

From pandemic to post-pandemic: Understanding the digital platform usage experiences of older people

Pandemiden post-pandemiye: Yaşlı bireylerin dijital platform kullanım deneyimlerini anlamak

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Abstract

The social isolation experienced during the coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic period has transformed the daily life practices of individuals of all ages and increased their integration into digital platforms. The adoption of digital technologies by elderly users has accelerated, and the digital environment has assumed an important role in meeting various physical and social needs. Although the mandatory physical isolation after the pandemic period has been replaced by measures taken based on individual preference, it is evident that elderly individuals have become much more active users of digital platforms than before. Based on this understanding, this study aims to make visible how individuals aged 65 and over make sense of their digital platform usage experiences in this new period, also called post-pandemic. A phenomenological approach was adopted to conduct semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 22 participants. As a result of the study, 7 positive and 4 negative sub-themes were identified for the category 'making sense of digital platforms.' Among these, the sub-themes of 'informative,' 'communication tool,' and 'dangerous' came to the fore. The 'digital platform experience' category was divided into 8 positive and 3 negative sub-themes. Among the positive sub-themes, 'receiving news from the environment/maintaining relationships' was the most common type of experience, and among the negative ones, 'criticism' stood out. Concerning the 'reflection of digital platform experiences on daily life practices' category, 6 positive and 3 negative sub-themes were identified. 'Increased/accelerated access to information' among the positive themes and 'a new addiction' among the negative themes were the most emphasized.

Keywords: Aging, digital platform, post-pandemic, phenomenology, digital platform experience

Öz

Pandemi dönemiyle yaşanan sosyal izolasyon süreci, her yaştan bireyin günlük yaşam pratiklerini dönüşüme uğratmış, kullanıcıların dijital platformlara entegrasyonunu artırmıştır. Yaşlı kullanıcıların dijital teknolojileri benimseme süreçleri hızlanmış ve dijital ortam çeşitli fiziksel ve sosyal ihtiyaçların karşılanmasında önemli bir rol üstlenmiştir. Pandemi dönemi sonrasında zorunlu fiziki yalıtılmışlıklar yerini bireysel tercihle alınan önlemlere bırakmış olsa da yaşlı bireylerin öncesine nazaran çok daha aktif kullanıcılara dönüştükleri görülmektedir. Söz konusu odak noktasından yola çıkan çalışma kapsamında, post-pandemi olarak da adlandırılan bu yeni dönemde, 65 yaş ve üzeri bireylerin dijital platform kullanım deneyimlerini nasıl anlamlandırdıklarının görünür kılınması amaçlanmaktadır. Fenomenolojik yaklaşımın benimsendiği araştırmada 22

katılımcıyla yarı yapılandırılmış derinlemesine görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiştir. Çalışma sonucunda, dijital platformların anlamlandırılma biçimlerine ilişkin 7 olumlu alt temaya, 4 olumsuz alt temaya ulaşılmış; bunlar arasında bilgi verici, haberleşme aracı ve tehlikeli alt teması öne çıkmıştır. Yaşlı kullanıcıların dijital platform deneyimleri 8 olumlu 3 olumsuz alt temaya ayrılmış; olumlular arasında çevreden haber alma/ilişki sürdürme ve olumsuzlar arasında eleştirilme en fazla karşılaşılan deneyim türü olmuştur. Dijital platform deneyimlerinin günlük yaşam pratiklerine yansımaları için 6 olumlu ve 3 olumsuz alt tema tespit edilmiş; olumlu temalar içinde artan/hızlanan bilgiye erişim, olumsuz temalar arasında yeni bir bağımlılık öne çıkmıştır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Yaşlılık, dijital platform, post-pandemi, fenomenoloji, dijital platform deneyimi

Introduction

During the pandemic, the elderly were the most isolated social group who stayed at home for most of their time. In their isolated life, digital communication tools and digital platforms have assumed an important role in meeting all the various physical, mental, or social needs. Thus, their use of digital technology and the time spent in the digital environment have increased (Adnan et al., 2021; Hargittai & Micheli, 2019; Özsirkecioğlu, 2022). The increasing integration of elderly users into digital platforms has brought about a significant academic interest in the interaction between elderly users and digital platforms, and many researchers have addressed the positive and negative consequences of this interaction. In this context, the presence of elderly users on digital platforms has been found to have a positive effect on their physical and mental wellbeing by enabling them to connect with their social environment (Banskota et al., 2020; Bayram & Arıcı, 2021; Choi & DiNitto, 2013; Damant et al., 2016; Ekici & Gümüş, 2016; Forsman & Nordmyr, 2017; Forsman et al., 2018; Oppenauer, 2019; Sixsmith et al., 2022; Szabo et al., 2019; Winstead et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2021), establish a more dynamic relationship with their social environment, actively participate in social life and maintain their social welfare (Artan & Urhan, 2019; McMellon & Schiffman, 2002; Sum et al., 2008; Thomas, 2010; Xie et al., 2020), and eliminate the feeling of loneliness (Fumagalli et al., 2021; Kalinkara & Sarı, 2019; Küçük & Koçak, 2019; Mason et al., 2012; Pettigrew & Roberts, 2008). Digital platforms also allow them to come together with individuals with similar life experiences (Pfiel et al., 2009), increase perceived self-efficacy

(Lam & Lee, 2006; Salanova et al., 2000), and maintain social independence by receiving direct information about health problems (Heart & Kalderan, 2013; Karavidas et al., 2005; Mace et al., 2022). Furthermore, digital communication tools help reinforce a sense of belonging through membership in various online groups (Arun et al., 2022; Nahm et al., 2003), establish social bonds and receive social support (Chen & Schulz, 2016), and cope with stress by reducing anxiety (Nimrod, 2020).

On the other hand, some studies underline that older users approach digital platforms with prejudice and encounter various problems in the adaptation process. Older users are much more selective in their digital platform preferences compared with younger users (Broady et al., 2010). They are exposed to ageist discourses raised by other users (Akbuğa, 2023) and face digital exclusion (Ekoh et al., 2021; Nimrod, 2020). Digital platform use does not necessarily increase perceived social inclusion (White et al., 2002). Instead, it increases physical loneliness (Hill et al., 2015) and digital fragmentation. At the same time, users without access to digital platforms are disempowered and vulnerable to technology (Gibson et al., 2020; Hill et al., 2015; Robinson et al., 2020; Rorai & Perry, 2020; Seifert, 2020). Having considered the relevant literature, this study focuses on the effects of the integration of the elderly into digital platforms on their physical, mental, and social well-being and addresses the transformation in the forms of interaction depending on digital platform use and other environmental-individual variables. Currently, no study looks from the inside at what the increasing integration of elderly users into digital platforms during and after the pandemic period means to them and how they make sense of the various platform experiences they have with their inclusion in the digital environment. In this respect, understanding how digital media-mediated interaction is experienced by elderly users and how this experience is interpreted by understanding the user perspective that includes digital platforms in their life world during and after the pandemic period will contribute to the literature.

Digital platforms continue to play an important role in the life worlds of elderly users even after the pandemic period (Bayram & Arıcı, 2021; Ramirez-Correa et al., 2023). The trust in and application of digital solutions adopted during the pandemic period will continue (Law & Abascal, 2022), and even the digital communication motivations specific to the pandemic period will lead to habits that last longer than the pandemic itself (Nguyen et al., 2020). There is limited literature on how older individuals respond to digitalization affected by the pandemic and how they adapt to the use of technology in daily life (Sixsmith et al., 2022). Therefore, this study, which was conducted during

the post-pandemic period, attempts to contribute to the limited literature by providing an understanding of how the post-pandemic digital transformation is made sense of and experienced by older users. Furthermore, making this interpretation and experience visible is important in terms of increasing the skills and competencies of the elderly in the digital environment and providing a basis for micro- and macro-scale measures to be taken regarding potential risks and problems that may be encountered.

Old age is a life process that arises within the framework of different individual experiences. This process is shaped depending on how it is interpreted by an individual (Görgün & Baran, 2008), which makes it necessary to focus on the life experiences that give meaning to old age. The fact that aging refers to a vital process that finds meaning through individual experiences makes it necessary to recognize the nature of this experience by closely examining the digital platform experience for each elderly user and examine the nuances of this experience more closely. In line with this focus, this research aims to bring to light the meanings that older individuals attribute to their digital platform usage experiences. Since this goal necessitates the study of the nature of the state of being on digital platforms for older individuals and connecting to the world from there, with them attributing meaning to these platforms, the research design was determined to be phenomenology. The phenomenological approach attempts to decipher an individual's perspective on a particular situation or practice around him/her. In the context of this study, this approach is employed to obtain information about the phenomenon defined by the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Tutar, 2023). Based on this, older individuals who use digital platforms to meet various needs, such as communicating with family, relieving loneliness, and receiving social support, attribute a subjective meaning to these platforms. This experience and subjective meaning can be considered as a phenomenon. Phenomenology, as an approach that addresses all kinds of phenomena that focus on the subjective experiences of the individual, suggests that individuals will experience the state of being a user on digital platforms in old age differently in relation to their online and offline lives. In this context, the essence of the common experience of elderly users gains importance, and it is necessary to make sense of what it means to be on a digital platform as an elderly user. Within the scope of this research, a semi-structured interview technique was employed, and in-depth interviews were conducted with 22 users. The data was analyzed through thematic analysis; codes, sub-themes, and themes that reveal the essence of the phenomenon were identified.

On the relationship of the elderly with the digital world in the pandemic and its aftermath

Old age is defined as “a set of experiences that vary considerably according to individuals, groups, and societies and are closely related to health, welfare level, social relations, social policies, education, gender, ethnicity, and similar factors” (Arun, 2019, p. 82). In other words, old age is a life process that arises within the framework of different individual experiences rather than a homogeneous group membership. Taking into account the conditions specific to the pandemic period, the transformed life experiences of individuals in the life process in question also gain importance. The social isolation measures taken during the pandemic period have made it impossible for elderly individuals to physically coexist with their environment and perform daily practices, such as receiving health services, shopping, and socializing. In addition, older people face difficulties in many areas, such as psychological, health, finance, access to the environment, death, home care, and especially social interaction and activity restrictions (Heid et al., 2021; Demirtaş & Madran, 2021). The digital environment has become an indispensable part of their life in meeting all these various needs, and the interest and integration of older individuals into the digital world have increased (Adnan et al., 2021; Hargittai & Micheli, 2019; Özsirkecioğlu, 2022). According to the TurkStat Household Information Technology Usage Survey (2021–2022), the proportion of individuals in the 65–74 age group who use the internet in Türkiye was 5.6% in 2015; this rate increased to 27.1% in 2020 and 32.5% in 2021.

The pandemic period has changed the communicative needs and expectations of older individuals (Kılıç et al., 2021). With the specific measures required by the pandemic, the opportunity for face-to-face communication, which is the main way of communicating for individuals older individuals, has decreased. Older individuals have turned more toward digital communication, and their use of traditional and social media has significantly increased (Özsirkecioğlu, 2022). During this period, information was obtained through smartphones (social media platforms, applications, news sites, etc.) after traditional media such as television. Due to their isolation, the elderly have increased time spent on online interview programs, e-government applications, videos, and online news sites, leading to their inclusion in an environment where their needs are met with opportunities offered by the digital world (Binark et al., 2020, pp. 12–15). The integration of many actions, such as access to information, communication, socialization, banking, health, shopping, and bill payment, with digital has penetrated the daily

routine of the elderly. In a sense, older individuals have adapted to isolation, social distancing, and quarantine processes through the digital environment (Sayin-Kasar & Karaman, 2021). Therefore, the pandemic period has accelerated the permanent adoption of digital technologies globally (Montealegre, 2020). Furthermore, the fact that several daily needs of elderly users can be met through the digital environment has strengthened the connection between daily life and online inclusion (Erdem, 2022).

For the elderly (Fumagalli et al., 2021; Küçük & Koçak, 2019), who perceive digital platforms as a solution area to overcome the feeling of loneliness and therefore the need to stay connected (Fumagalli et al., 2021; Küçük & Koçak, 2019), the pandemic period, when physical isolation reached the highest level, also served as a potential solution for this need. Social media platforms, in particular, allow individuals to follow social, political, and cultural events in a flow while reinforcing identity practices through membership in and belonging to online groups. In this respect, one of the strategies of the elderly to cope with the feeling of isolation during the pandemic was to stay connected with the closest social environment online (Arun et al., 2022). The digital environment helped elderly individuals to both receive information and services (Mace et al., 2022; Giwa et al., 2020; Xie et al., 2020) and cope with the feeling of loneliness during the pandemic period, thus helping maintain their physical and mental wellbeing (Banskota et al., 2020; Sixsmith et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the growing importance of digital platforms and the function they have assumed have made it necessary to discuss the barriers to older users' digital participation (Ramirez-Correa et al., 2023; Tyler et al., 2020) and the potential consequences of digital inequality in several areas (Binark et al., 2020; Giasanti & Veltro, 2021; Mace et al., 2022; Nimrod, 2020; Robinson et al., 2020; Rorai & Perry, 2020). The most important determinants of reducing these barriers are increasing digital ownership and developing competence.

Aim and methodology

This study aims to reveal how the use of digital media, which started or increased during the pandemic period and continued in the post-pandemic period, is made meaningful and experienced by elderly users and make visible the role that they attribute to digital platforms in their offline daily life practices. The research questions sought to be answered in line with this purpose are:

RQ1: How do older users make sense of the digital platforms they are involved in?

RQ2: What are older users' experiences of digital platform use during and after the pandemic?

RQ3: How do older users make sense of the reflections of their digital platform experiences on their offline life practices?

This research was carried out to answer the above-mentioned research questions and to understand the experiences of elderly users in using digital media during and after the pandemic period. To this end, it was deemed appropriate to conduct field research based on a descriptive method that adopts a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is a qualitative research design used to understand a group of people's understanding, feelings, perspectives, and perceptions about a particular phenomenon or concept and to describe how they experience the phenomenon in question (Tekindal & Uğuz & Arsu, 2020; Rose et al., 1995; van Manen, 2007). In accordance with the adopted research design (Eddles & Hirsch, 2015; Seggie & Bayyurt, 2017), a semi-structured in-depth interview technique was employed to understand the perceptions and experiences of users who started to take part in digital platforms during and after the pandemic period or whose integration into these platforms increased. This study aims to understand how elderly users perceive the digital platforms in which they consciously participate and what their presence on these platforms means to them. In line with this goal, 12 open-ended questions were included in the interview form to determine which digital platforms the participants use and for what purposes, how they perceive and experience these platforms, and how they make sense of the reflections of their online experiences on their offline lives. The interview questions were designed to reveal the participants' textural and structural description of the phenomenon (Bal, 2016; Tekindal & Uğuz-Arsu, 2020), thus aiming to reach the essence of the phenomenon.

The criterion sampling method, which is one of the purpose-oriented sampling types, was used to determine whether the study group was eligible to participate in the interview. In this framework, it was decided which criteria would need to be met for inclusion or exclusion in the study group (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). Accordingly, the criteria for inclusion in the study group were (1) an age range of 65 years and over, (2) having internet access and owning a smartphone, and (3) actively using or starting to use digital platforms during the pandemic period. In addition, studies on the digital

integration of older individuals (Czaja et al., 2006; König et al., 2018; Van Deursen & Helsper, 2015) show that users with higher education and economic status tend to be more competent digital platform users. In Türkiye, educationally competent individuals with high incomes have medium to high levels of digital capital, and their media repertoire is more diverse (Arun et al., 2022). In this respect, the fourth and final inclusion criterion to achieve more in-depth data on older users' digital platform usage experiences was (4) having a high level of education and income. To understand the essence of the phenomenon, especially in phenomenological research, it is recommended to select participants from a homogeneous pool of participants as much as possible (Smith et al., 2009). Doing so enables the examination of divergence and convergence within the sample in more detail. In this context, the final inclusion criterion is important in terms of enabling a more homogeneous sample group and a more detailed examination of participant experiences. The exclusion criterion was (1) the presence of a physical or mental health problem that prevents older individuals from participating in the study.

Although there is no strict rule for determining the number of participants in phenomenological research, Wilson (2015) states that the number usually varies between 6 and 20. Creswell (2018) and Patton (2014) recommend interviewing 5–25 individuals who have experienced the phenomenon. During the data collection process, the easy accessibility of information, the absence of any reservations in the answers received, the clarity of the subject, and the selection of participants from among individuals who have directly experienced the phenomenon in question (Morse, 2000) made it sufficient to determine the number of participants as 20. Pilot interviews were conducted with 2 participants, and the data collection process continued after no problems were encountered in the process of answering the interview questions. Although the number of participants was predicted to be 20 before the interviews, altogether 22 participants were interviewed to ensure that the data reached sufficient depth and saturation. When repetitive patterns and non-patterned expressions began to be encountered in the raw data set obtained from the interviews, the data collected was deemed sufficient, and the interview process was completed (Kleiman, 2004; Lester, 1999). Table 1 presents the participant group profile in the study.

Table 1: Study group profile

Participant code	Gender	Age	Profession
P1	Male	78	Retired/Private sector executive
P2	Woman	69	Housewife
P3	Woman	70	Retired/Teacher
P4	Woman	65	Retired/Public employee
P5	Male	72	Retired/Public employee
P6	Male	70	Retired/Pilot
P7	Woman	67	Retired/Teacher
P8	Male	86	Retired/Doctor
P9	Woman	83	Retired/Nurse
P10	Male	69	Retired/Attorney
P11	Woman	72	Housewife
P12	Woman	65	Retired/Teacher
P13	Woman	70	Retired/Accountant
P14	Woman	65	Retired/Public employee
P15	Woman	70	Retired/Accountant
P16	Woman	80	Retired/Teacher
P17	Woman	67	Retired/Public administrator
P18	Woman	74	Retired/Private sector employee
P19	Male	65	Retired/Public employee
P20	Male	66	Retired/Private sector employee
P21	Male	68	Retired/Private sector employee
P22	Woman	64	Retired/Private sector executive

During the interview, participant statements were recorded. Each of the interviews, which was completed between January 23, 2023, and March 26, 2023, lasted between 30 and 40 minutes on average. The collected data was analyzed through thematic analysis. In phenomenological research (Clark et al., 2021; Işıkoğlu et al., 2021; Miles & Huberman, 2016; Robson, 2017; Tekindal & Uğuz & Arsu, 2020), the analysis process consists of examining and classifying the research data, generating codes from the data by defining units of meaning, identifying themes that each express a single meaning, ensuring thematic clustering and cascading (deciding on the main themes of the experience), creating thematic networks, ensuring the integrity of the themes, and providing a mixed description of the phenomenon, interpretation, and reporting. The aforementioned steps were also used in the analysis of the raw data; first, the interview transcripts, which were read repeatedly by the researchers, were transferred to the Maxqda program. In determining the codes and themes, an attempt was made to develop an understanding of how the phenomenon in question could best be understood, and the process was repeated until no new codes and themes were encountered.

First, open coding was performed, and the code and theme lists were checked. Cascading was used at this stage to identify the main themes of the experience, and care was taken to ensure that the themes were mutually exclusive. After open coding, axial coding was performed to go from the categories to the themes. In addition, the coding process was carried out relationally to make better use of the data visualization features of the Maxqda program. Researcher coding was frequently checked to ensure that the presence of codes in the document did not fall below 90%. The open and relational coding lists and the codes and themes reached in this process were evaluated by two independent external experts in the field. Thus, the codes brought together were reduced to themes, and the findings were associated with figures, tables, and literature to reveal the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2018; Tekindal & Uğuz & Arsu, 2020). The theme, sub-theme and code distributions reached within this framework are given in Table 2. The number of times each theme was coded is shown in parentheses. The code matrix browser showing the distribution of all themes and codes in participant statements is presented in Appendix 1.

Table 2: Categories, themes, and sub-themes

Categories	Themes	Sub-Themes
Making sense of digital platforms	Positive	Entertaining (14) Informative (18) Communication tool (18) Making life easier (14) Friend finder (13) Keeping up with the agenda (14)
		Time passer (8) Trustworthy (6)
	Negative	Dangerous (11) Time waster (4) Need assistance in its use (9) Bad influence on young people (3)
Digital platform experience	Positive	Alleviating loneliness (13) Making new friends (2) Receiving news from the environment/ maintaining relationships (17) Joy of life/engagement with life (8) Communicating about content (12) Keeping up with the times (9) Getting ideas/suggestions (9) Satisfying curiosity (4)
	Negative	Missing out on life (4) Criticism (7) Discomfort from overuse (3)

Reflection of digital platform experiences on daily life practices	Positive	Increased/accelerated access to information (22) Access to alternative views (6) Ease in meeting daily needs (12) Self-actualization (7) Constant state of being in contact (20) Spending quality time (15)
	Negative	Inability to escape from unwanted content (6) A new addiction (8) Reducing the need to leave the house (1)

While analyzing the interview data, care was taken to follow certain steps in order to eliminate researcher bias and ensure research reliability and validity. Research reliability means that the researcher is aware of and excludes any personal bias that may affect the study process to present the participants' experiences and interpretations most accurately (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). In line with this goal, phenomenological reduction was applied by bracketing the researchers' personal views and attitudes about aging and elderly people's digital platform usage skills (Drew, 2004), thus ensuring the reliability and confirmability of the research process (Başkale, 2016; Kleiman, 2004; Tekindal & Uğuz & Arsu, 2020). The researchers displayed an impartial attitude by not expressing opinions about the participants' experiences during all the interviews (Işıkoğlu et al., 2021; Stake, 1995). Furthermore, a common interview protocol was maintained for consistency (internal reliability), and confirmation was obtained from the participants about their statements during the interview. The recorded interview data and the researcher's notes were also compared to understand the data and provide internal control by documenting the researcher's thoughts and reactions (Starks & Brown-Trinidad, 2007). In addition, two external subject experts were consulted at every stage of the research to control the analysis process (triangulation). For confirmability (external reliability), the research process was explained in detail, the findings were associated with the literature, different participant statements were conveyed without ignoring them, and in the last stage, the research findings were compared again with the raw data. For dependability, the data collection process was explained in detail, and the research was intended to be procedurally reproducible.

In the process of data collection and analysis for credibility (internal validity), the study's literature and relevant research findings were utilized; direct quotations from participant statements were included; confirmation was obtained from participants regarding their various statements; participants were selected to ensure diversity in terms of age (the age distribution of participants over 65 was diversified as much as possible), gender, and occupational group; and inter-coder agreement was frequently

checked. The inter-coder agreement was measured using the Maxqda program based on code association patterns in the document; code presence and code frequency in the document were 98.94% and 98.73%, respectively. To ensure the transferability (external validity) of the findings, direct quotations from the participant statements were again used, and the inclusion and exclusion criteria and details about the participant profile were presented. The stages of examining the data, coding, reaching themes from codes, establishing connections between themes, and interpreting the data were frequently checked between the researchers at each stage. The data analysis process was explained in detail, and attempts were made to ensure research transparency regarding how the results were reached. The use of a qualitative analysis program in the analysis of the research data contributed to the validity and reliability of the study by ensuring that the data were analyzed systematically (Arastaman et al., 2018; Creswell, 2018; Merriam, 2018; Miles et al., 2013). In addition, to ensure the ethical responsibility of the researcher, the participants were informed about the research in advance; it was conveyed that their personal information would be kept confidential; a informed consent form was obtained; participant names were coded as P1, P2, and so forth to maintain anonymity; and ethics committee approval was obtained from Yeditepe University Ethics Board of Social Sciences and Humanities (Board Date: 10.02.2023, Meeting No: 36/2023, Decision No: 3) before the data collection process.

Findings

The findings obtained in the data analysis were interpreted in the context of 32 positive and negative sub-themes in the categories of “making sense of digital platforms,” “digital platform experience,” “reflection of digital platform experiences on daily life practices,” as shown in Table 2.

Making sense of digital platforms

Participants were asked which digital platforms they use before they were asked how they make sense of the digital platforms they use. *WhatsApp* was the most used platform by all the participants, followed by social media platforms *Facebook* and *Instagram*; *Twitter*, *YouTube*, and other digital platforms, respectively, were used by a smaller number of users. In addition, half of the participants emphasized that they started using digital platforms during the pandemic period; the other half highlighted that their usage time and digital platform integrations increased during the pandemic

period and that this increased use continues today in a very intense manner compared with the pre-pandemic period.

Digital platforms have both positive and negative meanings for older users. Participant views on the positive meanings of digital platforms are grouped into 7 sub-themes. When we look at the distribution of these views, the sub-themes of 'communication tool' and 'informative' come to the fore by being coded 18 times each. The majority of the participants see digital platforms primarily as a means of communication and information. For example, P8 stated, "I get news about how my grandchildren are doing, how my children are doing, and what they are doing. I see their pictures when I miss them. This is the most important thing for me." P3 said, "I learn the information I want to learn about the world and life. I look at it to increase my daily life needs and general culture." In addition, the sub-themes of 'entertaining,' 'making life easier,' and 'keeping up with the agenda,' each of which was coded 14 times, stand out. For example, P3 stated, "I play word games a lot; for forgetfulness, I like such things very much," and P6 asserted, "It is a facilitating requirement in today's conditions. It makes life easier; it is very easy to get information." Furthermore, P15 declared, "You can be informed about social developments," whereas P12 stated, "I learn about what is happening in my country." They conveyed opinions related to the sub-theme of 'keeping up with the agenda.' These sub-themes were followed by the theme of 'friend finder,' which was coded 13 times. The participants mentioned that they could find their old friends through digital platforms and interact with others by reaching their friends' friends. For example, P3 stated: "I found my old friends, I found my students, and my circle has expanded more." The other sub-themes were 'time passer,' which was coded 8 times, and 'trustworthy,' which was coded 6 times. The participants also evaluate digital platforms as a means of distraction. For example, P1 said, "There are channels I follow. I watch them in my free time; I follow new videos as they come." P8 stated, "My ear is on the phone; now something has come; now it will come. Look at this, look at that, but I also spend time." P8 was of the opinion that they see digital platforms as tools that help them spend time.

When we look at the negative meanings of digital platforms for elderly users, the sub-themes of 'dangerous,' coded 11 times, and 'need assistance in its use,' coded 9 times, come first. Users stated that they find digital platforms dangerous because they do not know who can access the content they share on digital platforms and are generally afraid of encountering problems such as fraud. For example, P2 said, "I am

skeptical if I don't know the people who write or follow me." P7 stated, "Platforms where young children can face dangers are scary," and P17 declared, "My identity will be exposed; I don't know who will get it. (...) For that reason, I don't think it is a safe place." In addition, the participants stated that they faced various difficulties while using digital platforms and viewed them as channels that they needed help using. In this context, P2 described the help she received from her granddaughter while opening and using her account as follows: "My granddaughter helped me open the account. (...) I usually use it myself, but when something new comes up and I don't understand it. I understand when she explains it. It's not easy to get used to it." It was also observed that, as a precautionary measure, users preferred not to use the platforms that they found dangerous and difficult to use: P9 said that to avoid any problems, he only used applications that family members showed him. Similarly, P19 stated that he did not use platforms such as *Twitter*, which he found difficult to use.

The other sub-themes were 'time waster,' which was coded 4 times, and 'bad influence on young people,' which was coded 3 times. The participants mentioned that they spend too much time on digital platforms and that this is a time-wasting situation in a way: "Every time I have nothing to do, I take it and look at it; it's fine, but I look at what time it is. It's a waste of time" (P17). Examples of participant statements indicating that they think digital platforms negatively affect young people are as follows: "They encourage young people to be what they are not; it causes them to earn money quickly and not develop themselves sufficiently" (P5). "The possibility of being negatively affected is high. For example, I think young people are negatively affected" (P10).

Digital platform experience

The findings of this study indicate that the participants' experiences on digital platforms show a positive trend in general. The most prominent among these positive experiences was the sub-theme of 'receiving news from the environment/maintaining relationships,' which was coded 17 times. The participants stated that they receive news from their surroundings and maintain their digital social relations through their experiences on digital platforms. For example, P3 explained that the state of being in constant communication with her environment allows her to further strengthen her existing social relations: "Since I see them there, our communication has become stronger; we send news to each other." P5 said, "I use *Instagram* to see the photos of my children and grandchildren who are far away and their moments"; P8 stated, "I get news about how

my grandchildren are doing, how my children are doing, and what they are doing. I see their pictures when I miss them. This is the most important thing for me." The sub-theme of 'alleviating loneliness' was coded 13 times, and the sub-theme of 'communicating about content' was coded 12 times. Some participants reported that they felt less lonely through their digital platform experiences: "I didn't feel lonely; I didn't feel empty. (...) I made up for my longing for friends I couldn't see. I didn't lose touch with people" (P3); "I feel that it takes away my boredom and is good for my loneliness" (P2). The sub-theme of 'communicating about content' corresponds to the views that they base their online communication on the content encountered on digital platforms. In this context, P1 mentioned that she sends videos that she receives from various groups or that she watches herself to other friends or her family: "I send the videos I watch and like, the videos that come to me from groups, to my other friends or family. Sometimes we talk about it. Or I tell my children about the videos I watch on *YouTube*."

These sub-themes are followed by the sub-themes of 'keeping up with the times' (coded 9 times), 'getting ideas/suggestions' (coded 9 times), and 'joy of life/engagement with life' (coded 8 times). P10 explained that the digital platform experience is necessary for keeping up with the times: "Staying away from social media and not using it is not a wise thing to do. It is a necessity in this age. It is like living on a mountainside without electricity, television, newspapers, or books. I think the tribes around the Amazon or the Nile River would also use the internet if they had access to it." Regarding the sub-theme of 'getting ideas/suggestions,' some of the participants stated the following: "On *Instagram*, I learn about food, decoration, and information I want to learn about life" (P3); "I watch touristic videos, travel videos, and I take notes for the places I am going to visit" (P12). The digital platform experience is also described as a 'joy of life/engagement with life.' For example, P8 stated, "Now television is 1, phone is 2. It has become our whole life. Otherwise, no time passes in the house. (...) It has taken a leading place in my daily life. I take care of it as soon as I get up in the morning," while P9 added the following: "I get bored; I open it; I look at it; it cheers me up. So pandemic conditions continue for me. My whole life has become colorful. Before that, we were sitting at home. We are connected to life."

Participants' views on their positive experiences with digital platforms are followed by the sub-themes of 'satisfying curiosity,' coded 4 times, and 'making new friends,' coded 2 times. The participants explained how their experiences contributed in terms of satisfying their curiosity and making new friends: "I learn everything I am curious

about, everything I wonder what this is" (P3); "I found my old friends; I found their children, my former students. (...) We added each other with friends of my friends whom I knew remotely or knew by name. I have much more of a news network now" (P12).

However, negative experiences are also encountered. One of these is the criticism received due to various mistakes made on digital platforms. For example, P2 stated that she faced criticism from her family because of the spelling mistakes she made: "My child got angry because I misspelled letters and words when I wrote comments. (...) Sometimes I can't see. I used to write a lot then, but now I don't write anymore when he gets angry." The sub-theme of 'criticism' (coded 7 times) is followed by the sub-themes of 'missing out on life' (coded 4 times) and 'discomfort from overuse' (coded 3 times). As they spend too much time on digital platforms, participants sometimes feel like they are missing out on the reality of offline life, and they receive warnings from those around them for being too busy with the digital platform: "I use it wherever I find the opportunity. I probably use it more than 2–3 hours a day. I learn, I research, and there are groups I belong to on *Facebook*. (...) Sometimes I wonder if I am missing out on life on the street" (P3); "My wife and daughter complain that I use it too much. They warn me sometimes" (P21).

Reflection of digital platform experiences on daily life practices

Older users' interpretations of how digital platform experiences are reflected in their daily lives are divided into two main themes: positive and negative. Among the positive sub-themes, 'increased/accelerated access to information,' which was coded 22 times, takes the lead. Participants stated that with the use of digital platforms, they can access more information more quickly. For example, P9, making a comparison between the period when he did not use digital platforms and the period when he used them, stated: "When we didn't use it, we were living like vegetate. We didn't know anything, but we were content with our old knowledge. Now I use it to learn everything." Again, P1 added the following: "It is much easier now; we used to wait for the news or hear it from our surroundings. Now you can access it immediately; you can type it in. You search for it." Next comes the sub-theme of 'constant state of being in contact,' which was coded 20 times. In this context, the participants stated that through digital media experiences, they can stay in constant touch with their surroundings in their daily lives: "I can get news from social media even when the Metrobus is out of order; it provides comfort; or I can learn about the events in any country before the television and in detail" (P5);

"It has become our window to the world. (...) I can communicate with everyone thanks to it. Otherwise, I am at home, and I have no other life. I follow life with it" (P8).

The sub-theme of 'spending quality time' was coded 15 times. Participants emphasized that their experiences of using digital platforms also increased the quality of their offline lives. For example, P2 reported: "I used to spend my free time watching TV, killing time. (...) I always have my phone in my hand; I listen to songs; there are places that write poems; I follow them." Coded 12 times, the sub-theme of 'ease in meeting daily needs' corresponds to the participants' views that they can meet their offline daily needs with their digital platform usage experiences: "I learned to order from Getir and Banabi during the pandemic. It was very useful for us; we order immediately when we cannot go out" (P1); "I can make my payments from my phone. I learned how to shop during the pandemic, and it made our lives easier" (P4). Other sub-themes encountered under the positive theme were 'self-actualization,' coded 7 times, and 'access to alternative views,' coded 6 times. Participants stated that they could improve themselves in their offline lives by making use of digital platforms and that they could access alternative views that they had not encountered in their offline lives or traditional media. For example, P3 said, "I benefited from art activities. My general culture increased. My vocabulary of knowledge expanded. At least you learn about different kinds of food and see historical and touristic places." P2 explained that he was able to access alternative views and that he no longer believes everything he sees on television: "Especially you see what the public wants and does not want. In street interviews, for example, rich and poor, young and old, all talk. I see different things than on TV. I see what other people think."

Conversely, the participants also indicated that their digital media experiences had negative reflections on their daily lives. The most prominent among these was the sub-theme of 'a new addiction,' which was coded eight times. Participants mentioned that the use of digital platforms can become an addiction and the time they spend in the online world negatively affects their offline lives. For example, P2 reported: "It's addictive in a negative way. When I have nothing to do, I immediately pick up my phone and check what's going on. I also get bored when I see the same things done by malicious people all the time. This sub-theme is followed by the sub-theme of the 'inability to escape from unwanted content,' which was coded six times. Participants mentioned that they are frequently exposed to unwanted content, especially on social media platforms, and this negatively affects their psychological wellbeing. For example, P9 stated, "I also encounter a lot of bad news, images, and messages. These inevitably

bother people; you get upset.”The last negative sub-theme was ‘reducing the need to leave the house,’ which was coded once. The fact that digital platforms meet many daily life needs led to a decrease in the need to leave the house: “With the use of social media, I think people over a certain age have less need to leave the house” (P16).

Discussion and conclusion

Within the framework of this research, which aims to reveal the meanings that elderly individuals attribute to their digital platform usage experiences, the focus is on how the elderly perceive and experience the phenomenon in question. On the one hand, the elderly have more positive interpretations of digital platforms; they see digital platforms as informative and communication tools. On the other hand, they also perceive digital platforms as dangerous and requiring help when used. The user’s trust in a digital platform is important in terms of accepting and adopting that platform (Mou et al., 2017; Pavlou, 2003) and as a variable that reduces risk and social uncertainty for relatively inexperienced users (Gefen, 2000; Jarvenpaa et al., 2000). In this framework, the participants tend to communicate only with users they know. In addition, to protect their privacy, they tend not to use certain digital platforms that they think are unreliable, thus reducing the potential risks they may encounter. The participants do not prefer to be on platforms that they have difficulty using, do not learn on, or do not trust (Hawthorn, 2007) and show risk-averse behavior by minimizing their digital performance. When they seek the help of their environment, they tend to optimize their behavior when using digital platforms (Vaportzis et al., 2017).

Older people, however, have more positive experiences with digital platforms. One of these positive experiences is receiving news from the environment or maintaining relationships. In addition, positive experiences such as communicating about the content and relieving loneliness stand out. In this context, the findings of this study are consistent with other research findings (Artan & Urhan, 2019; McMellon & Schiffman, 2002; Sum et al., 2008; Thomas, 2010; Xie et al., 2020; Fumagalli et al., 2021; Kalınkara & Sarı, 2019; Küçük & Koçak, 2019; Mason et al., 2012; Pettigrew & Roberts, 2008). Therefore, it is possible to say that positive elements also find a response within the subjective worlds of older users. In addition, considering that elderly users’ positive experiences of technology are decisive in their acceptance of that technology (Mitzner et al., 2010; Van Dijk, 2006), it would not be wrong to state that the interpretations of the positive experiences conveyed play an important role in the acceptance process.

However, negative experiences were also encountered. One of the most prominent negative experiences is the criticism they face, especially in their close circles. This situation causes the elderly to restrict their use of digital platforms.

An analysis of the participants' narratives about how the phenomenon reflects on their daily lives shows that the positive sub-themes are similarly predominant, and the most emphasized sub-themes are 'increased/accelerated access to information' and 'constant state of being in contact.' These findings are consistent with the results of various studies (Bayram & Arıcı, 2021; Tyler et al., 2020; Wagner et al., 2010) on the purposes and motivations of elderly users' use of digital platforms, and it is understood that elderly users have similar priorities in their interpretations. When interpreted by considering other sub-themes, it can be said that the elderly think they can improve themselves through the social relationships they establish in the digital environment and the various content they encounter. They also believe that they can access alternative views and meet their daily vital needs through the functional quality of digital platforms. In addition, the elderly's emphasis on relieving their loneliness and providing them with the joy of living while conveying their experiences of the phenomenon makes visible the mediating role of the digital environment in the daily lives of the elderly. However, it was also observed that the elderly think that the phenomenon has negative reflections on their lives. Some participants are of the opinion that they have become addicted because they use digital tools too much. They also complain that they cannot escape from encountering content that upsets them. In this context, it can be stated that the elderly are unable to manage their digital platform experiences according to their own preferences. They also believe that their intensive use of these platforms reduced their need to leave the house. This finding is consistent with Hill et al.'s (2015) argument that digital platform integration increases physical loneliness in older users.

Furthermore, as Flandorfer (2012) reminds us, the socio-demographic background, education, and technology experience of future older adults will be different. Today's older users are in the process of acquiring deeper technological knowledge and will continue to learn how to use technological tools throughout their lives. Therefore, as underlined by Arun et al. (2022), it is important to trace the mobility of the elderly in digital environments in the development and implementation of inclusive social policies. From this point of view, considering the advancing technologies and digital communication processes, it would be appropriate to emphasize the necessity of research diversity that focuses on the experiences of the elderly in these processes.

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Appendix 1: Code Matrix Table Showing the Distribution of Participant Statements

Kod Sistemi	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12	P13	P14	P15	P16	P17	P18	P19	P20	P21	P22	
62 Making Sense of Digital Platforms																							
62 Negative																							
62 Bad influence on young people																							
62 Time passer																							
62 Dangerous																							
62 Need assistance in its use																							
62 Positive																							
62 Entertaining																							
62 Informative																							
62 Communication tool																							
62 Making life easier																							
62 Friend finder																							
62 Catching the spotlight																							
62 Time waster																							
62 Platform Experience																							
62 Negative																							
62 Missing life																							
62 Discomfort from over use																							
62 Criticism																							
62 Positive																							
62 Making new friends																							
62 Receiving news from the environment/Ma																							
62 Alleviating loneliness																							
62 Satisfying curiosity																							
62 Keeping up with the times																							
62 Joy of life/Engagement with life																							
62 Communications about content																							
62 Getting ideas/Suggestions																							
62 Reflection on Daily Life Practices																							
62 Negative																							
62 A new addiction																							
62 Inability to escape unwanted content																							
62 Reducing the need to leave the house																							
62 Positive																							
62 Increase/Accelerated access to informatio																							
62 Access to alternative views																							
62 Ease in meeting daily needs																							
62 Self-actualization																							
62 Constant state of being in contact																							
62 Spending quality time																							

