Aging and Digital Participation: Enhancing Wikipedia Engagement Among Older Adults in Southeast Europe

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Abstract

In this research, we propose a qualitative and participatory study focusing on older adults in Southeastern Europe and their engagement with Wikipedia. The project seeks to explore the barriers and opportunities for older generations to participate as contributors to Wikipedia in their native languages, specifically Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian, and Macedonian. By combining in-depth interviews, and participant observation, we will identify social, technological, and cognitive factors that influence editing behavior among older adults. Our ultimate goal is to co-develop strategies with community members that will lead to increased digital literacy, inclusion, and intergenerational collaboration on Wikipedia.

Introduction

While Wikipedia is a globally used and collaboratively written encyclopedia, its editor base remains demographically skewed, with most contributors being younger, technologically literate individuals. Older adults (aged 60 and above) are significantly underrepresented as contributors, despite being a growing demographic globally, particularly in Southeastern Europe due to an aging population.

The problem this project aims to address is the lack of participation of older adults in Wikipedia editing communities in Southeastern Europe. This exclusion has consequences for both representation (missing knowledge from older generations) and social inclusion (missed opportunities for meaningful digital engagement).

This issue is highly relevant for the Wikimedia movement, which values knowledge equity and aims to include diverse voices in free knowledge creation. Addressing this demographic gap can improve the diversity of content and contributors, while promoting lifelong learning and social participation among older adults.

Research questions:

- What are the perceptions, motivations, and barriers experienced by older adults in Southeastern Europe when it comes to editing Wikipedia?
- What kinds of training, support, and community practices can foster their participation?

- How can we design culturally relevant outreach models that are sustainable and scalable within Wikimedia communities?

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Related work

While there is a growing body of literature on digital inclusion and aging, few studies focus specifically on older adults as Wikipedia contributors. A notable exception includes Pfeil et al. (2007), who examined age-related participation differences in online communities, and the study by Lam et al. (2011), which analyzes editor demographics but focuses more on gender than age.

More recently, the 2017 arXiv paper "Wikipedia for Senior Citizens" explored a prototype system for increasing the usability of Wikipedia for older readers, not necessarily editors. Similarly, the 2014 thesis from the University of Split addressed senior citizens and digital literacy broadly but without a participatory research design or Wikimedia-specific focus.

Our research will fill a gap by combining region-specific inquiry (Southeastern Europe), a participatory design approach, and a focus on older adults as *editors*, not just readers. Based on Wikimedia Serbia's long-standing work with various target groups, we have recognized the need for more in-depth research into the role and impact of older individuals participating in wiki projects. Through the **Wiki Senior** program, which focuses on educating and actively involving retirees in contributing to Wikipedia, we have gained the impression that there is strong potential to improve the quality of life for older adults through digital engagement and knowledge sharing. In addition, our work with **librarians**, many of whom are older, as well as with **project leaders** in this age group who have emphasized how meaningful their work on Wikipedia is to them—in terms of mental stimulation, social connection, and a sense of purpose—further highlights the importance of systematically researching this topic. These experiences provide a solid foundation for formulating research questions that could lead to a better understanding of the impact of wiki activities on the elderly population and support the development of programs tailored to their needs.

Methods

We will use a mixed-method, community-based research approach:

1. Mapping and recruitment: We will identify key urban and rural areas in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and North Macedonia, focusing on communities with access to public libraries or community centers that can host training workshops.

2. Interviews: We will conduct 40–60 semi-structured interviews with older adults who represent a range of experiences with digital tools (from digitally excluded to semi-literate to highly literate users).

3. Workshops: In each country, we will organize local workshops that will introduce participants to Wikipedia editing. These workshops will also serve as spaces for feedback collection, co-design, and observation.

4. Participant observation and diary studies: We will invite a subset of participants to document their experiences with Wikipedia editing over a period of three months.

5. Thematic analysis: Qualitative data from interviews and observations will be analyzed thematically to uncover common patterns and unique insights across geographic and cultural lines.

Expected output

- **Research report and open-access article** on digital participation among older adults in Southeastern Europe (audience: scholars, Wikimedia researchers)
- **Toolkit and outreach guide** for Wikimedia affiliates interested in engaging older populations (audience: Wikimedia affiliates and community organizers)
- **Two online events or webinars** for the Wikimedia community to present findings and foster dialogue (audience: general Wikimedia community)
- **Localized edit-a-thon model** that can be replicated in similar cultural contexts (audience: educators and trainers)

Risks

- **Recruitment challenges** due to digital exclusion: mitigated by working with local libraries, NGOs, and retirement associations.
- **Health or mobility constraints** of participants: mitigated by hybrid or home-based participation options.
- **Sustainability post-project:** mitigated by involving Wikimedia affiliates from the start and creating open training resources.

Community impact plan

We will collaborate with Wikimedia affiliates (e.g., Wikimedia Macedonia, Wikimedians of Republika Srpska) to conduct outreach, host workshops, and disseminate results. The training toolkit will be co-created with these groups and piloted during the project.

We will also publish findings in local languages and offer a downloadable model for replication. Through edit-a-thons and ongoing support groups (facilitated online and offline), we aim to establish long-term engagement pathways for older adults in Wikipedia editing communities.

Evaluation

Success will be measured through:

- Number of older adults trained and engaged in workshops
- Number of participants who continue editing after the project
- Quality of co-developed materials (e.g., toolkit, guides)
- Scholarly outputs and community feedback
- Replication interest from other Wikimedia groups

Evaluation will include surveys, usage metrics, and participant interviews. Wikimedia Research chairs may also assess the impact via community engagement metrics and presentation outputs.

Budget

Link to the budget.

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