

WE MUST PROTECT CHILDREN BUT ALSO THEIR GRANDPARENTS: A QUALITATIVE UNDERSTANDING OF OLDER ADULTS' GENERAL PERCEPTIONS AND UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIAL NETWORKS

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ABSTRACT

Aim. Research on older adults (≥ 60) repeatedly confirms that the use of social networks has a rather positive effect on these users. The indicated trend leads us to the research of older adults with a focus on their motivations and challenges when using social networking sites.

Methods. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty-four older adults in Slovakia. The aim was to uncover the deeper processes and details that the members of the selected sample experience when using social networks.

Results. The thematic analysis revealed a disproportion between low knowledge of social networks and willingness to use them in the research sample (Q1). While older adults rated their knowledge of social networks with a school grade of 4, they do not see this as an obstacle to their increasingly frequent use of social networks. Within the second research area (Q2), a set of seven motivations derived from the use of social networks among respondents were identified. Finally, four main challenges (Q3) were identified in the research.

Conclusion. Research findings confirms not only older adults' growing interest in using social networks, but also the need for adequate media education with a focus on 'digital citizenship', which emphasises both, skills and also knowledge.

Cognitive value. When using social networks among older adults, their family members are the driving force behind respondents' understanding (knowledge) and technological progress (practical skills). There is the necessity of advancement of digital competencies of older adults.

Keywords: Older adults, social networks, knowledge level, motivations, challenges, digital citizenship

INTRODUCTION

Opinions on the age of people characterised as *older adults* vary and the definition is not uniform around the world. People judge ageing according to different criteria. This mainly includes physical condition and age, loss of mental freshness, inability to take care of oneself, inability to adapt to changes, retirement and the like. Generally speaking, according to the younger generation, age is decisive, according to older people, more related to health condition and the ability to take care of oneself.

In Slovakia, we currently refer to older adults as "seniors" and characterise them as older adults between the ages of 60-65 and 75; the next period is then defined as "old age" (Ondrušová, 2011). A similar chronology is also recognised by the United Nations "as well as most researchers who have used measures and indicators of population ageing that are mostly or entirely based on people's chronological age, defining older persons as those aged 60 or 65 years or over" (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019, p. 5). According to Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) or for example the World Economic Forum (WEF) the elderly population are defined as people aged 65 and over (OECD, n.d.; Richter, 2023).

Generally speaking, people from Generation Z, i.e., young people born in the years 1995-2010, are currently the biggest users of social networks

worldwide (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Ballard, 2019; Statista, 2020). In Slovakia, too, young people have long been the dominant group in the use of social networks and more than 90% of users use them daily (Slovenská sporiteľňa – Aktuálny, 2019; TouchIT, 2021; Kršiak, 2022) and on average more than four hours a day; i.e., young people spend the most time on social networks from all age categories (Kršiak, 2023). The intensity of internet use among the young generation naturally also leads to the intensity of research (Gregussová & Kováčiková, n.d.; Izrael et al., 2020; Kriglerová & Chudžíková, 2021; Velšič, 2015), to enlightenment (Tomková et al., 2015) and juvenile protection (Gregussová & Drobný, 2013). However, according to research, the use of social networks is increasingly visible among Slovaks over 60 (in this text, we will continue to use the term “older adults” for this group of users). However, despite the relevant risks, empirical research in this age group is insufficient. Concerns are also growing due to the low level of media literacy, which research has confirmed in the group of older adults (Hečková, 2023; Kosno, 2023). The indicated trend opens the question of the degree of adaptation of older adults in Slovakia to technology as well as the question of the consequences that follow from it.

In this research, we aim to qualitatively understand older adults’ knowledge, motivations and (mis)perceptions of using social networks. All, by exploring the following research questions: 1) What are older adults’ self-reported knowledge level about social networking sites; 2) What are older adults’ personal motivations with social networking sites? and 3) Do older adults face any challenges in using social networking sites? If yes, what are they? In the belief that we must protect children because “protection of z is an important matter in relation to the protection vulnerable groups” (Lešková et al., 2021, p. 49; Vrabec & Petranová, 2013), as well as we must protect also their grandparents, a qualitative analysis of the understanding of 24 older adults’ general perceptions and understanding of social networks was carried out. The main common feature of older adults is their age ≥ 60 years.

ADAPTATION OF OLDER ADULTS TO TECHNOLOGY AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

The latest research of Slovaks aged 15-79 confirmed that up to 63% of the population currently use social networks on a daily basis; this is an all-time high (Go4insight, 2022). With the increase in the activity of older users in the online space, and with the increase in their technological literacy the consequences of the use of modern technologies are naturally related. Research in the context of Slovak older adults confirms that the use of social networks has a significantly positive effect. Great positives are noted in both sexes of older adults, especially in relation to the suppression of stress, anxiety and sadness caused by social isolation and loneliness (Harvan, 2020a;

Morris, 2015). These feelings increased especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Budayová et al., 2022; Cintulová et al., 2021; Lešková & Uhál, 2020; Maturkanič et al., 2021; Sámelová et al., 2021; Sirotkin et al., 2023). It was a specific period when older adults had to socially distance themselves from other groups of people as part of measures related to their protection from the virus. During the pandemic but also after it, it turns out that it is precisely social networks that allow people of an older age to maintain constant contact with their family and friends. It is confirmed that strengthening social ties helps older adults not only fight loneliness, but also helps them stay healthier and happier (van Hoof et al., 2018).

Maintaining existing ties and the ability to create new ties also brings well-being (Cotten et al., 2022; Káčerová et al., 2019; Káčerová & Ondačková, 2020; Walden University, n.d.). In turn, new experiences, more beautiful home furnishings, new inspirations for the garden or tasty culinary experiments contribute to the improvement of the emotional area, to which older adults are also inspired by popular pages and communities on social networks (Vořanská et al., 2021). Finally, the positives of using social networks among older adults is also the need to learn new things, which are naturally related to the rapid development of technology. Regular brain activity not only reduces bouts of anxiety, sadness or bad mood, but also keeps the brain busy, which increases the feeling of own competence and potentially contributes, for example, to delaying dementia, improving memory and other cognitive functions, such as the ability to concentrate or learn (Fitzpatrick, 2023; Morris, 2015; van Migrot, 2023). It can therefore be concluded that the quality of life in old age is influenced, among others, by the quality and possibilities of social networks.

The indicated increase in interest in the virtual world is accompanied also by questions about how the Internet world can threaten seniors. Although research confirms the opposite, recalling the positives of social networks for older adults, it is also necessary to mention the flip side of online activities in this age group. According to experts, technology in general brings profound consequences in our basic attitude towards the other, because technology is a "depersonalisation maker". Peter Kondrila and Eva Durková pointed out about that in the context of so-called "personalist-existentialist ethics" which "underlines the fact that everyday use of technology is, *inter alia*, changing the perception of others in a way that an individual sees the other as something technical and technological" (Kondrila & Durkova, 2018, p. 46). Therefore, if technology enters the relationship between people, it contributes to the depersonalisation of this relationship. Among the significant negatives of online existence, we also list means that can endanger older adults in the virtual space (fake news, hoax, alarm messages, spam, viruses, etc.). Pages with dangerous content (violence) and internet scams, misuse of personal data and photos, abuse of trust, financial fraud and misuse of information about an individual's socio-economic conditions (for example, what a person owns) and others can convey other

negatives. Experts also draw attention to an increase in the individual's susceptibility to negative social behaviour in the online space (de Vries & Kühne, 2015). Finally, the dangers associated with the use of social networks can also have an impact on the psychological and mental health of older adults, which cannot be forgotten (Atkinson et al., 2016).

In short, generally speaking, we gain more experience as we get older. That is why it is often said that older people are also wiser. Does this currently also apply to activities in the online world? Research repeatedly confirms the significantly positive influence of the Internet, social media and, within them, especially social networks, on older adults (Cotten et al., 2022; Fitzpatrick, 2023; Harvan, 2020a; Káčerová et al., 2019; Káčerová & Ondačková, 2020; Morris, 2015; van Hoof et al., 2018; Van Migrot, 2023; Walden University, n.d.). On the other hand, research has also long-term reminders of the pitfalls of using online technology in the group of older adults (Arch et al., 2009; Kane, 2019). In the context of these opposites, in this article we will focus on Slovak older adults aged ≥ 60 years, who represent the generation of baby boomers, which – shortly after the fall of the forty-year communist regime (in former Czechoslovakia in 1989), experiencing the euro-unionisation and globalisation trends at the turn of the millennium (Králik et al., 2018) – it not only followed technological progress but also learned to live with technology; the generation of today's older adults were not even forty years old when the first Internet browser was introduced to the world (in 1992) and were in their forties when Google was founded (in 1998). Thus, our goal is to contribute to the discussion about the personal motivations and problems of older adults with social networking sites, as in the context of Slovakia it is a topic that is little explored.

METHODOLOGY

Purpose of research

We were interested in how older adults' evaluate self-reported knowledge level about current social networking sites and what are the personal motivations and potential problems of older adults with social networking sites. For the purpose of the research, the following research questions were constructed:

- Q1: What are older adults' self-reported knowledge levels about social networking sites
- Q2: What are older adults' personal motivations with social networking sites?
- Q3: Do older adults face any challenges in using social networking sites? If yes, what are they?

The aim of the research was to verify three variables: 1) self-reported knowledge level about social networking sites; 2) older adults' personal

motivations with social networking sites and 3) older adults' challenges in using social networking sites.

In order to clarify the discussed issue, the authors chose a qualitative form of research, which, as stated by Hendl, does not remain when examining the phenomenon on the surface, but helps to find out the details of the investigated phenomenon in the lives of the interviewees (Hendl, 2005). A qualitative approach to research seeks and analyses any information that contributes to illuminating the research questions.

Research sample and research method

In the first phase, $n = 53$ seniors aged 60-84 were included in the research. The research sample consisted of 36 women and 17 men. A condition for participation in the research was the respondent's experience with using social networks, as we were interested in their daily experiences. Those respondents who do not use social networks were omitted from the research ($n = 29$ so-called "passive" older adults in the context of this research consisted of 12 women and 17 men), as it does not make sense to investigate the phenomenon among respondents who have not experienced the researched phenomenon (Creswell, 2007, p. 143-144).

The resulting research sample consisted of 24 older adults aged 60-84; the average age of the respondents was 67.9 years. The research team consisted of 14 women (58.24%) and 10 men (41.6%).

The selection of the research sample was purposive and included a targeted choice of suitable respondents who, in Jan Hendl's words, represent "information-rich cases suitable for deeper study" (2005, p. 154). Although it is not a representative sample, it is a frequently used method of selecting a research sample in qualitative research. The purposeful selection of research respondents requires the character of qualitative research, so that the researcher manages to bring a variety of experiences and stories from different respondents who have encountered the phenomenon under investigation. As John W. Creswell points out, representativeness "is not even the goal of qualitative research, as it does not set itself the ambition of generalising its findings. Its goal is to reveal the motivations and details of the attitudes of the members of the selected sample" (2007, p. 125-126). Thus, own research brings research findings from a research sample of older adults in Slovakia, but at the same time it indicates the tendencies present in society and can serve as a basis for further research.

Data collection took place using semi-structured interviews, which proved effective as they provided control over the direction and content of the interviews, but also offered the possibility of adding additional questions. Semi-structured interviews thus enabled a closer look into the investigated issue, allowed the respondents to elaborate on their answers and gave the researchers the opportunity to ask additional questions. The possibility of verifying whether the respondents understood the question correctly also proved to be an advantage. We also positively evaluate the

possibility “to take into account the individual contexts of the respondents in the research findings” (Hendl, 2005, p. 165); for example, the death of a life partner and the related (not always verbally named) loneliness of the respondent.

We are aware that the topic of social networks and the problems related to them is not an easy topic for research, especially from the point of view of interfering in the private sphere of our respondents (see more in Možný, 1990, p. 9). All the more, our goal was that the data collection during the research and its interpretation took place in full compliance with research ethics; the respondents’ consent to the research was ensured; voluntariness in the degree of openness, anonymity of respondents, academic purpose of the research and the like (Silverman, 2005).

Research procedure

The research was conducted in different social groups of older adults. Most of the respondents ($n = 17$) were people with secondary education who live most of their life in the city ($n = 19$). The research took place from October 2022 to May 2023.

Most of the semi-structured interviews took place in the respondents’ homes, six interviews took place online (due to an illness), in a cafe (where the respondent’s grandson worked), two interviews during the walk. There were also three married couples in the research sample; the spouses were interviewed separately. The length of the semi-structured interview was between 45–60 minutes. No semi-structured interview (the duration of the research part of the interview) exceeded an hour. The sessions were recorded for data analysis with the consent of all respondents.

Thematic areas of the semi-structured interviews consisted of the following topics:

- a) Evaluation of self-reported knowledge level about current social networking on a scale from 1 to 5;
- b) Personal motivations of older adults to use social networks;
- c) Problems of older adults when using social networks;
- d) A set of security measures that older adults know and use (eg, software protection, strong passwords and their safe storage, software updates, caution against fake websites, caution against phishing e-mails, etc.);
- e) Possible follow-up questions on respondent’s survey responses.

Research analysis

The task of one researcher was to conduct interviews with 24 research respondents. Another member of the research team transcribed the data. No software tools were used to analyse the research data. The researchers appreciated the possibility of manually recording short notes in the printed text. Similarly, coding was done in paper form. Researchers used short, margin-based descriptions; part of this process was continuous highlighting of interesting statements of the respondents.

Codes were defined as main, or were grouped into larger categories. The researcher who conducted the interviews worked with other researchers to explore the themes and categorise them. All researchers had to agree on the correctness and relevance of the categorisation; if necessary, revisions were made until unanimous agreement was reached by all researchers.

RESULTS

The starting point of the research is the representation of self-reported social networking sites knowledge level in the research group ($n = 24$). Own research brings findings about older adults' personal motivations with social networking sites, and older adults' challenges in using social networking sites. We managed to obtain the following findings from the semi-structured interviews:

Self-reported social networking sites knowledge level (Q1)

Based on recommendations from some older adults who were part of our research, for the self-evaluation of respondents' self-reported social networking sites knowledge level, we used a well-understandable scale of school grades from 1-5, with 1 being the best grade and 5 the worst grade. Thus, we encode self-reported social networking sites knowledge level as follows: 1 - I am very knowledgeable about social networking sites; 2 - I am knowledgeable about social networking sites; 3 - I have some knowledge about social networking sites; 4 - I am aware of social networking sites but do not have much knowledge about it and 5 - I am not aware of almost anything about social networking sites.

The majority of older adults rate their knowledge of social networking sites with grade 4, i.e., I am aware of social networking sites but do not have much knowledge about it. There are 11 respondents, which states it, which is 45.76% of the entire research sample. It is worth noting the fact that none of the respondents rated their knowledge as 1 - excellent (0%) and only one person would rate its self-reported social networking sites knowledge by grade 2 - commendable (4.16%). Five respondents out of 24 chose the worst rating on the scale, i.e., grade 5 - insufficient (20.8%). We must add that while some older adults are tech-savvy and actively use social networks on a daily basis, others are less familiar with these platforms or have varying levels of interest. However, the willingness to use social networks can be noted in the entire research set, despite the fact that the respondents do not know much about them (i.e., grade 5). In the context of this research, we are talking about the disproportion between the level of knowledge and willingness to (practically) use social networks in the research group. While self-reported social networking sites knowledge is low among the respondents, the (practically) using social networks is accompanied by willingness and activity among respondents. It seems that factors such as digital lit-

eracy, accessibility and personal preferences influence how older adults in our research sample engage with social networks.

Based on qualitative research, it can be added that the surveyed older adults connect their current knowledge of social networking sites with the perception of their current needs. As one of the respondents states: "I know what I need right now". Several respondents also express their belief that if they need to know more, they have those close to them, who will show it to them: "My grandson wrote everything down for me on paper. I know which button to press and where to press it, and it works. He always shows me new things and I'm slowly but surely improving." All 24 participants express their personal conviction that there will be someone to explain what they need to know about the Internet and social networks; older adults most often mention children and grandchildren as their help with social networks issues.

Older adults' motivations in using social networking sites (Q2)

While there is a wide range of behaviour and preferences among older adults in research at a general level, when it comes to social media usage, we were focused on most frequent motivations why our respondents ($n = 24$) use social networks. We present the order of motivations from the most important to the least important in our research sample.

Staying connected with family and friends - Researched older adults use social networks to maintain and strengthen relationships with their loved ones and close friends. They share updates, photos, and videos, and also engage in conversations through comments or private messages. Some respondents like video calls more than texting; this is related to their poor vision at short distances or shaking hands while texting.

Accessing news and information - Older adults use social networks to stay updated on current events and news articles and videos. Especially youtube seems to be popular source in our research sample.

Sharing personal experiences and advices - Social networks provide a platform for older adults to share their life experiences and wisdom. Moreover, many of them share posts of their family members or about their family members. Respondents also post about their interests such as gardening achievements and travel experiences. Many of sharing personal experiences and advice also relate to their health, or the solution to their health problems; it seems that big motivation is posting this kind of content, because it allows them to contribute to conversations and provide valuable insights based on their unique experiences and perspectives. Sharing personal experiences and advices seems to be useful also when respondents have to managed their losses; in connection with several different spheres of life (e.g. loss of professional status, loss of social contacts, etc.) (Kobylarek et al., 2022).

Participation in interest communities - Social networks provide opportunities for older adults to connect with like-minded individuals who share their interests and hobbies. In our research sample they join groups focused

on topics such as gardening, cooking, consulting in the field of herbs or book clubs. Among our respondents popular sites are even groups whose members who have specific health conditions.

Learning and personal development – Generally speaking, the effect of education is the person will acquire certain skills and competences for behaviour in certain life situations (Kondrla, 2023). It is interesting, that many respondents use social networks as a means of learning and personal development. They visit educational pages, follow experts in their fields of interest, or access educational content shared by organisations and institutions. Some respondents talk about their personal experience with an online visit to a cultural institution (most often a museum).

Participating in discussions and debates – Older adults of our research want to engage in online discussions, debates, or forums on social networks. Their motivation is express their opinions, provide insights, and contribute to conversations on topics of their interest.

Reconnecting with old acquaintances – Social networks help older adults in our research sample reconnect with long-lost friends, classmates, or colleagues from their past. This motivate them to use social networks also for searching and connecting with those people they have lost touch with over the years.

Older adults challenges in using social networking sites (Q3)

Let us recall that in the context of our qualitative findings, we can talk about the disproportion between the level of knowledge about social networks and the level of practice and use of social networks. This disproportion was noted by almost half of the respondents (45.76% of the respondents rated their knowledge of social networking sites as 4; more in the research part Q1). Despite this disproportion, respondents express satisfaction with the current status quo: “I know what I need right now”; “I don’t know much, but I was able to learn what interests me”; “I don’t know much, but my grandson always stops by and explains what I don’t know” and so on.

The disproportion between knowledge about social networks and the willingness to use them also creates a context for the following older adults’ challenges that were identified in relation to the use of social networking sites. We can see that the lower level of knowledge has a certain influence on the perception of challenges and problems that older adults describe in relation to social networks.

Using semi-structured interviews, four mainly older adults’ challenges in using social networking sites were identified:

Overcoming anxiety about “one’s own incapacity and old age” – In this category, the statements of the respondents were concentrated, which directly name their anxiety about technological progress, which they do not understand and which they cannot keep up with. Older adults are frustrated that they quickly forget the knowledge they learn and have to “repeatedly ask relatives how to do it”. They feel not only “sadness at their own incompe-

tence” but also “anger at old age, which slowly but surely robs a person of the last memory cells”.

(Un)awareness of dangerous elements in the online space – The increase in the activity of older users in the online space is also long-term related to the increase in technological literacy, which is evident in Slovakia (Go4insight, 2022; Harvan, 2020a;) as well as in international context (Madden, 2010; Twohig, 2021). The surveyed respondents, although they are active, seem to only partially know the terminology of dangerous elements in the online space (e.g. fake news, hoax, alarm messages, spam, etc.). On the other hand, they are relatively well aware of the potential presence of Internet fraud (primarily financial) and possible abuse of their trust. In addition, there are several respondents in the research sample who surprisingly state that although the Internet is generally considered dangerous, they are not in any danger. An illustration of this belief is the statement: “I only have family and a few friends on Facebook, I don’t send anything, I just read.” Or another statement: “I’m 72 years old, who would be interested in an old retired woman on Facebook alone (laughter).” According to Lee et al., these and similar statements indicates “signs of denial”; i.e., respondents refuse to believe that they could be the target of a cyber attack (Lee et al., 2016). Thus, it is possible to identify the fact, that the respondents do not pay enough attention to security measures related to the use of the Internet. The stated finding is apparently a trend in the elderly group that is confirmed worldwide (Hoelscher, 2018; Morrison et al., 2021).

Respondents’ concerns about online safety – The following is partly related to the previous point. Awareness (although only partial) of dangerous elements in the online space certainly has an impact on respondents’ concerns about their online safety. In our research sample, older adults worry about themselves in relation to three phenomena: a) they fear potential surveillance through their own webcam, b) they are annoyed by ubiquitous and targeting advertising, because it gives them the impression of monitoring of their activity, and c) they also fear “viruses that will damage their computer.” Surprisingly, many of them answer the supplementary question for example about protection through antivirus software in the negative. One of the answers is also: “I do not need it”, “I consider it uselessness” or “waste of my money”.

The influence of social networks on the psychological well-being of older adults – Talking to respondents about their psychological well-being while using social networks, some respondents admit not only “anxiety about their own incapacity and old age” (see point 2 in this research section), but also fear of lack of ability and own control over the processes that take place in front of their eyes (see points 3 and 4 in this research section). In general, older adults enjoy using social networks, and they talk about the user-friendliness of social networks. On the other hand, the respondents also admit the fact that social networks are sometimes a trigger of negative feelings for them; for example when they did not find the content they needed; when they

saw a negative comment on a social network; when they read news about politics or the economy that upset them; they were bothered by annoying advertising and so on. A marginal finding of our own research is also the respondents' admission of frustration from their own ignorance when using online services (for example, internet banking) or from not knowing where to look for the necessary information. Let us add that the last mentioned findings correspond significantly with research findings abroad (Atkinson et al., 2016).

DISCUSSION

Qualitative research used semi-structured interviews. It is not representative, which was not even the ambition after all. We see an insight into the life, experiences and challenges of older adults as a benefit of the research. Our aim was to understand qualitatively older adults' knowledge and respondents' motivations from using social networks as well as older adults' challenges of using social networks. All, by exploring three main research questions: Q1) What are older adults' self-reported knowledge level about social networking sites; Q2) What are older adults' personal motivations with social networking sites? and Q3) Do older adults face any challenges in using social networking sites? If yes, what are they?

Based on the dominant statements of the respondents ($n = 24$), it is possible to make a partial generalisation of the findings as part of the interpretation. Among other things, it can be stated that most older adults rate their knowledge of social networking sites (Q1) with a grade of 4, i.e., I am aware of social networking sites but do not have much knowledge about it (45.76%). In the context of qualitative findings, we can talk about the disproportion between the level of knowledge about social networks and the level of practice and use of social networks. In other words, while knowledge about social networks is declared by the respondents as little ("I do not have much knowledge about social networks"), the respondents do not lack practice with the use of social networks ("I am aware of social networking sites").

The found disproportion between knowledge about social networks and the willingness to use them corresponds to empirical research in other countries, where older adults are associated with calls for protective measures, including in the field of digital literacy education (Schreurs et al., 2017), computer self-sufficiency (Chu, 2010; Hunsaker & Hargittai, 2018); computer security (Grimes et al., 2010; Jiang et al., 2016; Shao et al., 2019), etc. Finally, Benjamin Morrison et al. (2021) directly point out that older adults do not always show a willingness to fully manage the challenges in the field of cyber security, which appears to be a consequence of their "low self-efficacy, distrust and lack of awareness" (p. 1034).

Despite the disproportion between knowledge of social networks and willingness to use them, our respondents express satisfaction with the cur-

rent status quo: "I know what I need right now"; "I don't know much, but I was able to learn what I was interested in; I wanted my loved ones to see that I'm not a dinosaur" and so on. An interesting finding is the expression of the belief that if the respondents need to know more, they have those close to them who will help them and explain the necessary things to them. Since older adults surveyed agree that they would definitely ask for the advice of their loved ones, let's add that this is a positive finding in our research, but it no longer correlates with, for example, a representative study of older adults in Slovakia from 2021, which confirmed reluctance and fear of older adults to ask for advice (TouchIT, 2021).

Based on our qualitative research findings, it can finally be confirmed that the role of family members in the positive attitude of the examined older adults is undeniable. It turns out that the children and grandchildren of the surveyed respondents are important sources of help. Thus, when it comes to computer use in the group of older adults, intergenerational help and solidarity are shown to be significant; they can be identified as one of the essential bases for understanding the principles of online technology functioning in the group of older adults.

Also, the set of motivations (7), which we identified in the research set within the second research area (Q2), point to fact that although the level of knowledge about social networks was rated 4 by almost half of the respondents (the worse rating was only option 5), older adults confirmed in the interviews that they know social networks to the extent of what they need; and they are able to learn new things if they need to. Moreover, respondents unanimously agree that their ability to learn is largely influenced by their internal motivation. It can therefore be said that in our research sample, older adults' personal experiences with social networking sites depend on several motivational factors: Above all, the desire to stay connected with family and friends; have access to news and information and share personal experiences and advice. This corresponds to the research findings of earlier research in the group of older adults, which were carried out in an international context (Harvan, 2020b). Let's add that in our research sample, they talk about the use of social networks and about the internal motivation that leads an individual to use the social networks of the respondent – women – to the same extent as the examined men. This finding does not correspond with some findings that have focused on research on the use of social networks in relation to the gender of the users (Hochschild 2012; Powell 1999).

Let us remind ourselves that the daily interaction of older adults in Slovakia on social networks already approaches 40% (Go4insight, 2022). This can bring many positives, but also threats. Older adults' challenges in using social networking sites were addressed in the third research part (Q3). The third research question "do older adults face any challenges in using social networking sites? If yes, what are they?" was the biggest surprise of the research. The third set of research findings implicitly confirmed the disproportion between knowledge about social networks and

the willingness to use social networks among respondents in our research. Inter alia, four main challenges were identified: Overcoming anxiety from “one’s own incapacity and old age”; (Un)awareness of dangerous elements in the online space; Respondents’ concerns about their online safety and the effects of social networks on respondents’ psychological well-being. To put it briefly, in the context of Q3 it can be seen that the respondents – despite the strong internal motivation that flows from the use of social networks – feel not only “anxiety about their own incapacity and old age”, but also a fear from a lack of skills, and own control over the processes that are unfolding before their eyes.

In the context of the research findings, the need for adequate media education of older adults is therefore evident. In order for media education to be adequate, it must contain not only elements of “the ‘protectionist’ and ‘empowerment’ wings of the media literacy education” (Hobbs & Jensen, 2013, p. 1), or discourse about “tool competence”, technology benefits, contemporary culture or education (National Association for Media Literacy Education, 2007). We are convinced that the application of the relatively new concept of so-called ‘digital citizenship’ to the education of citizens is becoming more and more necessary because it is a kind of “the ability to navigate our digital environments in a way that’s safe and responsible and emphasises active and respectful engaging in these spaces” (Media Smarts, n.d.). In short, current ‘digital citizenship’ emphasises both, skills and also knowledge, needed to be effective as well as safe in the increasingly social media environment.

Finally, further research could focus precisely on the perception of ‘digital citizenship’ and its application in the everyday practice of older adults in Slovakia, as such research is currently minimal (Gálišová, n.d.; Hanganon et al., 2014; Ministry of Finance of the Slovak Republic, n.d.). Qualitative research, which in addition to data also provides the necessary explanations and the context of the findings, proves to be useful. On the other hand, the difficulty of this type of research can be the ability to relevantly investigate, for example, security knowledge or awareness in the population of older adults, because they may have difficulty explaining their attitudes, describing their abilities or vulnerabilities, due to their low level of digital literacy (Grimes et al., 2010); we encountered a similar problem in our own research. A possible solution is suggested by Morrison, Coventry and Briggs, who talk about the use of interviews based on qualitative research in combination with, for example, simple “structured tasks that would include challenges or provocations of various kinds” (Morrison et al., 2021, p. 1034).

In the field of future research, the research of the layer of older adults, who can be understood as passive in relation to the use of the Internet, also appears to be useful. This group does not have experience with the use of social networks, and therefore was not included in our own research either ($n = 29$ so-called passive older adults in the context of this research con-

sisted of 12 women and 17 men); it did not make sense to investigate the researched phenomenon among respondents who had not experienced it (Creswell 2007).

CONCLUSION

Older people are carriers of culture, values, ethics and wisdom, but old age also brings with it vulnerability, uncertainty and fear. The latter has its specific forms even in today's social networks. Believing that, we must protect children but also their grandparents, a qualitative analysis of the understanding of older adults' general perceptions and understanding of social networks was carried out. We see the insight into the life, experiences and challenges of older adults and the partial generalisation of the findings as a benefit of the research.

In the first research area (Q1), we noticed a disproportion between respondents' knowledge about social networks and their willingness to use social networks. While older adults rated their knowledge of social networks with a school grade of 4, they do not see this as an obstacle to their increasingly frequent use of social networks. Respondents do not see this situation as tragic. In case of need or difficulties (due to lack of knowledge), they are not afraid to ask for help. It can be confirmed that family members play a significant role in the use of social networks in the research group of older adults. They are often the driving force behind respondents' understanding (knowledge) and technological progress (practical skills). With the help of loved ones, the respondents learn to deal with new technologies, and their initial mistrust and fears or even fear that they will not be able to handle it change into an appreciation of the convenience of new technologies and the joy of their own improvement. Intergenerational help and solidarity can be characterised as one of the essential elements or a kind of conceptual basis for understanding the principles of the functioning of online technologies in the group of older adults.

Within the second research area (Q2), a set of seven motivations derived from the use of social networks among older adults were identified. As it turned out, older adults' personal experiences with social networking sites depend on several motivational factors. The biggest motivation is the desire to stay connected with family and friends; have access to news and information and share personal experiences and advice.

The third research question "do older adults face any challenges in using social networking sites? If yes, what are they?" was the biggest surprise of the research. Within the third research area, four main challenges (Q3) were identified, which indicate that the respondents – despite the strong internal motivation they perceive when using social networks – feel not only "anxiety about their own incapacity and old age", but also a fear of a lack of skills and their own control over the processes taking place before their eyes. In

the context of the research findings is evident the need for adequate media education with a focus on 'digital citizenship' – that emphasise both, skills and also knowledge – both needed for older people to be effective as well as safe in the increasingly social media environment.

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