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# Secondary Consumer Socialisation on the Internet: Intergenerational Learning

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**Abstract**

The paper aims to map the learning pathways that exist across generations. Its primary purpose is to describe to what extent different forms of learning influence the acquisition of the abilities and skills required for Internet use in Hungary and whether consumer segments can be distinguished based on the related results. A survey involving 509 Hungarian adults was conducted to analyse Internet use and related learning forms, focusing on various demographic factors and intergenerational effects.

Our findings reveal the identification of four distinct segments. These encompass formal, non-formal, informal, and hybrid learning styles, exhibiting discernible variations in demographic and learning characteristics. Younger age groups predominantly rely on formal learning, such as school education, to acquire Internet skills. In contrast, older age groups tend to learn through informal channels. Additionally, our results point out that they primarily learn from younger individuals.

Our study contributes to the understanding of secondary consumer socialisation in the context of Internet use, providing valuable insights for practitioners, policymakers, and educators that can be used to develop effective strategies that promote digital inclusion and bridge the gap between generations in the digital era.

**Keywords**

consumer socialisation, secondary consumer socialisation, internet, learning forms, intergenerational influence

## 1 Introduction

Individuals transition from being childhood consumers to continuously socialising adults, engaging in secondary consumer socialisation at various life stages. This process involves formal, non-formal, and informal learning, responding to evolving technological and digital advancements that reshape the market landscape. Meanwhile, the Internet's emergence has profoundly altered consumer behaviours, impacting information acquisition, communication, shopping, and engagement with digital products and services (Redine et al., 2023; Małecka et al., 2022; Perez et al., 2019).

This study explores the underexamined domain of consumer socialisation, explicitly focusing on Internet-related knowledge acquisition during secondary socialisation. It addresses gaps in existing literature (e.g., White-Riley, 1971 cited in Ekström, 2006, p.85; Berg and Liljedal, 2022; Nagy and Bernschütz, 2022; Aleti et al., 2023) and investigates various forms of connected learning and intergenerational learning pathways.

The key research questions include:

- Who is the primary source for the examined population's Internet learning and whom do they teach?
- Can segments be differentiated based on learning forms, and if so, what intergenerational influences are discernible?
- How do segments differ in demographics, information acquisition, and transfer practices based on learning forms?

These questions are significant for stakeholders, offering insights for educational providers, digital tool developers, designers, and marketers. Understanding the sources of Internet learning, intergenerational dynamics, and demographic variations can inform tailored interventions and facilitate strategic marketing approaches, especially for digital products.

The study contributes to consumer socialisation knowledge by uncovering patterns in information exchange

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preferences and behaviours. This understanding can aid marketers in customising strategies and products for diverse learner segments, promoting inclusivity in the digital realm.

The article's contents include a summary of consumer socialisation issues, highlighting secondary and reverse consumer socialisation, connected learning forms, and the role of the Internet. It outlines research questions, the questionnaire structure, and quantitative analysis results before concluding with practical insights for marketers, educators, and policymakers, enhancing consumer experiences in the digital age.

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 Consumer socialisation and learning

As an aspect of overall socialisation, consumer socialisation can encompass both interactions and learning processes for effective participation in the social environment (Ward, 1974; Shahzad et al., 2015; Harrison et al., 2021). Ward (1974) and Pólya (2019) emphasise that individuals are not born as consumers but develop consumer-related skills, knowledge, and attitudes through consumer socialisation. Consumer socialisation extends beyond childhood, shaping experiences in adolescence and adulthood and involving lifelong learning akin to general socialisation (Ward, 1974; Smith and Moschis, 1984; Shahzad et al., 2015; Watne and Brennan, 2009).

Secondary socialisation within consumer socialisation includes adapting to market changes and enhancing skills, knowledge, and attitudes as an adult consumer (Watne and Brennan, 2009). Reverse socialisation, observed in adulthood, involves younger individuals influencing older generations (a generation consists of individuals who are in similar stages of life and are defined by the events, trends, and processes of the same time period (Steigervald, 2020)), impacting views and behaviour (Ward, 1974; Perez et al., 2019). This occurs when younger individuals introduce new ideas, knowledge, skills, or behaviours that older individuals have not yet mastered (Grossbart et al., 2002; Sutton-Brady et al., 2010; Mandrik et al., 2018). Intergenerational influence varies, based on product characteristics (Mittal and Royne, 2010).

Learning during the process of becoming a consumer occurs in children through direct (formal or non-formal) and indirect (informal) means (Neeley, 2005). Unlike primary socialisation, adult socialisation requires clear definitions (Mathur and Moschis, 1999). Ekström (2007) notes insufficient exploration of the influence and learning process where parents learn from their children, a dynamic interaction extending beyond cohabitation. Adult socialisation differs from children's, considering individuals' attitudes toward learning, enriched by life experiences, positive and negative memories, and self-awareness (Házy, 2005). Life-wide learning (LWL), covering various life contexts, has become prominent, necessitating continual adaptation to new tasks and environments (Lantos, 2021). Research on adult socialisation plays a vital role in understanding values, norms, and behavioural requirements in diverse environments.

In the following sections, we investigate each form of learning and its main characteristics.

### 2.2 Learning forms

The Commission of the European Communities (2000) categorises learning into formal, non-formal, and informal forms. According to Rogers (2014), formal learning is structured, intentional, and conducted in accredited institutions, resulting in certificates. Non-formal learning, which is more flexible, occurs in workplaces or social organisations without credentials. Informal learning, significant and unintentional, includes daily activities like observation, collaboration, and internet use (Schugurensky, 2000).

The OECD examines learning dimensions: organisation, learning goals, intentionality, duration, and qualification (Werquin, 2007). According to Stréber and Kereszty (2015), informal learning is considered planned or intended by others. Rogers (2014) and Anselmann (2022) find informal and formal/non-formal learning complementary. While informal learning focuses on immediate, practical knowledge, formal/non-formal learning facilitates generalisable knowledge acquisition (Tóthné Boda, 2020).

Lantos (2021) notes changing forms of learning in our knowledge-based society, influenced by globalisation and technology (Lee and Conroy, 2005). He highlights childhood learning in formal settings and adult learning in non-formal and informal ways. Ekström (2007) observes that parental consumer learning often results from family interactions. Stréber and Kereszty (2015) emphasise lifelong, self-directed learning for a successful adult life, with informal learning being the most defining form. Adult learning, primarily at work and during leisure, involves motivation, situation-driven learning, and critical factors like individual preferences and environmental influences.

In online knowledge acquisition, informal ways such as experiencing, discovering, trying, and playing are emphasised (Lee et al., 2003; Lee and Conroy, 2005).

### 2.3 Internet and online technologies in consumer socialisation

Sociocultural changes, notably the Internet's evolution and emerging online solutions, significantly impact adult socialisation processes (Perez et al., 2019; Berg and Liljedal, 2022; Nagy and Bernschütz, 2022; Ghosh et al., 2023). Older consumers continually adapt to newer products and technologies, such as online administration, online shopping, smart devices, and applications (Watne et al., 2011; Liu and Huang, 2022). Cultural characteristics contribute to digital divides among social groups (Galácz and Smahel, 2007; Perez et al., 2019; Nagy and Bernschütz, 2022).

The Internet is crucial in shaping consumer values and attitudes, becoming an independent socialisation agent (Lee et al., 2003; Hill and Beatty, 2011; Barber, 2013; Thaichon, 2017). All three forms of learning - formal, non-formal, and informal - contribute to developing the knowledge and behaviour required to adapt to technological challenges (Lantos, 2021). Generational differences in technology use can create inequalities (Mishra et al., 2018; Sorbring et al., 2017; Perez et al., 2019), with cohort generations influencing consumer socialisation (Rindfleisch, 1994).

Technological changes can drive generational wedges, influencing processes differently across age groups (Watne et al., 2011). Children often serve as socialisation agents for their parents in technology adoption (Abhijith and Joseph, 2022; Freeman et al., 2020; Perez et al., 2019). Intergenerational relationships, including knowledge transfer from children to older adults, are significant in understanding how older adults acquire knowledge about info-communication technologies (Cáceres and Chaparro, 2019; Aleti et al., 2023).

The Internet and online technologies are integral to consumer life, constantly shaping digital skills and communication competence (Sorbring et al., 2017; Perez et al., 2019). Investigating the form of internet learning, intergenerational knowledge exchange, and influence provides insight into adult digital consumer socialisation.

## 3 Materials and methods

We collected data using a computer-assisted telephone interview (CATI) method to examine the research questions described in the Introduction section. A random number generator was utilised to generate mobile phone numbers, and calls were made to these numbers in June 2021. A total of 509 individuals were interviewed as part of the sample. To ensure the sample's representativeness, weighting was applied to account for any unevenness. The sample was designed to represent the Hungarian adult population aged 18 and above, considering variables such as gender, age, education, type of settlement, and region (categorised into three levels).

The research questions were incorporated into the questionnaire of a public opinion research institute as part of omnibus research. Our questions were related to demographics and Internet use. Following the insights of Pólya (2019), who emphasised the influence of socioeconomic status, gender, age, and social class on socialisation, we primarily focused on demographic features such as gender, age, place of residence, household financial situation, occupation, and education.

The questionnaire also included a set of questions exploring participants' Internet use, smartwatch and smartphone usage, frequency of engaging in various activities facilitated by the Internet, as well as information about whom (by age) the respondent taught and from whom (by age) they acquired knowledge about Internet use.

Table 1 shows the main demographic characteristics of the respondents and the features of the examined digital tool usage. The demographic distributions reflect the characteristics of the adult Hungarian population, and thus, a picture of an ageing society emerges. Both genders and every age group are represented roughly in the same proportion. The respondents primarily live outside Budapest and belong to those who think their financial situation is medium, and most of them have a high school diploma. Most respondents are employed full-time, while 31% of the sample is retired.

## 4 Results

Respondents who had attended official education participated in formal or non-formal learning almost equally. 20% of those with formal education experience had also attended non-formal education. This already anticipates that in the Hungarian population, we can find consumer groups that have acquired or developed Internet skills through several forms of learning. The remaining respondents are informal learners.

Regarding informal learning, respondents primarily learned about the Internet from younger people and those of similar age (see Fig. 1). As for teaching, they primarily teach their friends of similar age or younger. Interestingly, those who had not learned about the Internet formally or non-formally were found to have taught a high proportion of others, both younger and older.

### 4.1 Examined segments based on the learning forms

Our research allowed us to examine the three main segments (formal, non-formal, informal) already theorised in

**Table 1** Main demographic characteristics of the total sample (%)

| Demographic criteria | Characteristics | Breakdown (%) | Demographic criteria | Characteristics | Breakdown (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Male | 47% | Education | Basic education or less | 23% |
| | Female | 53% | | Vocational without graduation | 22% |
| Age group | 18-29 years old | 17% | | Graduation | 34% |
| | 30-39 years old | 16% | | Higher education | 21% |
| | 40-49 years old | 20% | Employment | Employed full-time | 52% |
| | 50-59 years old | 15% | | Student | 5% |
| | 60-69 years old | 16% | | Stay at home, receiving childcare benefits | 6% |
| | 70+ years old | 16% | | Retired | 31% |
| Settlement type | Budapest | 17% | | Unemployed | 2% |
| | County seat | 20% | Subjective financial situation | Bad | 9% |
| | Other city | 33% | | Medium | 66% |
| | Village | 30% | | Good | 25% |
| Region | West | 30% | Tool-usage | Smartphone user | 75% |
| | Central | 35% | | Smartwatch user | 12% |
| | East | 35% | | Internet user | 79% |

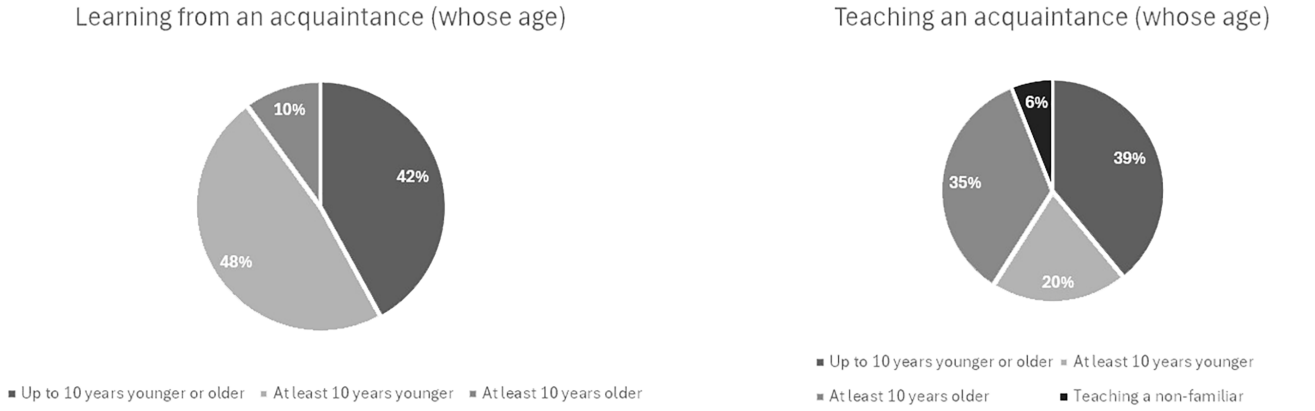


**Fig. 1** Learning from and teaching different age groups

the literature. We complemented the three segments with a fourth segment, which includes those who follow formal and non-formal learning (hybrid). The respondents were measured and categorised on a nominal scale based on the method by which they learned to use the Internet, the individuals they had taught to use it, and the presence of any informal sources from which they might have acquired Internet skills. Subsequently, we classified the respondents according to their answers and established the segments for our analysis.

The four segments were defined as follows:

- The segment of formal learners included those who had learned (or are learning) to use the Internet in school (size of the segment in the sample35%),
- The segment of non-formal learners included those who had acquired skills for using the Internet through training (size of the segment in sample 21%),
- Alongside formal and non-formal learning, some were (or are) using both forms of learning (hybrid learning) about Internet usage, and we wanted to examine the information acquisition and transmission behaviour of this segment, too (size of the segment in the sample 33%),
- Moreover, the likely informal segment included those who refused to learn anywhere and from anyone about Internet use (size of the segment in the sample 11%).

We have compared our total sample demographic data with each segment defined by the used learning form. Among those who have been formally educated, i.e., trained at school to use the Internet and various digital technologies, the proportion currently studying (10%) and those engaged in household activities (12%) are significantly

higher than the total sample. Regarding age, those formally educated are mainly from the 18-29 and 30-39 age groups. This is not surprising; the younger the respondents are, the more formal, school-related training they are involved in to acquire the skills needed to use different technological tools. This knowledge can be broadened over time (by taking additional Internet and technology-related subjects and courses). Regarding education, proportionally more people have a college or university degree (30%) than in the total sample. Regarding geographical location, significantly more people with formal education are residents of Budapest (27%), while those from the western part of the country are less represented in the segment (20%).

Among those who are part of the non-formal segment, namely those who learned about Internet usage through courses, the proportions of unemployed people (7%) (although a small number of them are present in the sample) and people with a high school diploma (53%) are significantly higher. This may also be because those not working often attend various improvement training courses.

In the case of this segment under study, the only other difference is by type of municipality, with a significantly higher proportion of people living in the county seat (29%) and in the 50-59 age group (27%) than in the total sample.

Among those who had learned about Internet usage in formal and non-formal (hybrid) ways, the proportion of those with primary education or less was significantly lower (10%). The 30-39 age group is mainly represented in this segment (29%), which is also not surprising, as they are the age group who have already learned about Internet use during their school time but who may have felt the need to supplement their knowledge with training both for their work and to develop different skills and abilities. Regarding education, those with a secondary school degree (45%) and a diploma (30%) were over-represented in this segment. Regarding the subjective perception of financial situation, the proportion of those who consider this poor (2%) is significantly lower than in the overall sample.

Furthermore, among those who did not follow any form of learning, i.e., those belonging to the informal segment, men (71%) and stay-at-home persons (15%) were significantly over-represented compared to the total sample. This predicts that men are the majority who acquire skills about Internet usage through their own experience, in a self-taught way, and those less active in their occupation.

Following the demographic characterisation of our four main segments, we examined whether there was a statistical correlation between the variables defined in the questionnaire and each analysed segment. The strength of the relationship was tested using the Cramer-V indicator. The main results are summarised in Fig. 2.

The results show that those who have been formally taught how to use the Internet and related technology tools are significantly less likely to have learned from younger

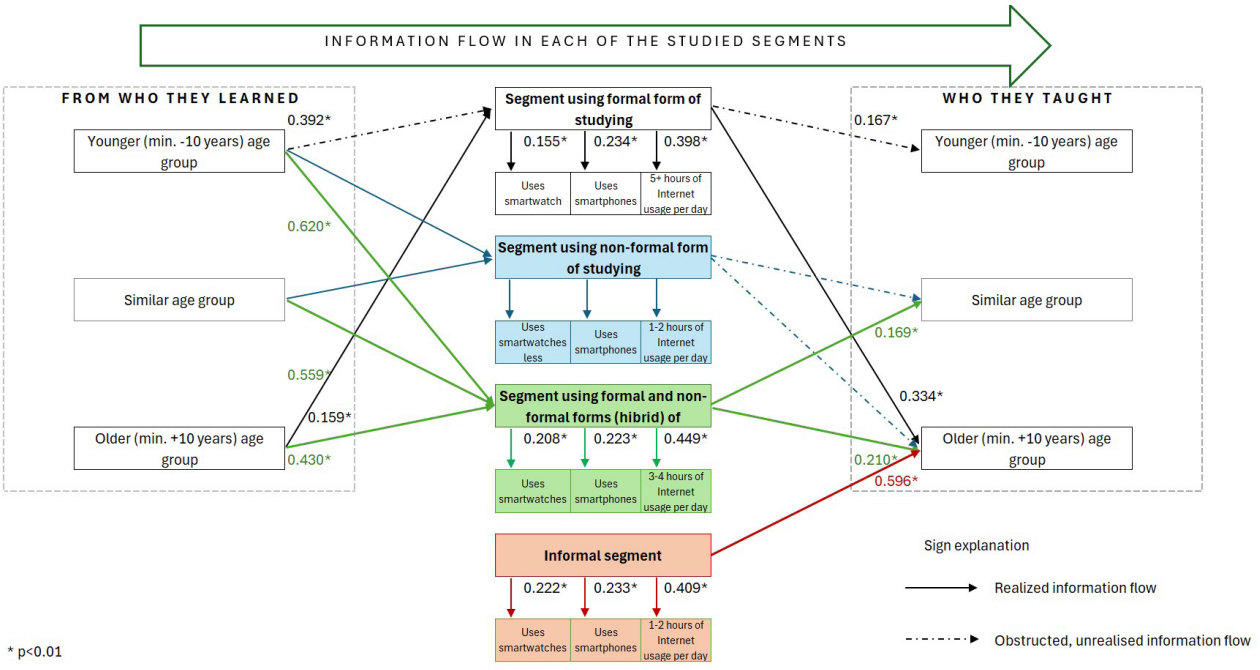


**Fig. 2** Information flow in each of the studied segments

people (21%) and are considerably more likely to teach older people (79%) who are at least ten years older than them (64%). It is also evident that, although to a small extent, nearly 20% of them also learn the information they need to use the Internet from older people.

They are also significantly less likely to teach those younger than themselves. They all have a smartphone (99%) and are significantly more likely to use a smartwatch (22%). We also found that they spend proportionally more time on the Internet, which is not surprising given the age group's Internet usage habits and attitudes towards smart devices.

The hypothesis tests showed no significant difference between the non-formal learning segment and the factors examined. Still, it can be stated that those who have acquired knowledge about the Internet in this way primarily seek help from people aged ten or more years (57%) and are less likely to pass on the skills and abilities they have acquired to other age groups (85% have not taught others to use the Internet). The results are unsurprising as the segment can be described as less active and more typical of the middle and older age groups. Regarding device use, the smartphone is more common (90%) than the smartwatch (11%).

In the case of the segment following both forms of learning (hybrid), it can be seen that they all learn from the age groups examined in our research, i.e., the information influences the Internet skills they receive from them, and it is clear that they are not restricted to the younger age group as a channel for obtaining information compared to the other segments. The segment is significantly helpful, as they educate almost all age groups, with a high percentage of them educating those around them. Regarding device use, nearly all of them use smartphones, and 11% use smartwatches. They spend approximately 3-4 hours online daily, slightly more than the non-formal groups.

The last segment surveyed included those without training in using the Internet and related technology tools. They are more likely to develop their Internet skills in a self-taught way, as they have yet to learn about this activity from any of the age groups studied. However, they do teach others significantly (62%), with their teaching activities mainly focused on the older age group (49% have taught older people). Almost all respondents belonging to this segment are smartphone users (96%) and also typically use smartwatches (13%); they do not disdain the Internet and develop the skills and abilities needed for the activity while using it, which also confirms that this segment covers the group following the informal learning mode.

## 5 Discussion

The present study investigated the influence of different learning forms (Commission of the European Communities, 2000; Werquin, 2007) on acquiring skills and abilities necessary for Internet use in line with secondary consumer socialisation. Previous works focuses mainly on the learning forms or secondary consumer socialisation, and it does not highlight the related learning directions (e.g., reverse socialisation).

Firstly, in addition to the three primary forms of learning determined in the literature (Rogers, 2014; Lantos, 2021; Anselmann, 2022), we identified a hybrid segment of society that combines formal and non-formal learning. In addition, our results highlight the diversity in learning processes across generations (Tóthné Boda, 2020), emphasising the importance of understanding these dynamics for skill development and improvement professionals. Considering all this, our results highlight the differences between the formal, non-formal, formal and non-formal, i.e., hybrid and informal segments, underlining the importance of learning forms related to socialisation in acquiring knowledge related to Internet use.

Formal learning is the main characteristic of the younger age groups, who are the most active in using the Internet and smart devices, as Lantos (2021) highlighted. This segment mainly teaches older age groups, while they learn less from age groups younger than their age group. In addition, informal learning is primarily typical of older, less active age groups, who are more reserved in using the Internet and smart devices. This segment mainly acquires knowledge of how to use the Internet from younger people. They need to improve their related knowledge repeatedly as it continuously changes (see, e.g., Liu and Huang, 2022). However, since they are less confident in this knowledge, they do not share it with other age groups. The segment following both – formal and informal – forms of learning is the most active in acquiring and passing on the information necessary for using the Internet. They collect knowledge from each examined age group and pass it on. The segment that does not benefit from the two primary studied forms of learning consists mainly of people with basic education, who acquire the abilities and skills necessary for Internet use in a much more self-taught manner while using devices – this was supported by the active use of smart devices (mainly phones).

Our findings shed light on several key points and relationships regarding secondary consumer socialisation and reverse socialisation in the context of Internet use (and connected learning forms).

Influence of Learning Forms: We identified different learning forms, including formal, non-formal, hybrid (combining formal and non-formal), and informal learning, and their impact on Internet-related skill acquisition. These learning forms play a crucial role in shaping individuals' abilities and knowledge related to Internet use, which both supports and supplements Lantos's (2021) viewpoints on the learning processes of online technologies.

Age and Generational Differences: Our study highlighted the significant influence of age and generational differences on learning forms and acquiring Internet-related skills. Younger age groups, who are more actively engaged in using the Internet and digital devices, predominantly rely on formal learning, such as school education, to acquire these skills. In contrast, our results support the viewpoints of Liu and Hang (2022), as older age groups, who may be less experienced with technology, tend to learn through informal channels. Additionally, our results point out that they primarily learn from younger individuals.

Hybrid Learning: We introduced a hybrid learning segment of individuals engaging in formal and non-formal learning methods. This segment plays a significant role in acquiring and disseminating Internet-related information as they learn from and teach various age groups, highlighting the importance of intergenerational knowledge transfer.

Role of Formal Education: Our results emphasised the significance of formal education in acquiring Internet-related skills, particularly among younger age groups (reinforcing Lantos, 2021). Those who have received formal education exhibit higher proportions of ongoing education and engagement in household activities related to the Internet.

Regarding reverse socialisation and intergenerational influence, we found that younger individuals primarily teach older generations about Internet use. However, the confidence level and willingness to share knowledge vary among different segments. While younger individuals are less likely to teach those younger than themselves, they demonstrate a higher inclination to teach older age groups. This highlights the importance of intergenerational learning and the potential for younger generations to bridge the digital divide by empowering older individuals with Internet-related skills.

Our study contributes to the understanding of secondary consumer socialisation and reverses socialisation in the context of Internet use. By identifying different learning forms, examining age and intergenerational influences, and highlighting the role of formal education and intergenerational knowledge transfer, we believe we can provide valuable insights for practitioners, policymakers, and educators to develop effective strategies that promote digital inclusion and bridge the gap between generations in the digital era.

### 5.1 Implications for Practice & Limitations

This study bridges gaps in the literature on learning forms, intergenerational learning, and secondary socialisation by integrating them strategically. With the increasing reliance on the Internet in learning, our research explores the intersection of generational characteristics and learning forms. This provides insights for developing internet-based knowledge dissemination strategies, particularly for older age cohorts. Marketers can leverage these insights to customise digital products, services, online platforms, and communication strategies to align with senior consumers' unique preferences and behaviours, enhancing engagement.

Despite the study's contributions, limitations exist. Our focus on smartphones and smartwatches narrows the scope of digital device usage exploration. Future research should encompass a broader range of digital devices and dimensions. The study's exclusive focus on Hungarian respondents also limits generalisability; future efforts should include neighbouring countries to permit cross-national comparisons. Moreover, ongoing research is crucial for understanding the evolving online landscape, ensuring that older generations possess the skills to use technologies responsibly, safely, and joyfully.

## 6 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study fills a significant research gap by focusing on secondary consumer socialisation and bridging connections between learning forms, generational characteristics, and the Internet's role. The findings contribute to strategies for effective Internet use, especially for older generations facing unique challenges in adapting to digital technologies.

Identifying distinct Internet learner segments offers valuable insights into skill acquisition, informing governmental strategies and educational programmes to enhance digital literacy and encourage positive consumer behaviours.

Future research should focus on implementing the developed model, involving tailored governmental strategies and educational programmes for different Internet learner segments. Replicating data collection in various countries can provide a comprehensive understanding of consumer socialisation, uncovering cultural and contextual factors influencing secondary consumer socialisation and guiding

targeted interventions. In summary, this study pioneers the categorisation of consumers based on learning forms, generational characteristics, and Internet prominence, addressing a research gap in secondary consumer socialisation with implications for developing effective strategies. Strategies to enhance digital literacy among older generations and promote effective Internet utilisation. Further research and practical implementations are needed to fully leverage the insights gained from this study and foster positive consumer experiences in the digital age.

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