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# Circumspect Users: Older Adults as Critical Adopters and Resisters of Technology

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While HCI research has often addressed the needs of older adults, they are often framed as being sceptical of digital technologies. We argue that while many older adults are circumspect users of digital technology, they bring rich and critical perspectives on the role of technology in society that are grounded in lived experiences across their life courses. We report on 20 technology life story interviews conducted with retirees over the age of 60. Our analysis shows how experiences of technology across their life courses significantly undermined participants' sense of competency, independence, resilience, agency and control. Dissonances between what our participants valued and the perceived values of technology have led them to become critical adopters of technology, and resist its intrusion into certain aspects of their lives. We discuss how the critical perspectives of older adults and the value dissonances they experience are valuable for designing future digital technologies.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in HCI**;

Additional Key Words and Phrases: Older adults; Life course; Life story interview; Everyday resistance

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The rise in the average age of the world's population [54], and the tendency to interpret this as a social and economic problem [27, 46], have contributed to an increased interest on how technology design might better meet the needs of older adults. A consequence of this has been a rapid growth in HCI research on ageing over the last two decades. This has led to a wealth of work highlighting the possibilities for technology to address the health and wellbeing concerns of older adults (e.g. [3, 26]), to connect elders who may be socially isolated (e.g. [32, 76]), or to respond to the declining physical or cognitive abilities and associated care needs that come with ageing (e.g. [16, 52]).

Recently, a critical stream within HCI research on ageing has called for a broadening of these concerns. It has been noted that much work in HCI tends to portray older people as a relatively homogenous group [75], often defined by their deficits rather than their capabilities [61]. Inspired by critical studies from the field of social gerontology, this body of work rejects the notion of age as a problem to be solved with technology [75], and advocates for a move

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beyond the focus on accessibility and assistance. For instance, Knowles et al. have highlighted the need to increase our understanding of the numerous other factors that make digital technologies less appealing to older adults [44]. Durick et al. have observed that usability alone does not guarantee adoption, and have argued for human-centred approaches to design that consider people's interpretations of "*why and how technologies should be used*" [27]. Vines et al. have called for researchers to engage more deeply with older adults' personal histories of technology use across their life courses [75], and to take seriously their critical positions on technology design and its potentially negative impacts on people's lives [74].

This paper responds to these challenges by situating the study of older adults' attitudes towards technology within the context of their life courses. We draw on studies from the field of social gerontology, which have demonstrated the value of situating people's lived experiences of the present in relation to their individual trajectories throughout their lives. **Our main objective was to increase our understanding of how older adults' life experiences relate to post-retirement practices of technology adoption and use. Additionally, we set out to explore conflicts and dissonances between personal values and values attributed to technologies.** In order to do so, we conducted a series of life story interviews with 20 people retired from full-time work, with a focus on key life stages and the various technologies (digital and otherwise) they used during different periods of their lives. Our analysis of these interviews highlights how technology changed dramatically over the course of our participants' lives, often in ways that were contrary to the values and commitments they were driven by. Technology was viewed as having counterintuitive logics, as pushing them to be increasingly reliant on the help of others or service providers, as introducing burdensome forms of surveillance and accountability into their lives, and as forcing its adoption on them. Not only did these changes have personal and professional ramifications for participants, but they shaped the ways in which they engaged with, and valued, digital technologies in their lives today.

Through reporting on our participant's life trajectories, we illustrate how past lived experiences of specific techno-historical contexts shape the perceptions and meanings projected onto technological artefacts, as well as the expectations towards them. Furthermore, we demonstrate how the value dissonances experienced by our participants act as starting points for their circumspect usage of digital technology in the present. These, in turn, provide examples of everyday resistances to technology that HCI researchers and designers should take seriously when considering the design of new interactive systems. This paper's contribution to the field of HCI research is three-fold. **First, it demonstrates how specific techno-historical contexts influence older adults' attitudes towards new technologies. Second, it builds upon the concept of everyday resistance to uncover aspects of existing digital technologies that could be perceived as problematic by older adults, and which can serve as stimulus for design alternatives that may have benefits for all. Third, it provides an example of how the life course perspective can contribute to HCI research at the intersection of ageing and critical perspectives on technology.**

## 2 OLDER ADULTS, THEIR RESISTANCE OF TECHNOLOGY, AND VALUE DISSONANCES

Research on access, use and adoption of technologies suggest the numbers of older people regularly using digital technologies is growing very quickly. In the UK, home Internet access between those aged 55 and over went from 47% in 2010 [55] to 72% in 2019 [57]; and smartphone use climbed from 11% [55] to 55% [57]. In the US, 67% of those over 65 use the Internet, a 55-percentage-point increase since the year 2000; and 42% own a smartphone, up from 18% in 2013 [20]. These numbers dispel the stereotypes that portray older adults as incapable or unwilling to use digital technologies. Backing them up, recent studies document the degree to which at least some older ICT users have appropriated these technologies and integrated them into their lives (e.g. [15, 19, 46]).

105 However, many sources also suggest a kind of technological circumspection amongst older adults. Their breadth of  
106 technology uptake, and their *"amount and quality of engagement (...) lag behind younger generations"* [42]. Most evidence  
107 seems to indicate that older adults engage only in a small set of activities online [71]. For instance, in the UK, Internet  
108 users over 65 are less likely to have communicated online over the previous week; to have a social media profile or  
109 messaging account; to do their banking, pay their bills and shop online; and to use digital government services [56].  
110 They are also more likely to be less experienced and spend less time online [56]. Kania-Lundholm and Torres observe  
111 how the older active ICT users in their study positioned themselves as *"cautious"* in their engagements with digital  
112 technologies [39]. Selwyn highlights *"older adult's profoundly ambivalent attitudes"* toward ICT [66], and Light et al.  
113 describe their participants as *"selective in what they were prepared to use"* [48]. This technological circumspection is  
114 not explained by usability or accessibility deficits alone, and as new cohorts who have experienced more prolonged  
115 exposure to digital technologies reach older adulthood, explanations based on the lack of familiarity are also weakened.  
116 Other factors must be at play.  
117

120 **Scholars have long argued for the importance of technology non-use and related practices as a meaningful aspect of**  
121 **the socio-cultural production of technological artifacts [7, 62, 78]. Accordingly, both HCI and socio-technical research**  
122 **have studied the reluctant attitudes of older adults towards technology, and have uncovered several factors that seem**  
123 **to contribute to them. These include, for instance, limited relevance to daily life [66]; perceptions of technology as**  
124 **undermining "personal initiative" [38]; the stigma attached to technology artifacts seen to substitute for physical**  
125 **or cognitive abilities [13, 38]; negative attitudes towards the Internet [71]; and concerns about the social impact of**  
126 **technology, which approach reluctant attitudes to a form of protest [42, 43, 74]. To borrow language from Baumer**  
127 **and Silberman [8], the implications from much of this work is to not design technology for many of these issues and**  
128 **contexts, and to indeed value the absence of technology in the lives of some older adults.**  
129

130 A further productive line of work seeking explanations to older adults' attitudes towards digital technologies  
131 connects personal values to those values projected onto technological artifacts. This literature relates to the tradition of  
132 value-sensitive design [31], where values are broadly understood as *"what is ultimately important in life"* [34]. Several  
133 studies have uncovered which values matter to older adults through a variety of methods such as focus groups [42],  
134 design workshops [47], *"questionable concepts"* [74], biographical approaches [73] and in-depth interviews [12]. The  
135 list of values that have been revealed as important for older adults include independence (e.g. [13, 38, 47, 53]), control  
136 (e.g. [73]), resilience (e.g. [12]), agency (e.g. [12]), competency (e.g. [47]), belonging (e.g. [12, 42, 47, 53]), locality (e.g.  
137 [42, 73]), privacy (e.g. [13, 15, 42, 60]) and thriftiness (e.g. [42, 73]).  
138

141 Some scholars have pushed this line of research forward by introducing the concept of value dissonances in relation  
142 to technologies. In their study of older adults choosing to disengage from a technical intervention to tackle social  
143 isolation, Waycott et al. conclude that *"recognizing mismatched values provides a valuable opportunity to learn more*  
144 *about our intended users"* [77]. Knowles and Hanson postulate that older adults express *"distrust"* of technologies when  
145 they perceive them as in conflict with their own personal values [42]. When identified, these value dissonances can  
146 *"draw attention to the trade-offs being made in developing new technologies"* [43], and to what may have been lost through  
147 their introduction. If sufficiently understood, it should also become possible to address these value dissonances through  
148 design. This would require not just their identification, but also an understanding of how value dissonances emerge and  
149 develop. Unfortunately, studies of technology and ageing seldom look into the past. They tell us very little about how  
150 older adults' cautious and reluctant attitudes come to be, about how technological artifacts become imbued of certain  
151 values, or about how value dissonances appear. When considering context, they focus mainly on personal, social and  
152 technological aspects as they manifest at the time of running the study, with only secondary attention - if any - being  
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157 paid to past experiences (e.g. [77]). In doing so, they provide us only with a snapshot of the present. A consideration of  
158 the techno-historical context within which older adults have lived most of their encounters with technology may shed  
159 light on these processes of attitude development and value projection. The life course perspective can provide a useful  
160 framework for studies of technology and ageing which would like to consider the impact of past experiences on present  
161 attitudes towards technology.  
162  
163

## 164 2.1 Life Course Perspectives

165 The life course perspective provides a theoretical orientation for the study of human lives [29]; one that emphasises the  
166 impact of socio-economic, cultural and historical conditions, and of institutional arrangements, in their direction and  
167 outcomes [9]. Although life course research is most often based on quantitative data collected through longitudinal  
168 surveys [51], qualitative methods such as life story interviews are often deployed in life course studies in order to  
169 understand "*meaning and influences*" [35].  
170  
171

172 Lacking a "*coherent body of theory*" [51], life course perspectives are not prescriptive in terms of which factors must  
173 be addressed, relying instead on a set of concepts and research principles. The latter are very much aligned with the  
174 viewpoints and arguments put forth by the critical stream of HCI research on ageing. These principles are based on  
175 understanding ageing as a life-long process where prior stages and the timing of events have consequences in later life;  
176 on emphasising the important influence that socio-historical context and relationships with others have on individuals'  
177 lives; and on recognising individual agency while acknowledging that it can only be exercised within the opportunities  
178 and constraints established by contextual factors [9, 29], what Diewald and Mayer have called "*agency within structure*"  
179 [25].  
180  
181

182 Key concepts from life course literature include life transitions and trajectories. These concepts are particularly salient  
183 for researching technology values and perceptions with older adults since they help to situate people's descriptions  
184 of experiences along a continuum of personal and societal change. Transitions are changes in an individual's state,  
185 status, role or identity. Examples of transitions include leaving the parental home, marriage, becoming a parent, starting  
186 full-time work and retiring [29, 35]. Trajectories are long-term pathways related to a specific area of life that may  
187 include several transitions, such as trajectories of schooling, work, parenthood or health [29, 35]. **Transitions and**  
188 **trajectories are not new concepts to HCI and CSCW. Both disciplines have "*a long history in transition work*" [17],**  
189 **exploring the role of digital technologies in common life transitions such as parenthood (e.g. [2, 17]), retirement (e.g.**  
190 **[28]), and bereavement (e.g. [18]); as well as more specific identity transitions such as gender (e.g. [36]), and from**  
191 **military into civilian life (e.g. [67]). In this literature, transitions have been defined as "*processes whereby people shift***  
192 ***from one life phase to another*" [67], and as a "*period of adjustment*" following a life disruption [17]. Trajectories have**  
193 **been less explored but are still present across the literature, which has looked, for instance, at life trajectories of money**  
194 **and finances [73], learning [1] and philanthropy [37].**  
195  
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198 Trajectories effectively connect individuals and groups to certain institutional structures and social organisations  
199 such as family, schools, labour markets or social welfare. This link between people and institutional structures is  
200 fundamental to life course analysis [9]. According to Mayer, individual life courses are "*highly structured by social*  
201 *institutions and organizations*", which in turn are also changed "*through the manner in which people live and construct*  
202 *their own individual lives*" [50]. When discussing the institutional configuration of postindustrial life courses, Mayer lists  
203 "*a manifold of culprits*" [50], between them educational expansion, the women's movement, weakness of trade unions,  
204 de-industrialisation, structural unemployment, globalization and the demographic crunch. Technology, however, is  
205 conspicuously absent from this list. Furthermore, while the life course perspective has been applied across disciplines  
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208

209 such as anthropology, demography, economics, developmental psychology, and health [51], there are relatively few  
210 studies of technology in older adulthood from a life course perspective. They tend to rely exclusively on quantitative  
211 approaches based on survey data (e.g. [21, 45, 58, 71]), or review existing literature in an attempt to draw comparisons  
212 between older and younger cohorts (e.g. [22]). There are even fewer publications engaging with the life course concepts  
213 and principles within HCI, the most salient exception being Foong's work on health trajectories in older adulthood  
214 and how they may impact adoption and use of mobile technologies [30]. This is in spite of the fact that the life course  
215 perspective is considered particularly well suited to the study of people in *"increasingly changing and unstable contexts"*  
216 [72], an expression that quite aptly describes the current technological landscape.  
217

218 Following Katz, who establishes a clear connection between the postindustrial life course and technology devel-  
219 opments [40], this paper suggests looking at technology as an institutional structure, and makes an explicit attempt  
220 to surface the individual trajectories of our study participants in relation to it. Our focus was not on identifying the  
221 relevant transitions within those trajectories, but on uncovering which aspects of the techno-historical context have  
222 shaped our participants' perceptions and understandings of technology. This focus determined the choice of the life  
223 story interview as our research method, since it enables the exploration of subjective aspects of people's lives - such  
224 as motivations, meanings, representations, emotions and beliefs - and their relation to external factors [72], which  
225 means it is well suited to uncover the impact of institutional structures on people [23]. *The life story interview is*  
226 *"the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived, told as completely and honestly as possible, what is*  
227 *remembered of it, and what the teller wants others to know of it, usually as a result of a guided interview by another"* [4,  
228 p8]. According to Atkinson, the life story interview can help explain how individual members of a cohort experience  
229 and understand social events; as well as provide insight into how values are acquired, shaped and held onto over time  
230 [4]. In the next section, we explain in detail how the life story interview was structured and applied in order to untangle  
231 our participants' technology trajectories.  
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### 237 3 STUDY DESIGN

238  
239 The main goal of this study was to increase our understanding of how older adults' life experiences relate to post-  
240 retirement practices of technology adoption and use, and set out to explore conflicts between personal values and values  
241 attributed to technologies. In order to do so, we conducted 20 interviews between May and August 2018 with 11 females  
242 and 9 males between 63 and 90 years of age who had retired from full-time work. Following Durick et al., our research  
243 started from the assumption that older users are *"specialist users"* [27], and that their specialist status derives from their  
244 experience in the art of living. Withdrawing from professional life was deemed a key aspect of such experience, which  
245 led us to establish retirement as the core criteria for recruitment rather than biological age. Participants were recruited  
246 in the United Kingdom through a variety of advocacy groups and referrals, making sure they represented diverse life  
247 courses in terms of education, socio-economic status and professional background.  
248  
249  
250

#### 251 3.1 Interview Protocol

252  
253 The interviews lasted between 67 and 157 minutes, and were conducted face to face either in participants' homes or  
254 in an alternative location of their choice. Our interview protocol was inspired by the personal history *"element"* in  
255 technology biographies [11], and based on the life story interview [4, 5].

256  
257 The interview content focused on experiences of and interactions with technology, following a similar approach to  
258 Suoparjarvi's ICT biographies [69] and Selwyn's chronological autobiographies of education, work, and technology use  
259 [66]. However, while these examples covered exclusively information and communication technologies, with discussions  
260

261 centered around landline and mobile telephones, computers and the Internet, our study purposefully broadened the  
262 scope of the conversation beyond this understanding of technology. Our intention was opening up the study to the  
263 techno-historical context prior to the arrival of digital devices, and to the transitional period between them, in an  
264 effort to recognise that if we consider the fast rate of technological development in the 20th century, older adults "*are*  
265 *probably the most experienced users in society, at least in terms of experiencing technological change*" (Östlund, 2005 cited  
266 in [27]). The broadening of the technology scope brought the additional benefit of breaking the feelings of alienation  
267 older adults often experience when dealing with the subject of technology [49], reassuring participants that they had  
268 something valuable to contribute to the subject.  
269

270  
271 Inspired by qualitative studies that use visual materials as a prompt for discussion (e.g., Vines et al.'s "*Questionable*  
272 *Concepts*" [74], and Kaye et al.'s work on visual prompts in finance [41]), at the start of the interview participants were  
273 presented with a set of image prompts showing technological artifacts from the 20th and 21st centuries. Although  
274 there was not a strict criteria guiding our image selection, we did set out to find examples that were: 1) from UK / USA  
275 markets, to match participants' geography and language; 2) spanning participants' life span (from 1920s to today); and 3)  
276 included telephony and computing, plus mass media, consumer electronics, household appliances and office equipment  
277 to encompass the pre-computing technology context. As such, the images we collated aimed to convey the breath of  
278 appliances, devices, gizmos and gadgets that arrived into the home and the workplace during the past 100 years. In total,  
279 110 images were selected, which can be browsed at <https://imgur.com/a/TqBsQ>. They include computers and telephones  
280 - fixed and mobile - but also mass media such as radio and television; consumer electronic devices such as music,  
281 photography and video equipment; household appliances such as vacuum cleaners and washing machines; and office  
282 equipment such as typewriters and photocopiers. The majority of the selected images are magazine advertisements.  
283 These were chosen because they often embed a value statement in their tagline and imagery.  
284  
285

286  
287 The purpose of the image prompts was two-fold. First, they helped communicate the scope of the study to our  
288 participants, loosening the strong association between the word "technology" and digital technologies. The images  
289 assisted the researchers in conveying that technology, for the purpose of the activity, referred to more than computers,  
290 the Internet and mobile phones. Second, we used the images to elicit discussion about the technological artefacts  
291 participants experienced during their lives and to seed conversation points beyond the content of the adverts themselves.  
292 They helped participants recall their personal stories of interactions with technology, prepared them for the life story  
293 interview, and provided a starting point for conversations about the role technology had played throughout their lives.  
294  
295

296 The image prompts were colour printed on card and laid out in front of participants at the start of the interview. The  
297 interviews began by asking participants to look through the images in order to select five to ten that held meaning for  
298 them. The interview proceeded from this by inviting participants to narrate their encounters with technology across  
299 key life stages and transitions: childhood, education, family life, working life and retirement. These conversations were  
300 scaffolded by the images chosen by participants, and combined with the use of open questions to initiate discussion,  
301 e.g.: What is the first piece of technology you remember? Was there any technology at school or university? What  
302 kind of technology did you use in work? How has your use of technology changed upon retirement? At the end of  
303 the interview, participants were invited to reflect on their experiences in relation to how they imagine technology  
304 developments will unfold in the near future.  
305  
306

307 Participants exercised a high degree of autonomy over their narratives, directing interviews towards areas that were  
308 of interest to them. This is in accordance with Atkinson's definition of the life story interview as "*the story a person*  
309 *chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived*" [4, p8], and his description of the role of the researcher as a "*collaborator*  
310  
311





Fig. 1. The printed image prompts used during the interviews.

in an open-ended process" who "is never really in control of the story actually told" [4, p9]. The researchers did not ask the same questions to all participants, or in the same order; and each interview was truly unique.

### 3.2 Participants' Profile

Participants (11 females and 9 males) were between 63 and 90 years old and had retired from full-time work. All of them self-reported to be in reasonably good physical and mental health, led active social lives, and many volunteered with community organisations and activity groups.

In terms of digital technology use, all our participants owned one or more computing devices, and most used them every day. 19 of them liaised with the researchers via email, and 18 out of the 20 clearly fitted Kania-Lundholm and Torres' definition of older active ICT users, i.e. those who engage "with different types of digital technologies on a daily basis" [39]. Two of them had developed software professionally; a third had worked in the domestic appliances business, starting his career as a service engineer; and a fourth had an amateur radio license and had acquired significant knowledge and expertise about electronics through this hobby. Although there were individual differences in terms of breath of uptake, frequency of use and interest, as a group our participants were rather comfortable and confident with digital technologies. As such, our participants reported higher levels of familiarity with technology than population-level statistics for older adults [56]. Table 1 provides an overview of our participants' demographic, educational and professional backgrounds.



Table 1. Participants' demographics. Participants were not required to disclose their exact age, and were given the option to provide a 10-year age bracket instead. Their educational and professional history was complex, with several enrolling in third level education during adulthood, and changing roles and professions over their careers.

ID	Gender	Age	Retirement period	Education	Employment
1	F	68	After 2007	Third level	Clerical
2	F	86	1994-2007	Secondary	Clerical
3	M	60-70	After 2007	Third level	Self-employed (consulting)
4	F	73	1994-2007	Third level	Librarian
5	F	76	1994-2007	Third level	Teacher
6	M	73	1994-2007	Third level	Social worker
7	F	81	After 2007	Secondary	Clerical
8	M	72	After 2007	Secondary	Retail
9	F	78	Before 1994	Secondary	Clerical
10	M	65	After 2007	Secondary	Civil servant
11	M	60-70	1994-2007	Secondary	Executive (multinational)
12	F	66	After 2007	Third level	Social worker
13	M	90	Before 1994	Third level	Architect
14	M	74	1994-2007	Third level	Software engineer
15	F	73	1994-2007	Third level	Self-employed (consulting)
16	F	75	1994-2007	Secondary	Self-employed (typesetting)
17	F	86	Before 1994	Third level	Teacher
18	M	71	1994-2007	Third level	Self-employed (media)
19	F	63	After 2007	Third-level	Self-employed (consulting)
20	M	60-70	1994-2007	Third level	Executive (multinational)

### 3.3 Data Analysis

Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and coded following the thematic analysis process described by Braun and Clarke [14]. The first author began this process by performing a close reading of a selection of 10 interviews. As noted by Braun and Clarke it is common to code corpuses of data iteratively to check the clarity and coherence of codes and themes. Coding the first 10 interviews resulted in 199 codes that were used to construct preliminary themes, which were discussed and clarified between authors 1, 2 and 4. Following this, we coded the remaining 10 interviews using the preliminary themes as a guiding reference, but left the analysis open for new codes and themes. No other significant new themes were developed at this stage, but based on the second round of coding the themes were reviewed, redefined and renamed. Quotes and their associated themes were then printed and a secondary coding was performed drawing more explicitly from existing theoretical literature across HCI and life course perspectives. In our secondary coding we paid particular attention to the experience of trajectories [29, 35]. This sensitised us to the specific range of workplace, domestic and leisure experiences associated with technological change over distinct periods of time. This led us to identify "Losing control" as a meta-theme that provided a unifying thread across all others.

## 4 FINDINGS

Our analysis identified five areas of tension for older adults grounded in their day-to-day material realities and past experiences that contributed to value dissonances associated with technology. These include i) understanding mechanics vs. counterintuitive logics; ii) independent maintainers vs. powerless consumers; iii) repair vs. replacement; iv) autonomy vs. accountability; and v) freedom to adopt vs. obligation to use. These dissonances contributed to our participants'

cautious and circumspect attitudes towards digital technologies within the home, the workplace and in their leisure time. In the following sections, we report on each of these dissonances as articulated by our participants.

#### 4.1 Understanding Mechanics vs. Counterintuitive Logics

Our participants lived the transformation of mechanical machines into computing devices through the proliferation of electronics. This transformation was somehow controversial, because it significantly impacted our participants' ability to understand and operate the tools they used.

Mechanical machines were felt to be transparent: it was possible, through observation, manipulation and use, to acquire a basic grasp of how they worked. As explained by P13, mechanical processes were those *"which your mind can absorb, and understanding the background to it"*. As a result, our participants' relationship to their mechanical tools was built upon the ability to understand their operational principles. Knowledge about machines surfaced during our interviews through detailed descriptions of how things functioned, like this one of a varityper:

[I]t's like a huge typewriter. It's electric, and it had a split wood roller, and you put your paper in, and wind it up and slide it in, and you could type using different typefaces. Rather like an IBM golf ball, but this had the type on it, semi-circular thing. You had an anvil, and you'd put one typeface to one side, and one typeface to the other, and as you typed the typeface swung around, the thing that was on swung around, and then a hammer came from the back, hit the paper onto the typeface. There'd be a ribbon in there somewhere as well. (P16)

P16 became a varityper operator at the very beginning of her professional career, and thoroughly enjoyed the creative and independent nature of the job. When she was required to leave the position to raise her children, she purchased a varityper machine and started her own typesetting business from home. She chose and bought her own computerised typesetters for years, until the arrival of the Macintosh computer, which contributed to the demise of her typesetting business.

Like P16's varityper description demonstrates, participants were accustomed to a considerable degree of insight into the machines they used. The arrival of computers was seen to change that. Compared to mechanical machines, computers were remarkably opaque. A personal computer was a closed box whose components and mode of operation could not be fathomed through day-to-day use. As P16 put it when recounting the arrival of desktop publishing with a Macintosh computer, you *"hadn't got a first idea of what made it tick"*. Computers changed the terms of engagement in use: since understanding was no longer possible, one had to rely on memorising and following instructions. P10 described the shift: *"before I can sort of use something, I sort of need to understand how it works. Where with computers you mustn't think like that. It doesn't matter how it works. You just do it intuitively"*. P13 used his son's words to explain the change:

[O]ur son, who was very much into computing, said dad, you'll never be any good, because your brain does not go a, b, c, d. Or 1, 2, 3, 4. Your brain goes 1, 6, 2, 90, back down. He said: you will not go logically through anything. So he said: you won't be suited to computers who liked being logical, you do it, you follow the rules, that will happen. And he said: dad, you will not like it. (P13)

Computers came with their own logic, one that had to be mastered without any insight on how the device actually worked and could appear nonsensical. Recalling the process of learning how to use an Amstrad computer, P19 explained that *"a lot of the instructions seemed to be counterintuitive. You would try to do things that just didn't seem logical"*. As a

469 result, coming to grips with this new logic involved a lot of trial and error, and inordinate amounts of time. P4, who  
 470 was a librarian when she first came into contact with computers, described how it happened:  
 471

472 I didn't understand it. I just do: if I press that, what might happen? I mean, there was this thing where you,  
 473 if you wanted to call up all of everything, you'd put in star dot star. And I dutifully went on putting in  
 474 start dot star for months, if not years. It was only ages on that I realised that the star bit meant everything,  
 475 and then the dot and then everything on the other side of it. (P4)  
 476

477 This shift from a modality of use based on understanding, to a modality of use based on instruction-following  
 478 and trial and error, undermined our participants' sense of competency and efficacy. Through their interactions with  
 479 mechanical things, these older adults seemed to have developed certain assumptions as to how much knowledge should  
 480 be expected from a competent technology user. The mismatch between those assumptions and their perceived own  
 481 understanding of digital devices fed feelings of inadequacy and a certain anxiety. It also eroded their confidence in their  
 482 own ability to use and keep their devices in working order. In the next section, we further elaborate on this issue of  
 483 maintainability, and on how it impacted our participants' much valued sense of independence.  
 484

#### 487 4.2 Independent Maintainers vs. Dependent Consumers

489 The visibility afforded by mechanical components, together with practice, allowed people not only to achieve a very  
 490 high degree of mastery, but also to develop coping strategies and workarounds for when machines refused to work.  
 491 It also brought the ability to do basic maintenance and troubleshooting. P12 had to bring her sewing machine to be  
 492 serviced only once since she bought it in 1986, between other things because she was able to do the essential upkeep  
 493 herself: *"I can just use a dust thing to blow out any dust, and I can make sure I've got clean needles and bulbs or whatever. I*  
 494 *can do all that myself"*. P6, who had an amateur radio license, used to build his own radio equipment. P8 repaired his  
 495 cars, a skill that allowed him to still enjoy cassette tapes while driving:  
 496

498 I still have a lot of cassettes. I prefer a cassette in the car. My present one is broken, but fortunately, every  
 499 car that I took apart, I kept the old cassette recorder. So I've got about 6 in the garage, and I put them in  
 500 any new car, in any other car I get, to play there. (P8)  
 501

502 For P6 and P8, the addition of electronics to cars and radios put an end to their ability to repair, make and *"fiddle"*  
 503 (P8), something that both lamented:  
 504

506 The car under wraps is from 1933 there. I have an engine for it. It came with an engine and gearbox, but  
 507 I would like a bigger engine for it. I am busy having some work done on that. The other one is a more  
 508 modern one. A Suzuki. And if anything went wrong with it I wouldn't have a clue. It's all electronics.  
 509 Completely. You need even ... you need a programmable computer you plug in, and it diagnoses what's  
 510 wrong. So you have to buy these packages to do. And I am not into that. I want to go back to the older  
 511 cars. The older cars I could take apart with a screwdriver and a spanner. Take them apart, put them back  
 512 together again. (P8)  
 513

515 When it came to computers, lack of understanding meant many of our participants needed assistance from others to  
 516 set up, configure, manage and troubleshoot their devices. For some, like P2, this reliance on the computer *"whiz-kids"*  
 517 became a significant source of frustration at work: *"I didn't want to learn all the stuff about their backups, and everything*  
 518 *like that. I just wanted to get my thing working, get it started, fix what I wanted."* (P2).  
 519

521 At home, it became necessary to source the required help. Some, like P3, hired professional services. Others, like  
522 P1, used the telephone support provided by computing companies. The vast majority also relied on younger family  
523 members and friends. The impact of this dependence on participants' self-confidence was such that some no longer felt  
524 capable of making purchase decisions by themselves. P10 recruited his sister to help him choose a new smartphone right  
525 after our interview took place. P2 delegated that very same task to her cousin. Many avoided purchasing altogether by  
526 accepting second-hand devices cast away by family. Others held onto old appliances, concerned about the impact of an  
527 update on their ability to use them. P10 fretted about getting a new TV:  
528  
529

530 [M]y TV is quite sort of old fashioned, because I mean it's OK, and I just think if I buy a new one now it's  
531 going to be full of computer stuff. And I'll have to go through this system, and that system ... and I think  
532 how simple life used to be when you just pressed the button and it came on. (P10)  
533

534 P12 worried that buying a new car would prevent her from listening to music while driving:  
535

536 My car is old enough that I can play CDs. I don't want to upgrade my car. (...) I am dreading the day when  
537 I have to change it, because all the modern ones are bluetooth, aren't they? (...) See, that's really going  
538 to be a problem for me, because I don't have music on my phone. So I have to keep taking the car to a  
539 garage, and getting them to keep it going for me. (P12)  
540

541 The arrival of digital technologies turned our participants from independent maintainers of things they owned to  
542 powerless consumers, a shift that undermined their sense of independence and self-worth. Since they were no longer  
543 capable of setting up, maintaining and troubleshooting their devices, they had to rely instead on paid services or on  
544 informal assistance from family and peers. In addition to the extra cost and hassle involved in sourcing help, this  
545 dependency on others left some of them feeling like a nuisance: *"I always ask them if I need help. And then, one of my  
546 daughters goes: every time I come to this house you ask me something technical [laughs] So I try and keep quiet a bit now.  
547 I think yes, it's not fair."* (P9). Once again, our participants' expectations regarding their ability to keep things going,  
548 developed through their interactions with mechanical tools, did not match the reality of living with their new digital  
549 technologies.  
550  
551  
552

### 553 4.3 Repair vs. Replacement 554

555 Our participants struggled with what appeared to them as ephemeral technologies by comparison with earlier things  
556 that were *"made to last"* (P15). *"Everything now is so transient"*, lamented P15, *"I find now that so much technology  
557 has built-in obsolescence, and I get annoyed with it."* The clearest manifestation of this impermanence was perceived  
558 short replacement cycles. P3 had a mobile phone for *"about 10 years or something. Which to my mind was nothing, but  
559 everybody said, oh, it's very, very old (...) that's very old now, you need to get a new one. And I said but that's perfectly  
560 alright. Ah, yes, but it might go wrong any time and then it's all out of ... people can't repair it"*. P10 was dissatisfied with a  
561 smartphone lasting 5 years: *"I have a fairly modern phone, which just packed up, just died on me. I think they are only  
562 meant to last about 5 years. So I have to update that."* P12 was not prepared to let go of her 6-year old iPad:  
563  
564

565 I took it to the Apple shop, and they said oh, this is an older model. And I said well, it was new when I  
566 bought it in 2011 [laughs]. Oh yes, but you know there's been a few since then (...) we would do you a  
567 good deal if you wanted to. No, I'll wait, and then when it breaks down I'll go and get another one. (P12)  
568  
569

570 In sharp contrast with her 6-year old iPad, P12's Kenwood Chef had lasted 40 years; and her sewing machine,  
571 30. However, time to replacement was not the only issue: replacement itself was somehow controversial, because  
572

573 participants had lived most of their time in a world where things were repaired by default, rather than replaced. When  
 574 reminiscing about her mother's vacuum cleaner, P15 explained how *"the Hoover man used to come and service it every*  
 575 *year. This is what I am saying: you only got these things serviced because they lasted forever."* P11 started his career in the  
 576 domestic appliances business, working for a repair establishment where they would fix *"virtually anything that came in"*.  
 577 The arrival of sealed electrical and electronic components of ever increasing complexity, and the drop in manufacturing  
 578 prices, encouraged a move toward replacement by default. **As an appliances service engineer and later a marketing**  
 579 **executive in a white goods multinational**, P11 experienced these changes first hand:  
 580  
 581

582 [Y]ou repaired a lot of the parts then, you didn't replace them (...) But nowadays they don't do that. It's  
 583 thrown away now. I don't think there is any attempt now to repair components. It's just too expensive (...)   
 584 you know, labour costs and breaking down a circuit board and then diagnosing the exact fault on that  
 585 board and soldering it and getting another one, and then doing all the testing. It's just too time consuming  
 586 (...) It's just not worth it. (P11)  
 587  
 588

589 In spite of portraying himself as a technology enthusiast, P11 still found the move from repair to replacement *"sad (...)*  
 590 *Because it's a lot of waste, isn't it? Huge amount of waste. It's just sad that we have to waste so much stuff"*. He expressed  
 591 hopes of this throwaway trend reversing: *"hopefully as products get more reliable then you don't have to throw away*  
 592 *parts so much"*. The move from repair to replacement undermined our participants' appreciation of thriftiness.  
 593  
 594

#### 595 4.4 Autonomy vs. Accountability

596  
 597 Our participants shared stories of how technology was involved in constraining their capacity to exercise autonomy,  
 598 particularly in the workplace. This happened through an increased emphasis on data collection, which made participants  
 599 feel under surveillance. Data collection was justified in the name of *"accountability. That was what mattered"* (P12).  
 600 P12, who had been a social worker, explained how these new data collection pressures conflicted with her sense of  
 601 professional duty:  
 602  
 603

604 [Y]ou are encouraged to write everything on the computer. Because if it's not on the computer, it didn't  
 605 happen. So one part of your brain is thinking, oh, if ever there was a problem I better put, you know, what  
 606 happened. But you have this pressure then. You are spending too long on the computer: you should be  
 607 out doing visits. (P12)  
 608  
 609

610 P5, who had been a head teacher, described how this new concept of accountability put into question established  
 611 notions of professional responsibility and due diligence, and their transference from individuals to organisations:  
 612

613 I used to track quite carefully results and performance. (...) And I'd always done that, even before we used  
 614 computers, because you'd like to see what you'd achieved (...) But until such time as [the government  
 615 regulator] came into being, nobody checked that, nobody would make you accountable for it (...) It was  
 616 only once the whole system of the national curriculum came in that you were accountable (...) Once the  
 617 national curriculum came in they were able to track everything. Because you have to report everything.  
 618 (P5)  
 619  
 620

621 For P5, the need *"to report everything"* blended with new oversight practices to engender a strong sense of being  
 622 under surveillance:  
 623  
 624

625 [The government regulator] would pick [the data] up from the [exam] results. (...) They picked that up,  
626 and then they report back to us and I'd get a book, a thick book, telling you all these things that I already  
627 knew, but they wanted you to know, me to know, that they knew too. (P5)  
628

629 Other participants also expressed unease about the consequences of traceability in electronic communications, what  
630 Bruce Schneier has called the death of "ephemeral conversation" [63]. Discussing the arrival of email to the office, P10  
631 spoke about there being "a feeling of like big brother, of being monitored, because I discovered that you could check whether  
632 the recipient had opened her email. You could set something, you know, before you sent it. And that was a feeling of we are  
633 starting to spy on each other a bit, you know what I mean. I know you haven't opened my email [laughs]". P1 described  
634 how the "electronic trails" [63] left by email demanded extra care and vigilance in the workplace: "obviously people had  
635 to understand that what was on an email, you know, some times you'd send something and you hadn't screened the email,  
636 and somebody hadn't realised there was something below and someone else saw something they shouldn't have seen."  
637

638  
639 Finally, participants also experienced the arrival of digital technologies as coinciding with an increase in work  
640 pressures. For P19 and P20, this manifested as an encroaching of professional life into the personal sphere. P19, who  
641 had worked as a housing consultant for charities and public organisations, refused to set up email on her phone in  
642 an attempt to preserve boundaries. P20, who had been an executive in a multinational corporation, described the role  
643 mobile phones played in intensifying the already strenuous demands of highly distributed work environments:  
644  
645

646 [I]f I had closed my shop in [Europe], the telephone in the United States started to ring (...). And it was so  
647 damn easy to be there in the office 24 hours a day. (...) I would start around ... well before 8, and would be  
648 leaving the office at 9. And mobiles made that life even worse (...) The fact is that, if you are not careful,  
649 it's eating your life away. (P20)  
650

651  
652 For our participants, digital technologies constrained the space available to exercise autonomy in the workplace,  
653 brought about feelings of being under constant surveillance, and reduced their ability to establish boundaries between  
654 the personal and the professional spheres.  
655  
656

#### 657 4.5 Freedom to Adopt vs. Obligation to Use

658 Our participants felt they no longer had a choice in terms of technology adoption and non-use. They spoke about  
659 technology as something "inevitable" (P13) and unavoidable. When describing their relationship to it, they used  
660 expressions like "accepting", "coming to terms", having to "adapt", "trying to catch up" (P10); "keep up" (P11, P9); "get by",  
661 "get through" (P9); "latching on" (P2); and being "able to cope" (P5). This language reflects a reactive position with respect  
662 to technology. Participants felt they didn't have a choice on this matter: technology use had become the only available  
663 option. Up to the 1990s, it was still possible to exercise a certain degree of agency in terms of adoption. P13, who had  
664 been an architect and partner in his firm, resolved not to learn computer-aided design when his architectural practice  
665 introduced it four years before his retirement. After a bad experience with an Amstrad computer in 1985, P18 got rid  
666 of it "and never got a computer again until 1995. In many ways I didn't need to (...) I'd write long hand, and sometimes I  
667 would dictate. I had staff. I had a secretary." The days in which one could decide not to use technology were now at an  
668 end: "Today (...) you can't ignore technology. It's no good burying your head in the sand and say: oh, I don't understand all  
669 that, I don't want to do it." (P11). With non-use out of the question, technological resistance manifested itself as sharp  
670 boundaries - "I still do not, I will not buy tickets on the Internet. Train tickets, or tickets to go to see a concert. I will always  
671 go to the box office, or the ticket office in the train station" (P3) - and reaffirming use in one's own terms: "I don't use it to  
672  
673  
674  
675  
676



677 *its full potential, I know. But I use it for what I want, and that suits me" (P12). As P8 explained: "It's not that I've closed my*  
 678 *mind to it, but I want the technology to do what I want it to do, not for me to be led by the nose to do other things".*

679 Pressures to adopt technology arrived from everywhere: relatives, friends, co-workers, volunteering activities  
 680 and institutions. Families prodded and nudged, heavily influencing the selection of devices and platforms. P12's son  
 681 "encouraged" her to buy an iPad. P15's husband determined she "should have one as well", as did P9's daughters. P5's  
 682 children purchased her Kindle and her first computer because "they decided I needed to get with it". P8's wife bought  
 683 him a computer, as "she was trying to drag me into the 20th century, she said, not just the 21st". P9 joined Instagram  
 684 to "keep up with the kids". P6 was on Facebook because "My daughter put me on it (...) she thought I should be on it to  
 685 keep in touch with people [laughs]". While this family arm-twisting was joked about and even enjoyed, institutional  
 686 pressures were much despised. The move to establish online channels as the default way to transact with companies  
 687 and organisations felt like an imposition, and was resented by many:  
 688  
 689  
 690

691 They forget that there are people who are not, there are some people who are not online. A lot of seniors  
 692 are not online. But it's accepted now, you know, that this is the way you do it. And sometimes there is no  
 693 alternative! Which I think is wrong, but there you go, it's the way the cookie crumbles. (P2).  
 694

695 Participants provided examples of how it was no longer possible to perform certain tasks, or engage with certain  
 696 institutions, other than through digital means, between them requesting a garden waste bin, buying exhibition tickets,  
 697 being a justice of the peace, volunteering with befriending phone services, liaising with energy companies, accessing  
 698 documents such as bills and statements, and applying for government benefits. This push towards digital transactions  
 699 prompted fears of exclusion: "we are disenfranchising some people (...) we are leaving people behind, and if you don't want  
 700 to come on board, kinda tough." (P1). Anxiety about exclusion was exacerbated by technology's terrifying pace, which  
 701 was experienced as a "quantum leap" (P10): "It's a bit like a friend's grandmother who saw the first car in the village, (...)   
 702 and then the landing on the moon, in the same lifetime. It's incredible. It's so fast." (P16).  
 703

704 Overall, participants seemed overcome by a sense of technological powerlessness that was reflected in depictions of  
 705 technology futures that did not include them and could not be fathomed. P12 didn't "think you can predict (...) it's almost  
 706 as if things come out of the blue, don't they?". For P15, "these things seem to develop, they seem to have a mind of their own,  
 707 and suddenly occur". For our participants, the world moved inexorably forward, without them having any say on it: "it  
 708 just wasn't there yesterday, it is today. And you just gotta get over it (...) This is the future! Whether you like it or not." (P10).  
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## 712 5 DISCUSSION

713 Our findings clearly intersect with some of the values that the literature has shown to be important for older adults,  
 714 such as competency, independence, resilience, agency and thriftiness. In our participants' technology trajectories, these  
 715 values were woven together through a narrative of control. Our participants felt they were losing control over their  
 716 own lives, but they also expressed a sense of lost control across society, in part driven by digital technologies.  
 717

718 In the accounts shared above we can see the ways that technology was felt to have reduced the degree of control  
 719 participants had over certain parts of their lives. Digital technologies and personal computers were viewed as hiding  
 720 their workings in ways that meant you could not decipher how they operated, you were reliant on others to mend and  
 721 fix them, and afforded less independence and autonomy at work and at home. As P16 explained, with computers, "the  
 722 control is taken away from you, I think that's the thing. You can only do certain things on it, you can't adapt things." P14,  
 723 who developed software for most of his professional career, described modern computer applications as taking "control  
 724 away" from those who use them by detaching them from the operating system and making it virtually impossible to  
 725  
 726  
 727  
 728

729 interact beyond the prescribed functionality. This sense of lack of control was felt most keenly in workplaces, where  
730 new practices, underpinned by digital systems, were perceived as acts of control through surveillance and ongoing  
731 accounting of work.  
732

733 The sense of losing control extended beyond specific devices and personal lives: our participants felt it was not just  
734 them who had lost control in relation to technology, but society at large. In the words of P15, *"technology seems to call the*  
735 *tune now. People have to fit in with the technology"*. Many expressed concerns about the relationship between humankind  
736 and their technological offspring. They marvelled at the pace of change, which they believed to be exponential and the  
737 fastest in human history; and at the capabilities of computers, which they saw as far exceeding human abilities. But this  
738 combination of speed and computational power made them wonder whether humans were relinquishing control over  
739 to the machines they had created, and were becoming too dependent on them. P10's concern was that *"gradually, we*  
740 *could be sleepwalking into a world where we've passed so much responsibility onto machines, something will happen"*. P12  
741 found things *"a bit frightening. It's that control element. If humans lose that control over things they've made, goodness*  
742 *knows what will happen. I believe that things could go wrong."* P1 wondered whether we haven't *"gone a little bit too*  
743 *far"* in our technological endeavors, *"and we'll have to kinda stop"*. P13 believed technology developments lacked an  
744 overarching plan and vision, with experts understanding only specific silos, and without anybody *"strong enough to say:*  
745 *enough, stop, rethink, throw this away, and let's start again."* P5 felt there was a lack of reflection about the consequences  
746 of technological advance: *"you need to stand back and really think about it as well some times, what the implications are*  
747 *of change"*. Against this backdrop, our participants' circumspection towards technology becomes an appropriate and  
748 coherent reaction to their perceived lack of control over it.  
749

750 One reaction to our participants views would be to consider them "laggards", or indeed unnecessarily suspicious  
751 of digital technology as a result of not understanding how it works. However, we must remember that all of our  
752 participants were active users of digital technology: but they did so with a weariness, suspicion and circumspection.  
753 Their views did not come from an unfounded dislike of technology, but from wider concerns about how it was affecting  
754 the lives of individuals and society at large. What they valued had come into sharp contrast with what they perceived  
755 to be the values inscribed in modern technologies. We unpack this in more detail in the following sections of the  
756 Discussion, drawing out insights for the design of digital technologies and wider implications of life course approaches  
757 within the field of HCI.  
758

## 763 5.1 Value Dissonances as a Design Material

764 The technology trajectories of our participants also show that the way they think about digital technologies is grounded  
765 on notions and expectations built upon encounters that took place before those technologies were introduced. **For**  
766 **instance, P16's expectations for desktop publishing with computers were based on her experiences with varitypers and**  
767 **earlier typesetters.** Based on their interactions with mechanical contraptions, our participants expected to understand  
768 in great detail how their digital devices worked. Failing to do so contributed to the feelings of inadequacy, lack of  
769 confidence in one's ability and anxiety reported by the literature (e.g. [42]). Knowles and Hanson perceptively linked  
770 such feelings to *"situated elderliness"* [42], i.e. technology encounters that make older adults question their own ability.  
771 We can appreciate here that such questioning is built upon personal experiences that individuals have had in their deep  
772 past. Their frame of reference for determining what means to be "able" or confident with technology is based on past  
773 interactions with non-digital technologies and the degree of understanding they afforded. To address those feelings of  
774 inadequacy, training on how to use digital devices will not be enough: it would also be necessary to reset older adults'  
775 expectations in terms of the degree of knowledge needed to be a confident user of digital technologies.  
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781 This opens up a different interpretation of older adults' feelings of inadequacy towards digital technologies: it could  
782 very well be that our participants' expectations in terms of technology understanding are not too high, but rather  
783 that the degree of understanding we have come to expect from confident users of digital technology may be too low.  
784 Our participants struggled with digital technologies because they found themselves on the losing side of a computing  
785 culture that, as explained by Douglas Thomas, divides people  
786

787 into two classes: programmers/engineers and end-users. By definition, the programmers and engineers  
788 know how things work, and the end-user does not. (...) When things go perfectly, the philosophy of the  
789 end-user works. However, when things work less than perfectly (that is, most of the time), the philosophy  
790 of the end-user positions that user as helpless. [70, pp. 64-65]  
791  
792

793 In this computing culture, the idea of users who are completely oblivious to the inner workings of their devices has  
794 become naturalised. The estrangement and dependency derived from the lack of understanding about how computers  
795 work becomes visible only to those who, like our participants, have experienced a different relationship with their  
796 tools. This positions our older participants' feelings of inadequacy not as a user problem, but as a design problem: the  
797 opaqueness of our digital technologies contributes to the dependency and powerlessness of their users. This in turn  
798 poses the question of how to design digital systems, services and devices that reveal themselves through use and tackle  
799 users' helplessness through understanding.  
800

801 We find a similar pattern in most other areas highlighted by our findings. Having to rely on others in order to perform  
802 even the most basic maintenance tasks on your devices turns into an issue only after enjoying the independence of being  
803 able to maintain things yourself, as P6 did with his amateur radio equipment, P8 with his cars, and P12 with her sewing  
804 machine. The degree of repairability and the life expectancy of digital devices become contested only by comparison to  
805 the same characteristics in earlier artifacts. When you have seen your sewing machine lasting 30 years and requiring  
806 service only once in that lifespan, replacing your iPad after a meagre six years (let alone every one or two years, as  
807 many smartphone manufacturers imply) appears simply ludicrous. Being forced to transact via online channels is  
808 perceived as problematic only by those who had the luxury of choosing from a wider set of options, including engaging  
809 by phone or face-to-face, as our participants did with institutions like utilities, public services or banks. Being subjected  
810 to continuous supervision and surveillance through data collection in the workplace is experienced as an attack on  
811 professional autonomy only by those who relished the prowess of exercising personal responsibility and integrity  
812 in their work lives, as P5 did as a head teacher, and P12 as a social worker, early in their careers. These experiences  
813 bring up and legitimise design questions about specific aspects of digital technologies, such as transparency, reliability,  
814 maintainability, durability, data collection and processing.  
815  
816

817 The examples above also illustrate how technology trajectories can shed light on why and how certain technologies  
818 come to be perceived as in conflict with personal values. These value dissonances emerge through notions and  
819 expectations built upon past experiences of technology. In order to fully unravel them, we must delve into people's  
820 personal histories and the techno-historical contexts within which they took place.  
821  
822

## 823 5.2 Circumspection as Everyday Resistance

824 The concept of value dissonances poses the question of whether older adults' circumspection towards digital technologies  
825 could be interpreted as a political stand [74] or a form of protest [42]. It is indeed possible to draw parallels between  
826 older adults' circumspect attitudes and James Scott's concept of everyday resistance, the "*disguised forms of struggle*"  
827 [65] deployed by the weaker party to a power relationship when more organised forms of collective action become  
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831  
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833 inaccessible or simply dangerous. According to Scott, strategies of everyday resistance include "foot-dragging" and  
834 "feigned ignorance" [65], attitudes of a similar nature to our participants' circumspection. The purpose of these resistance  
835 strategies is to avoid detection: those who use them are trying not to draw attention to themselves in order to minimise  
836 risk. This provides an explanation for what Knowles and Hanson have called "playing the age card" [43], the way older  
837 adults hide behind societal stereotypes and expectations of their technology use in order to "cover for their prevailing  
838 sense of social responsibility" [43].  
839

840 Finally, everyday forms of resistance are the strategies deployed when no other forms of protest are possible, either  
841 because open defiance would entail physical danger, or because the structures being resisted are "inaccessible" or "alien"  
842 [65]. Scott uses the relationship between the peasantry and the laws of the state as an example of the latter, observing  
843 that collective action to change the structure of the law is out of their reach and "confined largely to the literary middle  
844 class" [65]. The position of the peasantry in this example is not dissimilar to that of older adults with regards to digital  
845 technologies, since they also find themselves systematically excluded from their production processes and unable  
846 to access them. Inaccessibility ultimately determines the objective of everyday resisters, which is not to bring about  
847 structural change, but to "work the system to their minimum disadvantage" (Hobsbawm, cited in [64]). In other words: to  
848 minimise the impact on their lives of that which they resist. To achieve this goal, older adults have no other option but  
849 to defend their interests "at the enforcement stage" [64], which in their case is at the point of technology use. It is possible  
850 to see parallels here with the forms of resistance formed by other groups who can feel marginalised by technology and  
851 don't identify with the labels and expectations assigned to them by others. For example in the case of LGBT young  
852 people who creatively resist simplified labels of vulnerability in reporting hate crime as described by Gatehouse et al.  
853 [33], or workers who resist particular surveillance practices by developing workarounds for non-use [6, 59].  
854

855 Literature has often portrayed resistance as linked to categorical non-use. For Wyatt, the "resisters" were those "who  
856 have never used the Internet because they do not want to" [78]. For Satchell and Dourish, "active resistance" involves the  
857 steadfast refusal to adopt a technology [62]. Other works on resistance in HCI have associated it with complaint, for  
858 example when expectations around relied upon technologies are felt to be violated [24]. However, our participants'  
859 form of everyday resistance demonstrates that resistance to technology can also happen in use. As Scott points out [65],  
860 active resistance is often restricted to a privileged few and may be out of reach for most. It is therefore important to  
861 acknowledge resistance in use as an active and legitimate constituent within the range of attitudes and practices that  
862 shape cultural interpretations of technology [62].  
863

864 Our parallel with everyday forms of resistance has obvious limitations. Older adults' reluctant attitudes towards  
865 digital technologies are most certainly not a form of "class struggle" [65]. However, looking at older adults' "foot-  
866 dragging" as a form of everyday resistance opens the possibility for designers to ask meaningful questions about  
867 what is being contested; and helps them fulfill their responsibilities towards taking users' actions, statements and  
868 interpretations seriously [62]. Arguing that older adults' resistance is addressed towards technology in general is  
869 clearly an oversimplification. In the same way that Scott's peasants do not resist power or the state, but the unjust  
870 collection of a specific form of taxation [64, 65], older adults do not resist technology, the future, or change, but specific  
871 consequences derived from the introduction of technology into certain contexts that they perceive as unfair. It is  
872 the work of designers to uncover and address those specific consequences that trigger the backlash, and to develop  
873 strategies that can support the expression of resistance. Blythe et al.'s "seriously silly workshops" [10] with older adults  
874 point to possible methodological directions for the latter.  
875

876 Connecting older adults' attitudes towards technology to more political forms of resistance also changes the discourse  
877 from one of blame to one of legitimacy. Resistance to digital technology stops being equivalent to resistance to change or  
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885 to a "(largely irrational) attachment to the status quo" [68], and becomes a justified response to shifts in the technological  
886 landscape [68] perceived as unfair by those who resist them. Once the critical stances of older adults have been legitimised,  
887 value dissonances become a useful design material. They uncover controversial aspects of existing technologies that  
888 may not be obvious to designers due to familiarity or habit. In the case of our participants, these included the operational  
889 obscurity of computing devices; their short life span; their lack of repairability; their constant updating; their enabling  
890 of data collection and surveillance practices; and their tendency to replace all other organisational contact channels.  
891

892 It now becomes possible to develop guiding sensitivities for the design of digital systems better aligned to their  
893 personal values. Such systems would be transparent in their operation, revealing themselves through use; they would be  
894 durable, reliable and capable of withstanding heavy use; they would promote independence by supporting maintenance  
895 and troubleshooting tasks without requiring third-party assistance; they would prioritise repair over replacement by  
896 implementing modular architecture with widely available components and non-permanent attachments; they would  
897 provide a carefully curated feature set, striking the right balance between power and ease of use; they would minimise  
898 data collection and discourage surveillance practices; they would insert themselves into a network of organisational  
899 contact channels, complementing rather than replacing them; and they would be designed to enhance feelings of control  
900 in adoption and use. Such digital systems would not only be more attuned to our older participants' values: they would  
901 be better technology overall and for all.  
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### 905 5.3 The Life Course Perspective and HCI

906 Our research illustrates the value of incorporating the past into studies of technology and ageing. **In order to do so,**  
907 **researchers must meaningfully engage with older adults' life experiences and particular techno-histories.** Life story  
908 interviews complemented with visual materials proved an effective means of engagement, eliciting personal accounts  
909 of a wide range of meaningful and rich technological experiences. Many of our participants derived great enjoyment  
910 from looking through the technology images and selecting some for discussion. The images acted as a catalyst not  
911 just for reminiscence, a technique often used with older adults, but for surfacing and specifying the concrete ways  
912 technologies had or were being used.  
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916 Unforeseen by the researchers was the appropriation of the broad historical concept of "technology" to include  
917 further relevant examples beyond the image prompts provided. Participants extrapolated from the set of images we  
918 presented to them and brought up for discussion other artefacts, some of which were completely unknown to the  
919 researchers. They included varitypers, computerised typesetters, the IBM golf ball, minicom telephones, amateur radio  
920 equipment, telephone switchboards, sewing machines, longarm quilting machines, Tannoy public-address systems,  
921 dictaphones, stenomasks, teleprinters, the mimeograph, and sun printing. This list illustrates the remarkable extent of  
922 our participants' technological expertise, which allowed them to appropriate the original technology scope and drive  
923 the conversations towards meaningful artifacts within their personal trajectories. The diversity of the image prompts  
924 - across time and use - opened up conversations and reflections that began to be driven by participants themselves,  
925 rather than locking them into discussing only the examples selected by the researchers.  
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929 Telling their life stories also provided participants with an opportunity for self-reflection [4], and for some it  
930 uncovered new and unexpected aspects of their technology trajectories. For instance, as the interview progressed P16  
931 realised how her *"life seems to be bound up with machines! (...) the machines always intrigued me, thinking about it (...) I*  
932 *hadn't thought of it, you know. And I hadn't thought that I liked machines quite as much, when I am slagging them off."* The  
933 approach supported participants to have a greater degree of control over the experiences and narratives they shared in  
934 the interview, and provided an opportunity for them to talk in great length about their expertise, skills, competencies  
935  
936

937 and agency; even if, at times, these had been constrained and challenged by technologies. In doing so, they implicitly  
938 challenged the perceived norm of older people being vulnerable and experiencing a state of decline in old age, which is  
939 often how they have been portrayed in research on ageing and technology [75]. The life course perspective allows us to  
940 step back from seeing older adults primarily through a lens of "vulnerability", and like Gatehouse et al.'s work with  
941 LGBT young people [33], allows us to challenge reductive understandings of technology design.

943 In order to incorporate the past into studies of technology and ageing, researchers must also acknowledge the role of  
944 specific techno-historical contexts in shaping perceptions and attitudes. We have suggested the life course perspective  
945 can provide a useful conceptual scaffolding for this endeavour, as already observed by other scholars [22, 30]. Foong  
946 has remarked that "A comprehensive technology history for older adult users might be the HCI equivalent of the health  
947 history used in epidemiology" [30]. Chesley and Johnson have observed that "both technology and life course scholars  
948 have an interest in understanding the larger historical and social context that shapes technology adoption and different  
949 patterns of use when thinking about the social implications of technological innovation" [22].

952 Building upon their arguments, we suggest the life course perspective can further contribute to HCI studies of ageing  
953 in three ways. First, by positioning ageing as a life-long process where the timing of events, our relationships with  
954 others, and context - socio-economic, historical and cultural - play a fundamental role in shaping outcomes in later life.  
955 Second, by reminding us that individual agency is exercised within the opportunities and constraints established by  
956 institutional structures. Lastly, by providing us with a set of core concepts that can help structure our inquiries into the  
957 past, such as transitions and trajectories, the latter linking individual lives to institutions.

959 Our research made use of these concepts by positioning technology as a fundamental component within the  
960 institutional configuration of postindustrial life courses, and by making an explicit attempt to unravel our participants'  
961 technology trajectories through life story interviews. Our findings demonstrate the life course perspective and the life  
962 story interview can help designers identify conflicts between personal values and those projected onto technological  
963 artifacts, as well as gather insights about how those value dissonances develop on the basis of expectations and notions  
964 built upon prior experiences of technology. This contributes to a richer understanding of attitudes towards technology  
965 in later life, and can uncover controversial aspects of technology that should be tackled through design.

968 By drawing attention to how the techno-historical context contributes to perceptions, notions and expectations  
969 of technology, the life course perspective also confronts us with the question of how our contemporary technology  
970 context - characterised by such things as ubiquitous computation and networking capabilities, bulk data collection,  
971 widespread surveillance, the deployment of algorithmic decision making and ever increasing energy consumption - will  
972 shape the understandings and attitudes towards technology of future cohorts of older adults.

## 975 976 977 **6 CONCLUSION**

978 In this paper we have demonstrated how turning our attention to the past can contribute to HCI studies of technology  
979 and ageing. Using life course perspectives as a guiding framework, and through life story interviews, we approached  
980 technology as a key component within the institutional structure of the postindustrial life course, and uncovered our  
981 participants' personal trajectories in relation to it. During our analysis of those trajectories, we identified dissonances  
982 between our participants' personal values and the values they projected onto digital technologies. Interpreted as a form  
983 of everyday resistance, these value dissonances can reveal controversial aspects of existing technologies obscured by  
984 familiarity or habit, opening the possibility to address them through design.



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