Examining the Experiences of Older Women with ICTs

Interrelations of Generation-Specific Media Practices and Individual Media Biographies

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Abstract

A current empirical study explores how Austrian women aged 60 to 70 use and ascribe meaning to ICTs such as television, radio, mobile phone, computer or the Internet. In the study, life-graphs, semi-structured interviews, and indoor walking interviews are used to examine the everyday usage and interpretation of ICTs by older women, coming from various social backgrounds and living in the Austrian region of Styria. Analysing empirical material of the study, this paper focuses on the interrelation of generation-specific media practices and individual (media) biographies as they both influence older women's usage of and attitude towards ICTs. By using Maierhofer's concept of "anocriticism" as a frame for the analysis of the material in addition to Mannheim's idea of "generation location", it becomes possible to elaborate on a more nuanced understanding of the relation between collective experiences within time and individual life-course perspectives in the context of ICTs.

Keywords: older female ICT users, ageing, generation-specific media practices, media biographies, anocriticism

Introduction

An empirical study currently being conducted within the framework of the research project "Cultural Narratives of Age and Aging" explores life-course experiences of women aged 60 to 70, in the context of information and communication technologies (ICTs). The study focuses on the question of how women of this generation have been using and ascribing meaning to "old" and "new" ICTs such as radio, television, computers, the Internet and mobile phones throughout their lives or – more precisely – how they have been acting *together with* ICTs, to refer to Bruno Latour's notion of technologies as "quasi-objects" (1993: 55), as artefacts which negotiate social space and power (Wise 1997: 36). Researching the usage of ICTs by older women is of relevance, as unequal access and competencies related to digital ICTs remain a problem for equal social inclusion in a digitalised world. Across Europe, there is a considerable digital divide

between different age groups (Eurostat 2012: 3). In addition to age, gender also plays an important role in this context.

As the data for Austria indicates, in 2015 nearly 70 per cent of men between 55 and 74 years of age stated that they had used the Internet in the past three months, while only roughly 49 per cent of women of the same age range gave this response (Statistik Austria 2016). Thus, this empirical study aims to provide deeper insights into strategies of use and processes of ascription of meaning to ICTs by older women, a group doubly affected by the digital divide in Austria. Embracing a broad conceptualisation of ICTs, this study draws on a definition of ICTs established by the United Nations Development Programme.

According to this definition, ICTs can be described as "a varied set of goods, applications and services that are used to produce, store, process, distribute and exchange information" (UNDP 2001: 2). In order to investigate the everyday usage and interpretation of ICTs, this study employs three qualitative research methods: the discussion of life-graphs on media biographies, walking interviews in the homes of the participants, and semi-structured interviews. While the life-graph discussions help to establish a life-course perspective in the conversations and the indoor walking interviews are employed to explore more implicit and embodied aspects of media practices (Buse 2010), the semi-structured interviews focus on a variety of topics that are relevant to the usage of ICTs, such as strategies of usage and attitudes towards a range of specific ICTs.

Drawing from examples from the empirical material, this paper presents preliminary findings of the qualitative study conducted. In the context of the analysis of the empirical material, Karl Mannheim's (1952 [1927/28]) notion of "generation location" serves as an important theoretical tool. However, in order to understand the multifaceted role of ICTs in older women's lives, this perspective is not sufficient, if we understand living and ageing itself as an interplay of continuity and change (Kriebernegg, Maierhofer & Ratzenböck 2014: 10). Thus, this paper suggests Roberta Maierhofer's (1999; 2003; 2004a, 2004b; 2007) concept of "anocriticism" as an additional theoretical tool in the analysis of ICT experiences of older women which highlights the importance of individual perspectives.

Notions of generation and generation-specific media practices

Like other social categories such as, for example, class, "generation" as a concept expresses collective experiences as well as social orders (Jureit & Wildt 2005: 7). Thus, as Ulrike Jureit and Michael Wildt (2005: 9) argue, the idea of "generation" first and foremost refers to the aspect of identity which relates to specific (and rather stable) ways of thinking, feeling and acting.

But the notion of generation does not refer to collective experiences only; most importantly it refers to collective experiences in specific periods in *time*. As Heinz Bude (2005: 28), writing on the German author Winfried G. Sebald, states, the term generation also refers to a sense of "belonging" within time.[1] This aspect draws attention to the importance of time for identity construction. Social actors do not only identify with geographical, socio-economic, political, religious or gender groups, but also with specific periods in time.

Within sociology, youth experiences are said to have a particularly strong influence on notions of "belonging" in terms of value systems and attitudes. Most prominently,

the hypothesis of the strong influence of youth experiences on life-long attitudes and perceptual patterns was put forward by Mannheim already in the 1920s, as he explored the correlation between youth experiences and social change. Mannheim developed the concept of "Generationenlage" (generation location) in arguing that the shared socio-economic experiences of a certain cohort during their youth later influence interpretations of the social world (Ecarius et al. 2011: 32-34). According to Mannheim (1952 [1927/28]: 296), youth experiences are especially influential on the formation of patterns of attitudes because of the "moulding power of new situations". Although individuals continue to have new experiences throughout their lives, the impressions of early life have the tendency "to coalesce into a *natural view* of the world" (Mannheim 1952 [1927/28]: 298), as he puts it. Elaborating on this idea, Mannheim (1952 [1927/28]: 298) argues that all life experiences are interpreted on the basis of previous experiences, be it in affirmative or negative ways. Although emphasising the particular importance of youth experiences, Mannheim (1952 [1927/28]: 298) explicitly neglects the idea of life experiences as "summation or agglomeration" but rather puts forward the idea of an "inner dialectic" in the context of various life experiences.

This is important to note, since Mannheim's idea of the particular influence of youth experiences on the formation of general attitudes and perceptual patterns otherwise seems to fall into the trap of an all too simplified binary image of young and old in which young is associated with dynamism and old only with stagnation. This kind of more complex theorising of the influence of life experiences is essential, as research in ageing studies has shown that binary models of "young" and "old" can be challenged, for example, by examining the ways in which these categories interrelate and particularly by rethinking age as a category of ambiguity (Kriebernegg & Maierhofer 2013). Thus, also from a Mannheimian perspective, investigating generational aspects of the usage of ICTs does not mean conceptualising a generation as an entirely homogenous group. Following Mannheim's thoughts, a generation does not constitute a community characterised by personal connections, but rather a group with a "similarly 'stratified' consciousness" (Mannheim 1952 [1927/28]: 297).

Such notions of generation are of relevance in the context of studies on ICT usage by older adults, as for example Göran Bolin & Oscar Westlund (2009) have shown by identifying varying patterns of mobile phone use of different media generations and as also Christina E. Buse (2010: 997) has argued in her study on older adults and embodiment of computer technologies. Another instructive example regarding the role generational elements play with regard to user behaviour is a study conducted by Burkard Schäffer in 2009 in which he investigated the media practices of different generations. Also following Mannheim's lines of thought, Schäffer conceptualises interaction with media devices as informed by generation location and thus by widespread media experiences and practices during the youth of media users. In this context, Schäffer develops the concept of "generation-specific media practice cultures".

These practice cultures denote modes of media use which are based on youth experiences with media and which are habitually incorporated into everyday life (Schäffer 2009: 42). Schäffer empirically investigated such habitualised practice cultures in the context of media devices with various age groups, the oldest one ranging from 60 to 70 years of age. Among others, Schäffer was able to show in his study that the older participants preferred carefully planned and executed actions to "trial and error" approaches

to new ICTs such as computers, the latter being more applied by younger participants. As Schäffer (2009: 46) argues, such differences in practices can be related to different generational experiences with analogue media. Findings of this type emphasise the relevance of a generational perspective when researching the use of and ascription of meaning to ICTs by older adults as they draw attention to the embeddedness of individuals into collectively shared experiences and temporal frames of reference.

Individual aspects of ICT experiences

Usage of and ascription of meaning to ICTs are influenced by generational identity, as elaborated above. However, generational elements are not the only relevant dimension in understanding the interpretation and use of ICTs by older adults in everyday life. More individual elements of ICT usage and changes in (media) biographies are also relevant in this context. These include, for example, personal life-long interests in technology (Fernández-Ardèvol & Arroyo Prieto 2012: 20), professional experiences (Buse 2010: 996), or changes in personal living conditions, such as health status (Van der Goot, Beentjes & Van Selm 2012).

Yet, although the multidimensionality of ICT experiences of older adults has been demonstrated repeatedly, there is still a need for theoretical tools supporting the *methodical highlighting* of individual aspects of ICT experiences of older adults in empirical material. This is important because dominant cultural narratives of old age that inform interpretations of cultural representations (such as research material) emphasise – often in negative terms – the relative homogeneity of old age and older adults (e.g. Gullette 2011: 4; Cruikshank 2013: 6) and thus can impede a comprehensive, multifaceted analysis of the experiences of older adults in everyday life.

These narratives include, among others, the idea of old age as being connected to helplessness and passivity (Maierhofer 2003: 40) as well as technical illiteracy (Östlund 2005: 29). Building on these thoughts, this paper thus suggests the analytical lens of anocriticism (Maierhofer 1999; 2003; 2004a; 2004b; 2007) as a theoretical tool to examine systematically the individual ICT experiences of older women, in addition to collective, generational experiences. The concept of anocriticism was originally developed by Maierhofer (2004: 156) "as a method of tracing the aspect of female ageing in texts of American literature", but can also be used in the analysis of other cultural representations. Building on feminist theories and their distinction between "sex" and "gender", Maierhofer (2007: 111-112) argues for a similar distinction to be made between chronological age and cultural ascriptions related to age. Anocriticism thus is "an interpretational approach that validates individual experience of age and ageing in resistance of normative assumptions" (Center for Inter-American Studies 2015). In addition, Maierhofer argues that age should be theorised and researched in connection to gender since the experiences of ageing differ for men and women due to their ascribed social roles (Maierhofer 2004b: 158). This is of particular relevance in the context of ICTs as previous studies (e.g. Richardson, Weaver, & Zorn 2005) have shown that the intersection of age and gender is of relevance in the ascription of meaning to ICTs.

Building on this perspective, the study focuses on various aspects of individual media biographies and engagement, such as personal patterns of media use and influences of media usage on structures of daily life – which both constitute central areas of research

with regard to media biography studies (Vollbrecht 2009: 25). When researching individual media biographies it is important to keep in mind that aspects of continuity and change are of equal importance. This has also been shown by a study on the usage of ICTs, in this case television, conducted by Margot Van der Goot, Johannes Beentjes, & Martin Van Selm (2012).

In this study, they investigated changes and continuities in television consumption of Dutch citizens aged 65+. Analysing their results, Van der Goot et al. were able to show that changes in structures of everyday life such as retirement, health status or household composition significantly affected the television consumption of participants in various ways. Thus, they strongly argue for research on ICT usage, in this case, television usage, addressing *both* change and continuity in order to obtain a fuller and more accurate picture of media biographies (Van der Goot, Beentjes & Van Selm 2012: 147).

Findings of the current empirical study

Since the beginning of the data collection, five semi-structured interviews and five walking interviews[2] in the homes of participants have been conducted with Styrian women aged 60 to 69 years and analysed subsequently. In addition, most interviews also included the discussion of life-graphs[3] on media biographies, drawn and written by participants prior to the interview appointment, which were then used as starting points for the conversation. The semi-structured interviews focused on media-biographic memories, strategies of usage and attitudes towards a range of specific ICTs (computers, the Internet, mobile phones, television, and radio) as well as general strategies of usage.

The subsequent discussion of first analytical results draws on the material of all data collected, although primarily focusing on the semi-structured interviews, since they – so far – constitute the most extensive body of material. The interviewees were mostly recruited through snowball sampling, after contact with the first interviewee had been established by a research colleague.

Selection criteria for participants for the study are gender (female), age range (60-70 years old) and place of residence (the Austrian province of Styria).[4] In addition to these standardising criteria, the selection of participants for the study aims at diversification. Included are women from urban as well as rural areas and with diverse living arrangements (living single, with a partner, or with extended family) as well as various professional experiences.

The analysis of the material was framed by the theoretical concepts outlined earlier and thus particularly focused on generational elements in the context of ICT usage, on the one hand, and descriptions of individual elements of ICT usage and media biographies on the other hand. Aside from these two broad thematic frameworks, an analytical strategy based on the approach of open coding as described in Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin 1990) was applied.

Generational elements in the context of experiences and interaction with ICTs
Using Mannheim's (1952 [1927/28]) notion of generation location as well as Schäffer's (2009) concept of generation-specific media practice cultures as analytical tools, three main categories emerged from the analysis of the material. The first category, *genera-*

tion-specific media experiences, consists of two subcategories: "early experiences related to ICTs" and "experiences of change". In the context of early experiences related to ICTs two themes were particularly dominant: a learned sense of distance through certain rules regarding ICTs and collective interactions with ICTs during childhood. With regard to the former, all five interviewees shared memories of childhood rules for ICT usage, mostly radio. One rule often mentioned was "Don't break it", another predominant one was "Be quiet when the radio is on". Interviewee three, a 60-year old former secretary and homemaker living in a suburb of the Styrian capital Graz stated that

> [f]rom childhood on, it always was like "Don't break it, don't break it!". It was always like that because new things were hardly affordable. Back then, times were not as they are now. It wasn't a throw-away-society as it is nowadays.[5]

Another example of a childhood rule which can be interpreted as inherently conveying a sense of distance is "Be quiet when the radio is on". As interviewee one, a woman aged 66, coming from the Styrian capital who used to work part-time as a secretary in the public sector, besides being a homemaker, explained: "[F]ather, when he listened to the news [on the radio], then it was like 'Shh, be quiet! Daddy is listening to the news'".

Aside from rules regarding (mostly) the radio, which reinforced, as it seems, a sense of distance towards ICT devices (e.g. a hesitancy to "just touch and try" in particular new ICT devices) in some cases, another predominant theme in early experiences related to ICTs was the experience of collective interaction with ICTs.

All interviewees shared memories of collective interactions with ICTs. Examples included, among others, watching TV with others at somebody's house in the village, going to the cinema to see the weekly newsreel ("Wochenschau") or listening to the radio at relatives' houses. In this context, interviewee five, a 62-year old woman from a small city in Upper Styria, who has been a homemaker and carer for most of her life, after having completed a seamstress apprenticeship in her youth, vividly remembered hiking to the neighbouring village in a remote mountain area once a week in order to be allowed to watch a children's television show (*Punch*, or "Kasperl" in German) at the home of a local midwife and how this was "a sensation for the whole valley back then".

With regard to the second subcategory, "experiences of change", perceptions of massive and significant overall changes related to ICTs throughout the life course were mentioned multiple times. Interviewee four, a woman from a small village in southern Styria in her mid-sixties who used to work as an accounting clerk before retirement, elaborated on "semiautomatic accounting machines" which they had at the office where she used to work as an accounting clerk and added that "[o]ne absolutely cannot imagine this anymore today, although this was not an eternity ago. Yes, the years, the difference, right".

But experiences of change were not only referred to in the interviews in the context of changes in devices, but also in the context of changes in general strategies for the interaction with ICTs. For instance, interviewee two, a 69-year old woman from the suburbs of Graz who has been a homemaker for the most part of her life and also used to work as a secretary in commerce and the social sector, thematised printed user guides which used to come with all kinds of ICT devices and which are becoming less frequent nowadays, often only being available online or within the device itself (e.g. saved in the TV set and only available digitally).

While all interviewees – unsurprisingly – were very aware of massive changes with regard to ICTs within the past half century, multiple interviewees also referred to notions of continuity. In particular, a sense of "growing with" new technologies was mentioned. Interviewee four states that people have always been "growing with" technologies.

> We grew with it, but for the old people this probably wasn't easy, they also grew with it, of course. It probably was the same also for my grandmother. – When was she born? – 1886 [...] She almost became 100 years old, she experienced it all. There were no cars, no electricity, it all just started then.

This is particularly interesting as such statements foreground the importance of investigating ICTs from generational and intergenerational perspectives as well. Interestingly enough, however, besides very general allusions to continuing experiences of overall change related to ICTs and associated processes of "growing with it", continuities in the context of ICTs were not referred to very often in the interviews. In the future, this topic will thus be addressed more explicitly, in order to explore further the interplay of continuities and changes in generational experiences of ICT usage, since one working hypothesis of this study is that ICT devices change faster over time than basic modes of interaction, e.g. trial and error or precise action planning.

The second main category developed regarding generational elements in the context of experiences and interaction with ICTs can be termed *generation-specific strategies of ICT usage*. In this respect, the strategy of "guided and planned execution of actions" was of great importance and mentioned frequently. This strategy refers to what could be termed the antithesis of a "trial and error" approach. Interviewee three illustrated this strategy by stating:

> And this is always at the back of my mind, that you should not break anything. It is idiotic, I know very well that I won't break anything, but it doesn't work anyways. I prefer asking first and then I do it.

This notion of preferring to ask instead of just trying and possibly breaking something is probably related to generation-specific early-life experiences with ICTs such as the commonly cited childhood rule of "Don't break it" and it again emphasises the relevance of Mannheim's concept of "generation location".

The frequent and diverse mentioning of the preference of "guided and planned execution of actions" – for example through the consultation of user manuals, children or grandchildren or online support channels – also seems to confirm the findings of Schäffer's study from 2009 outlined earlier and highlights the relevance of his concept of generation-specific media practice cultures.

Another strategy of interaction mentioned, particularly related to the Internet, was to apply a similar mode of usage on different types of media. The most prominent example for this strategy is to overall conceptualise and use the Internet as a form of "encyclopaedia". Remarkably, all four interviewees who stated they used the Internet (interviewees one to four), explicitly compared the Internet to an encyclopaedia or book (although no interview question was related to this comparison). Interviewee one stated that through using the Internet, "you don't need a music encyclopaedia or an encyclopaedia of choir literature anymore" and adds that "the bookshelf can shrink".

As it seems, this conceptualisation of the Internet as an encyclopaedia or book also influences the ranges of Internet usage. Besides writing e-mails, interviewees first and foremost stated that they use the Internet as a source of information that one typically used to find in encyclopaedia. This finding is relevant as it impressively highlights the influence of previous and historically situated experiences with other media types for the conceptualisation of and thus interaction with new types of ICTs, by showing that modes of interaction can "travel" across periods of time and across different types of media.

Another approach which was mentioned repeatedly and might be related to generation-specific concepts of ICTs is the request to "use media moderately". The imperative to use ICTs moderately in the interviews conducted was often related to money and memories of how expensive phone calls used to be in the mid-twentieth century, since in Austria national phone calls were charged according to which of the geographically relatively narrow "zones" one belonged and the distance between them, as, for example, interviewee one explained in detail.

The third category emerging in the context of generational elements of ICT experiences can be termed *intergenerational experiences connected to ICT usage*. In particular, intergenerational assistance in the usage of ICTs was an important topic in every interview, a theme which Neil Selwyn (2004: 373-375) also found to be prominent in interviews with older adults. Upon finishing the coding process, this subcategory included by far the most coded text segments.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that intergenerational assistance with ICTs was referred to in a heavily gendered manner as predominantly sons were mentioned. Only on one occasion was a daughter mentioned as somebody assisting with ICTs, and only occasionally grandchildren of both genders (although some interviewees also had daughters). There was a clear pattern of "the son helps with ICT issues". Interviewee two, for instance, stated that her son does the "technical support" regarding ICT matters. Although most interviewees thought of the assistance of their sons as support, interviewee two at some point also mentioned that she is "dependent" on the technical support of her son. Besides assisting with ICT usage, sons were also often referred to when interviewees wanted to purchase new ICT items, particularly computers. Interviewee three describes this in a nutshell when she says: "He [our son] said, this is the one we buy, he set it up for us and we then were only users". A similar observation about gender was also made by Barbara Crow & Kim Sawchuk (2015) in a recent study on the use of mobile technologies by Canadians aged 65+. As Barbara Crow & Kim Sawchuk (2015: 196) outline with regard to their findings: "[M]any in this study received 'hand-me-down' mobile devices from sons or daughters, although in the stories we heard it was most often sons".

Although the theme of the son as "technical supporter" was very dominant, "counter-stories" were also brought up in the interviews. Interviewee two, for example, talked about a recent experience when her modem did not work and she thought about calling somebody but then decided to try and fix the problem herself and succeeded in doing so.

Another interesting aspect in the context of intergenerational interaction with ICTs is that stories about ICT usage with grandchildren were framed in a different way than stories on "assisting sons". ICT interaction with grandchildren seemed to be more playful and less framed in terms of "assistance" and "help" and instead focused more on "exploring", "finding out" and "learning with them".

Individual elements of ICT usage and media biographies

Applying anocriticism as an interpretational approach in the analysis of the empirical material, the diversity of life-course experiences as well as professional backgrounds could be identified as important factors in the context of ICT usage, in addition to generational influences. In total, three main categories emerged with regard to individual elements of ICT usage and media biographies.

The first main category, *individual ICT experiences*, consists of two subcategories: "continuities related to ICTs" and "discontinuities related to ICTs". In general, continuities related to ICTs were thematised more often by the interviewees than discontinuities. Of particular importance in the context of continuities were work-related experiences with ICTs, which were shown to be of great influence for the usage of and ascription of meaning to ICTs, as has also been argued by Britt Östlund (2005: 34). In the words of interviewee one, who used to work part-time as a secretary in the public sector:

> This was a matter of fact for me that I will continue [using a PC] at home when I retire. And yes, then I just bought a computer before [retiring], [...] so I could continue [using a PC] seamlessly, in a way.

Other interviewees also mentioned the importance of their professional experiences with ICTs for their general usage of ICTs, particularly computers and the Internet after retiring. Interestingly, even interviewee five, who claims to be a non-user of computers and the Internet, expresses a sense of continuity with respect to ICTs in connection to professional experiences. According to her, ICTs altogether played no role during her job as a seamstress in her youth and continued to be, with the exception of radio and television, of very little importance throughout her life until the present day.

These examples and the general importance of work experiences for the framing of ICTs throughout the interviews conducted illustrate how anocriticism can help overcome the "binary opposition of young and old" (Maierhofer 2004) by paying attention to varying life courses and highlighting differences in the experiences of women with the same generational identity. In terms of "discontinuities related to ICTs", travel related to medical treatments as well as retirement have both been mentioned multiple times as occasions upon which the usage of ICTs changed. Interviewee four said that she purchased a laptop in the previous year when she went away for medical rehabilitation because she did not want to be "entirely without a computer". Interviewee one argued similarly in the context of a stay at a health spa and stated that she purchased an Internet-ready mobile phone before leaving because she wanted to be able to check her e-mails.

Besides changes in location for medical reasons, retirement was also mentioned as a reason to purchase new ICT devices or change habits of use. Interviewee three reported that she purchased a laptop upon retirement and interviewee four said that she started listening to a longer news show broadcast on the radio at noon because this "had not been possible at work"; multiple other participants stated, for example, that they now occasionally watch more TV in the evenings since they do not necessarily have to get up at a certain time the next day. Such findings point in a similar direction as the study conducted by Van der Goot et al. (2012), which outlined that changes in structures of everyday life such as retirement or changes in health status affect the interaction with ICTs (in their case, television). Thus, their suggestion to research ICT usage in connection to *both* change and continuity in order to gain a more accurate picture of media

biographies (Van der Goot, Beentjes & Van Selm 2012: 147) is also supported by the findings of this study.

The second main category relating to individual elements of ICT usage and media biographies deals with *personal attitudes towards new ICTs*. During the interviews, conceptualisations of and attitudes towards several ICTs were specifically addressed in an equal manner by the interviewer. However, most interviewees elaborated on their conceptualisations of and attitudes towards "new" ICTs (computers, the Internet, mobile phones) in more detail.

Besides conceptualising the Internet as some kind of "encyclopaedia" or book, multiple interviewees thought of the Internet as a "gateway to the world". Interviewee one, for example, stated that she feels "connected to the world" due to her Internet connection and the resulting ability to communicate with friends and family living abroad. Interviewee two referred to the Internet in a similar manner, as did interviewee five who identified herself as a non-user of computers and the Internet and who perceived it as something one can "retrieve a lot" from. Another positive dimension of the Internet brought up by interviewee four was the opportunity of political engagement. Interviewee four explicitly referred to herself as a "political person" and stated that she thus regularly also signs online petitions for environmental causes (e.g. for the free availability of plant seeds). This example illustrates that besides generational experiences and experiences related to professional backgrounds, very personal and individual interests inform dimensions of ICT usage as also Selwyn (2004: 379), Richardson, Weaver & Zorn (2005: 234) and a recent study on digital seniors conducted by Quan-Haase, Martin & Schreurs (2016: 698-699) have shown.

Besides positive aspects of the Internet, all interviewees also referred to dangers related to the Internet. The perceived risks of the Internet varied substantially across the interviews and thus also pointed to the relevance of personal and individual life-course experiences and frames of reference in the context of ascriptions of meanings to ICTs. While interviewee two particularly highlighted her scepticism with regard to the ethical use of personal data collected online by state institutions, interviewee three continuously emphasised potential health hazards of radiation from mobile phones and wireless networks. In a different manner, interviewee one referred to bad health effects in the connection to ICTs when she stated that because she is using the Internet she has less time to exercise. In this context, she compared herself with her husband who goes for a walk several times a week while she does not have time to do so. Interviewee five, who does not use the Internet, mostly had negative opinions about it and continuously referred to it as a waste of time, as something for people who have enough time to waste – like a friend of hers who spends whole afternoons in front of her computer chatting online. Repeatedly, she conceptualised the Internet as the opposite of "nature", in stating repeatedly that she does not use the Internet because she has a dog she walks several times a day. In explaining her attitude towards the Internet she stated: "[W]e go out, into nature [...] and we don't sit in front of this box for hours, right, it's useless". As Selwyn remarks, such interpretations of computer technologies as "useless" do not necessarily reflect unfamiliarity with the device but rather a "genuine lack of interest in computers" (2004: 376) and are "often based on a complex and interdependent on a series of events over time" (2004: 377).

The third main category developed in the context of individual elements of ICT usage and media biographies refers to *personal strategies of ICT use*. While generationally

framed strategies of ICT usage, among others, comprised guided and planned execution of actions, similar usage of different kinds of media (the Internet as "encyclopaedia") and the notion of moderate usage of media, more individual strategies of ICT use mentioned in the interviews were "planned ignorance", "trial and error" or variations of structuring daily time with the help of ICTs.

The strategy of "planned ignorance" refers to a conscious decision of "not having to know everything", as interviewee four put it. "Trial and error" as a counter-strategy to the more widespread procedure of guided and planned execution of action, which has also been identified as generationally framed by Schäffer (2009), is addressed by interviewee two when she stated that sometimes she also practices "learning by doing" in the context of new ICTs.

The usage of ICTs to structure time in everyday life was mentioned by all interviewees, but with great variety. Interviewee five ascribed great importance to the television for the structuring of breaks during her day, interviewee one stated that her day starts and ends with reading her e-mails, and interviewee four noted that listening to an extended radio news show at noon is part of the structure of her everyday life.

Conclusion

As Margaret Morganroth Gullette (2011: 6) succinctly put it: "The least studied theme in life-course understanding used to be the interplay between historical circumstances and personal experiences. Even now, the practice of demonstrating the interplay is hard and lags behind in the conceptual models." This also applies to the study of life-course experiences that relate to ICT usage.

Analysing the interplay of collective, generational experiences and more individual, biographical experiences remains a challenge. In order to examine systematically generational and individual elements in the context of experiences and interaction with ICTs by older women, this paper suggested Mannheim's (1952 [1927/28]) notion of generation location and Schäffer's (2009) concept of generation-specific media practice cultures as well as Maierhofer's anocriticism approach as analytical tools. In the context of generation-specific experiences related to ICTs, the analysis conducted illustrated the importance of early-life experiences with ICTs. Particularly striking examples in this regard were childhood rules referring to interaction with ICTs as well as early experiences of collective media interaction.

Such generationally framed references were of relevance as they informed the usage of ascription of meaning to ICTs throughout the life course of interviewees, which confirms the relevance of Mannheim's idea of the importance of early-life experiences for the formation of attitude patterns (Mannheim 1952 [1927/28]: 296). Although there is evidence for the particular importance of youth experiences for the formation of attitudes in the context of ICTs, one has to be careful not to fall into the trap of a simplified binary image of "young" and "old" by identifying youth as the predominantly "relevant" and formative category and identifying "old" with static. A more nuanced analysis of the experiences of older women with ICTs that recognises the *continuous* interplay of continuity and change throughout the life course is enabled by the use of Maierhofer's concept of anocriticism, an interpretational lens that emphasises the individuality of older women's experiences.

Using anocriticism in the analysis of the empirical material, the importance of biographical experiences, for example, professional experiences, for modes of engagement with ICTs was highlighted which had also already been identified as significant in previous studies (e.g. Buse 2010). In addition, anocriticism also argues that "it is important not only to emphasize the looking back, but also to consider the subject of women growing old" (Maierhofer 2004a: 334). Thus, it draws attention to the importance of not identifying old age with the past only but also with the present.

In the context of the usage of and ascription of meaning to ICTs, this implies to take into account explicitly the *more recent experiences* and *current interests* of older women and to investigate how they influence their engagement with ICTs. In the context of this study, political interests and leisure preferences were identified as influential factors for the usage of and ascription of meaning to ICTs by women aged over 60. That points to the need to understand ICT usage of older women as a continuous, creative interpretation of life-course experiences. Future investigations need to address the question of *when* and *under which precise circumstances* generational or individual experiences have a stronger influence on usage of and ascription of meaning to ICTs.

Notes

1. According to Bude (2005: 28-29), Sebald used the word "Zeitheimat" ("home in time") in an interview when talking about his age group.
2. In this study, walking interviews are conceptualised as conversations taking place while jointly walking through the homes of the interviewees. For a more detailed description of the method of walking interviews in small domestic spaces in the context of ICT experiences of older women, see Ratzenböck (2016).
3. Life-graphs are graphic representations of the life course of an individual in a particular context. On the x-axis, participants draw periods of time and on the y-axis participants note relevant experiences and events in a chosen period of time, e.g. in this case in the context of ICTs. For an example of a life-graph, see: *Transitions in practice: climate change and everyday life: The shower-bath path* (http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/staff/shove/exhibits/showerv2.pdf [accessed July 30, 2014])
4. The reason for the limitation of the age range to 60–70 years was the aim to create a comparable group of interviewees. The Internet became more widespread in Austria in the early 2000s (GfK Austria 2012: 2). Thus, women of this generational identity are likely to have been confronted with new ICTs such as the Internet on a discursive or a practical level already during their careers (if employed before retirement). The limitation to the geographical area is based on the fact that Styria is one of the three Austrian provinces which are close to the overall Austrian percentage of Internet users (Statistik Austria 2012).
5. All interviews were originally conducted in German. All passages quoted were translated into English by the author.

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