important part of modern life, and older people must have the opportunity to benefit from the possibilities it has to offer. However, there should be space for life with close corporeal relations with other people and other elements of the environment; technology should not become a source of stress with difficult programs and unwieldy equipment.

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### **Notes**

- 1 In Finland more than 1.2 million people were living alone in 2019 (SVT 2019), and half of Finns over the age of 75 live alone (Statistics Finland, 2019).
- 2 Act on the Sámi Parliament (974/1995; amendments up to 1026/2003 included, laki saamelaiskäräjistä)  
Section 3 — Definition of a Sámi  
For the purpose of this Act, a Sámi means a person who considers himself a Sámi, provided that:
  - (1) he himself or at least one of his parents or grandparents has learnt Sámi as his first language;
  - (2) he is a descendent of a person who has been entered in a land, taxation or population register as a mountain, forest or fishing Lapp; or
  - (3) at least one of his parents has or could have been registered as an elector for an election to the Sámi Delegation or the Sámi Parliament.

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