

THE SWEDISH ‘TANT’ AND DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

If you would picture a person who is a digital entrepreneur and leads digital transformation of the society, who do you imagine? Mark Zuckerberg, Elon Musk, an elderly woman? In this study we analyze how the image of an elderly woman, a Swedish ‘tant’, is mobilized to depict obstacles and struggles surrounding the digital transformation of the working life. The research problem that our study addresses lies within the field of working life research, at the intersection of gender and digitalization studies. It is well-documented in research that the digital transformation brings disruptions to working life by partially or completely displacing certain professions altogether by digital technologies (Hirschi, 2018). One type of professions that is under the threat of displacement are those built around routine administrative work, such as bookkeeping. And such professions, at least in the global North, tend to be primarily staffed by women. Moreover, the digital transformation is taking place within a working life that unfortunately is impacted by both ageism and sexism (Calasanti et al. 2006). One persistent stereotype is that the aging population is less digital and less capable of adapting and learning digital technologies. In addition to the general stereotypes about the aging population, working life scholars have alerted us that gender and ageism intersect, and that middle-aged and elderly women in particular are subjected to working life discrimination (Gregory, 2003). Their accumulated experience tends to be underestimated or rendered invisible. Moreover, middle age is when many women hit the glass ceiling, despite having many years of working life ahead of them. In other words, the digitalization of working life cannot be fully understood without taking these multiple layers of stereotypes and their effects into the account.

The overarching aim of our study is to analyze how the image of an elderly woman is deployed in promotional material on digital technologies, and by doing so, highlight the underlying ideas and social norms that inform and shape contemporary imaginaries on the digital transformation of working life. Theoretically, we combine insights from feminist gerontology and cultural theory and argue that cultural representations of elderly women are active discourses that inform and produce working life imaginaries about digital transformation. These sociotechnical imaginaries outline how people understand their social surroundings in relation to technology and these understandings are carried in our shared images and stories (Janasoff & Kim, 2015). Our empirical case is a collection of representations of elderly

women in advertisements of digital technologies such as software for bookkeeping for working life in the Swedish context. The cultural context of Sweden deploys a particular term to describe an elderly woman, the Swedish 'tant', similar to aunty or babushka in other contexts (Liliequist & Lövgren, 2012). Thus, our analysis unpacks this term to show the contextual variation and meaning in the representations of gender, ageing and the digital transformation of working life.

Our findings suggest that advertisements for digital technologies are used to convey a set of values and ideas on how the viewer should, or could, respond to the digital transformation. The image of an elderly woman is deployed as caricature of the employee resistance to the digitalization of working life. However, through this imagery, the advertisers also provide their audience with a normative path as in how the disruptions these technologies bring could be resolved by staging a fictive "happy ending".

The implications and contributions of the study are twofold. First, by examining the representations of the elderly woman in promotional material for digital technologies, we are able to add to the theorization of imaginaries that inform and shape our collective understanding of the digital transformation and its working life consequences. Our argument is that this imaginary is informed by a gendered and ageist subtext, and that these subtexts, and not necessarily the technologies themselves, risk create exclusions from the digitalized working life. Thus, such subtexts need to be made visible and challenged. Second, by contextualizing the image of the elderly woman and focusing on the Swedish 'tant', we also add to the feminist gerontology stream of research through by adding an additional dimension to what we know of cultural tropes and representation of aging women.

Keywords: digital transformation, ageism, feminism, gender, feminist gerontology, digital entrepreneurship

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