

Chapter 8


Ikigai Play: Towards an Ikigai Paradigm of Healthy and Active Ageing in Europe

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is grounded in the results of the ERASMUS+ funded project SmartAgeCare, which investigated active and healthy ageing strategies across eight European countries. The project aims to foster digital inclusion, civic participation, and psychosocial well-being among older adults by exploring innovative models of engagement. This chapter introduces the concept of 'Ikigai Play' as a transdisciplinary framework rooted in a meta-narrative review and inspired by the Japanese philosophy of Ikigai—meaning 'reason for being'. Synthesising evidence from national studies and digital ageing strategies, the chapter identifies regional disparities, psychosocial drivers, and the transformative potential of inclusive technologies. 'Ikigai Play' is proposed as a culturally adaptive model to support autonomy, well-being, and digital health equity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter is developed within the framework of the SmartAgeCare project, an international research initiative funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union. The project explores innovative approaches to promote healthy and active ageing across Europe, with a strong focus on digital inclusion, civic engagement, and meaningful participation. Through cross-national collaboration among researchers and institutions from eight European countries, the project addresses how emerging digital technologies and psychosocial paradigms can enhance the autonomy, health, and sense of purpose of older adults.

At the heart of this approach lies the Japanese concept of *Ikigai*—meaning 'reason for being'—which this chapter proposes as a culturally sensitive and emotionally resonant tool for guiding innovation in age-friendly ecosystems. The main objectives of the SmartAgeCare project are: (1) to investigate the role of digital technologies in improving health outcomes and social participation among older adults; (2) to assess regional disparities in digital and health equity; and (3) to develop a conceptual model that integrates cultural, social, and technological perspectives into a cohesive framework for active ageing.

This chapter proposes the 'Ikigai Play' paradigm — a novel framework that connects health, digital equity, and citizenship with older adults' search for meaning and purpose. Drawing from extensive literature reviews conducted across eight European countries, we argue that *Ikigai* can serve as a transdisciplinary and humanistic lens for designing inclusive ageing policies and technologies. The global demographic transition toward an ageing population presents both challenges and opportunities for societies across Europe. As populations grow older, the pursuit of healthy and active ageing becomes not only a health imperative but also a social and economic necessity (World Health Organization, 2015). To navigate this shift, new paradigms are required — frameworks that not only support longevity but also emphasize purpose, connection, and wellbeing in later life (Foster & Walker, 2015).

In response to these imperatives, the *Ikigai* concept—originating from Japanese philosophy—has gained traction in Western health discourse as a model for promoting wellbeing among older adults (García & Miralles, 2017; Imai, 2018). *Ikigai*, loosely translated as “a reason for being,” integrates personal fulfillment, community engagement, and a sense of meaning, making it a powerful lens through which to examine ageing policies and interventions (Sone et al., 2008).

European initiatives focused on active ageing have increasingly turned toward holistic approaches that incorporate psychological, social, and cultural factors (Walker, 2002; WHO, 2020). While biomedical models remain central to healthcare delivery, they are often insufficient to address the multidimensional aspects of ageing. Instead, interdisciplinary and participatory frameworks that center lived experience and purpose are gaining prominence (Buse, Martin, & Nettleton, 2018; Marston & van Hoof, 2019). As a dynamic and context-sensitive concept, *ikigai* also aligns with European ideals of active citizenship, where engagement in community, intergenerational solidarity, and digital participation contribute to a sense of purpose.

Against this backdrop, this chapter addresses the following research question: How can *ikigai* values and approaches be integrated with content on active and healthy ageing, digital transition, and European citizenship to develop a culturally appropriate training program for EU citizens over 65? In answering this question, we seek to bridge psychological well-being, technological innovation, and civic engagement through a unified, human-centered framework.

The chapter is structured as follows: Section 2 outlines the theoretical background, introducing core concepts such as eHealth, digital equity, health literacy, and *Ikigai*. Section 3 presents the methodology used in conducting a meta-narrative review. Section 4 synthesizes country-specific findings. Section 5

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