

OPP: HOUSING & DAILY LIVING

Exploring the invisible: The vital role of 'doing nothing' in the digital age for older adults' agency

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Purpose Can we ever 'do nothing' when we are 'always on' in our accelerated digitalized world? In our ever-evolving digitalized landscape, the positive impact of technology on everyday life is undeniable. Increased technology use, however, also presents a potential risk of disrupting crucial phases of doing nothing (DN) (Vorderer 2015). Drawing from an interdisciplinary integrative literature review, this contribution presents a framework (Fig.1) that illuminates the ambiguous nature of DN. It suggests that phases of DN are accompanied by vital mental processes, partly described in theories as the "internal conversation" (Archer 2003) or "internally-focused thoughts" (Immordino-Yang et al. 2012), that allow individuals to reflect on their goals and desires within the existing structures, thus playing a key role in their agency – the ability to actively make decisions and shape their lives. This contribution will discuss the interplay between DN and mental processes especially against the backdrop of technology use. The frequent notifications coming along with social media contribute to dependencies, especially in younger generations who are said to be more susceptible to those detrimental effects than older generations. (Sharifian et al. 2021, Fitz et al. 2019) This contribution will explore the individual strategies older adults employ to manage and mitigate the impact of technology use and what (especially the younger part of) society might learn from those strategies, ultimately discussing the importance of DN in an accelerated digitalized world. **Method** Testing and applying the framework in the field, the contribution discusses empirical findings from the SMART-AGE project which explores the impact of different digital assistive systems on the lives of older adults aged 67 and older (n=750). It draws on a subsample (n=20) selected initially at random from the main sample. After being recontacted, interested participants had the chance to opt in. The sub-study utilizes a mixed-methods design combining qualitative (self-recorded audio data of everyday thoughts) and quantitative (e.g. questionnaires, GPS data) ecological momentary assessment (EMA) data with additional insights from semi-structured interviews concerning the topics DN, internally focused thoughts and technology use. The participants in the substudy are between 68 and 88 years old. **Results and Discussion** Findings indicate that DN is indeed associated with various mental processes, ranging from daydreaming to reflexive deliberations susceptible to external stimuli, such as smartphone notifications. However, they also show certain resilience of the research participants against the addictive nature of technology use, especially social media. Acknowledging this, we critically re-evaluate the common understanding of learning processes associated with technology use as a one-way street, where the "old" should learn from the "young", and instead suggest a more balanced perspective on this relationship. Drawing upon the wisdom of older adults, we discuss strategies for striking a balance between digital engagement, real-world experiences and DN, emphasizing technology as a tool rather than a crutch. By leveraging these insights, individuals, particularly of younger generations, can learn to optimize technology use for personal growth, meaningful connections, and overall well-being.

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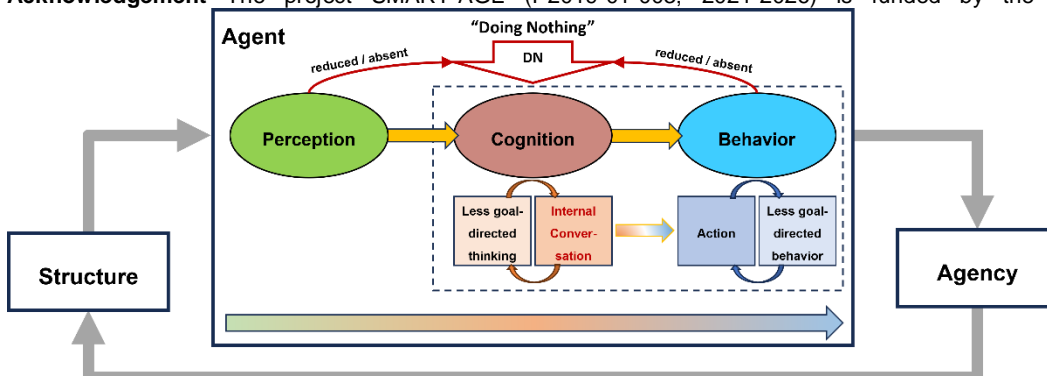


Figure 1. Interplay between mental processes, structural conditions and doing nothing (DN)