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THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN EMOTIONAL COMMUNICATION AMONG INDIVIDUALS IN THEIR THIRD AGE**

Abstract. *The study focused on investigating and analysing the perception of Facebook's role, as one of the components in the field of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), namely, social media, on the quality of emotional interaction, particularly among individuals in their third age. The research sample comprised 260 participants of various ages, divided into two age groups – under 50 and over 50 years old. Participants' opinions were obtained through empirical research, employing quantitative methods and surveys as the research technique. The research findings indicate that age influences participants' attitudes to digital communication as a means and medium of emotional communication in various contexts. Participants in the third age exhibit stronger reservations towards Facebook as a tool for emotional communication and are more cautious about the use of modern communication methods offered by new social media techniques. They are also less inclined to abandon traditional interpersonal interactions. The results reveal general distrust in the information circulating on Facebook and underscore the advantage of maintaining each interpersonal communication, encompassing all elements of emotional relationships beyond the realm of the Internet, or the information mediation services offered by ICT, primarily social media.*
Keywords: *Information and Communication Technologies, Facebook, third age, emotional communication, alienation.*

INTRODUCTION

With the advancement of technology, particularly in social interactions like human communication, significant innovations have emerged, notably in Information and Communication Technologies (hereinafter: ICT) and

digitalisation. Artificial intelligence, which is widely accepted and predominant, has been a special focus. While social media is just one aspect of contemporary electronic media, it encompasses the largest number of communicators, or correspondents. The relentless pace of the ubiquitous technological progress presents a tangible challenge for individuals to keep pace with this development. Moreover, only a small percentage of applications and digital solutions available today are effectively utilised, representing one of the fundamental problems facing modern digital society. Through this lens, the contribution of this research lies in addressing the issue of the emotional life and communication of individuals in their third age, at a time when there is public discourse on the relativisation of the importance of emotional communication among older individuals.

In the context of this research, the term "older participants" refers to individuals who according to Pečjak (2001, 20–21), Gilleard et al. (2007), Martyn and Gallant (2012) and Esgin Günder (2014) belong to the third age, or the last third of life, which begins after the age of 50, with the boundary shifting according to the systematic ageing of the global population (Pečjak 2001, 14). Laslett ([1987] 1991) views life through four stages, without clearly defined boundaries, with the third age being the culmination of life, and his theory of the third age is considered a positive outlook on ageing.

It is essential to stress that ageing is an extremely individual process, which varies for each person and therefore requires an individualised approach, taking three main aspects of ageing into account (Pečjak 2001, 18) – biological, psychological and calendar, to which Featherstone and Hepworth (2005, as cited in Esgin Günder 2014) add the social aspect. The same authors state that all information and definitions about ageing are shaped by social processes, implying that interpretations and evaluations related to the ageing process arise as products of social constructions.

ICT is bringing considerable changes to the lives of older individuals, making them equal participants in online communication options (Martyn and Gallant 2012), providing them with new opportunities, and facilitating their daily existence. It is necessary to emphasise that it also plays a role in improving their quality of life (Hutto et al. 2015; Golden et al. 2009). Through email, social networks, video calls, and messages, it enables them to maintain connections with family and friends (Winstead et al. 2012; Ferreira et al. 2016; Nowland et al. 2017; Bell et al. 2013; Hope et al. 2014; Hutto et al. 2015; Ancu 2012), regarding which research suggests that emotional connection positively affects the quality of life and well-being of older individuals (Gouveia et al. 2016). Despite physical distance (Bell et al. 2013), this technology facilitates their networking (Zhang and Kaufman 2015; Ermer and Proulx 2019; Hutto et al. 2015) and offers an alternative to social support for effective ageing (Silva et al. 2018). It further provides them with access to various information, opens paths for telemedicine (Hope et al. 2014), delivers educational content of their choice, enhances the home

environment, improves safety, and increases overall comfort at home. Finally, yet no less importantly, it also offers them rich entertainment content (Ancu 2012).

Based on observations and perceptions of the environment, along with the analysis of various data on public involvement in technical-technological and digital processes, it is observed that young people easily navigate these processes (Hayes et al. 2015; Hope et al. 2014). On the contrary, older individuals encounter more challenges and difficulties with accessing, adopting and engaging in communication via social Internet platforms (Hope et al. 2014). Since they did not grow up in the digital age, contemporary user interfaces, complex applications, websites, or devices prove quite challenging for older individuals, leading to potential confusion and difficulties in acquiring digital skills (Wilson et al. 2023; Hayes et al. 2015); on the other hand, ICT can be used to enhance their ageing experience (Fang et al. 2017). Some older individuals may feel fear or discomfort with new technologies (Wilson et al. 2023; Hutto et al. 2015). Sensory impairments, such as vision or hearing problems, and motor difficulties (Wilson et al. 2023), along with various chronic illnesses (Bell et al. 2013), can prevent their use of computers, smartphones or other digital devices. Moreover, they often express concerns about the security aspects of using digital technology (Bell et al. 2013; Hope et al. 2014; Hutto et al. 2015). Nevertheless, as Sinclair and Grieve (2017) note, older adults can also establish social connections via the Internet, in a world that is rapidly changing and increasingly digitised, to the same extent as younger users.

Considering the factors mentioned above, participants' opinions on ICT and social media as media for creating and maintaining emotional relationships are questioned. Since the use of social platforms and applications is seen as crucial for social connectedness in our time (Wilson et al. 2023), understanding this dynamic is vital for devising tailored strategies that facilitate the involvement of older individuals in digital communication processes. Further, researching how young people perceive and use technology to build emotional relationships, in relation to the older population, contributes to understanding generational differences in the approach and perception of contemporary communication technologies.

RELATED RESEARCH AND MOTIVATION

As the average age of the population is growing around the world, the proportion of older adults in the demographic composition is increasing significantly, along with the potential user base of the Internet, including social platforms. In 2022, over one-fifth (21.1%) of people in the European Union were aged 65 or over, with half the population being older than 44.4 years (Eurostat 2023), and the average population age of 42.2 years (Worldometer 2023). Between 2012 and 2022, the population of the Republic of Croatia, that is, the sample of this study, aged by 3.2 years (Eurostat 2023). According to a Euronews report (2023), the population of the European Union, which in early 2024 counted just over 448

million people, is expected to peak around 2026, after which it will gradually decline, with a loss of 57.4 million working-age individuals by 2100. Of particular concern is the rise in the proportion of older adults among the working-age population, predicted to reach 60% by the end of the century. The World Health Organization announced that by 2024 individuals aged 65 and over will outnumber those under 15 in Europe, indicating the emergence of new social, economic and health challenges (Phys Org 2023), with one of these challenges being ageing in the context of the current social circumstances.

In October 2023, Northern Europe held the leading position both in Europe and globally in terms of Internet penetration into people's lives, with a high share of 97.3% of the population using the Internet, while Western Europe was the second-most connected region in Europe, where approximately 93.7% are online users, still ahead of other parts of the world (Petrosyan 2023). The number of Internet users in Europe is expected to continue to grow from 2024 to 2028, with a total rise of 60.6 million users (+8.33%), while the number of users is projected to reach 788.2 million, to set a new record in 2028 (Statista 2023).

In the third quarter of 2023, Facebook recorded 408 million monthly active users in Europe, representing a drop of 1 million users compared to the previous quarter (Dixon 2023). Although the platform witnessed an increase in users during 2021, the number of monthly active users had returned to the level at the beginning of 2020. On the other hand, the situation is different for monthly active users globally. Between the fourth quarter of 2008 and the second quarter of 2021, the number of Facebook active users skyrocketed from 100 million to an impressive 2.89 billion, and during that period no decline was seen in the number of monthly active users (Dixon 2023).

Although older adults quickly acquire a certain level of familiarity with current social networking technologies (Hutto et al. 2015), there is a noticeable lack of scientific research on their use and activities in the context of networking for an emotional connection. Many websites, as well as social Internet platforms, seem tailored to certain target groups, adjusting to their specific needs and expectations. On the other hand, little effort has been made to adequately align older individuals with trends and thereby preserve their health and life for as long as possible (Holt-Lunstad et al. 2010; Zhang and Kaufman 2015; Ermer and Proulx 2019; Hamer and Stamatakis 2014; Heo et al. 2015; Seifert et al. 2017; Hunsaker and Hargittai 2018).

The rapid increase in the number of older adults poses a challenge in both scientific and technological terms. Extending the lifespan, regardless of somatic limitations, cognitive and mental issues, represents a necessary motivational factor for promoting and maintaining social relationships as a key factor in the independent functioning of older adults. This means that the active involvement and integration of older adults in social streams are essential elements for maintaining a healthy ageing process. Research by Cornwell and Waite (2009) showed that social isolation and a lack of social networks can constitute a health risk

for older adults, but that Facebook can provide them with an opportunity to create social networks, while the relationship between social participation and the mortality rate was first identified by Berkman and Syme as early as 1979. Numerous studies since then have shown that social connectedness is particularly important for the lifespan of older adults (Haslam et al. 2015; Seeman et al. 1987; Glass et al. 1999; Giles et al. 2005; Bennett 2002; Maier and Klumb 2005) and emotional connectedness, namely, the essence of every quality interpersonal interaction, is also the focus of this research.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The widespread adoption of ICT, together with the rapid increase in the use of social Internet platforms by older adults, motivated our choice of Facebook as the platform for conducting this research. This paper utilises the research concept of mixed methods (Creswell 2018; Ambrož 2023, 178). Public opinion polling is a common tool in relations with various publics. It is most commonly used in the initial phase of public relations – analysing the existing situation, but also in later stages such as evaluating achievements (Ristić 2011, 15).

For the primary empirical research, we employed a quantitative method with the technique of collecting data via a survey on participants' opinions. The research was conducted using a questionnaire made available to participants via a Google Docs form for a full 6 days, between 15 October and 21 October 2023. As a method of qualitative research, the presented analysis relies on the theoretical framework of relevant scientific and professional literature, as well as published results of applied research on the topic under study. As part of this method, we also relied on observation, descriptions, and discursive techniques of analysis.

About the Research Structure

The research problem: The role of social networks in the quality of emotional communication among older adults.

The research subject: Public opinion on the role of Facebook in the quality of emotional communication among older adults.

Elements of the researched subject (dependent variables): Technical and technological solutions offered by Facebook as a social network, people's attitudes to these solutions, and how often people use this social network to achieve quality emotional connections.

The main research question: Considering their age, how do people embrace social networks, specifically Facebook, as a medium for emotional communication among older adults?

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: ICT is developing applications and other communication tools and languages much faster than older individuals can keep up with their usage

and successfully educate themselves to become as proficient in using social networks as younger users.

Hypothesis 2: Compared to the younger population, older adults exhibit greater reservations towards Facebook as a modern electronic medium for practising emotional communication.

Hypothesis 3: People's age influences their value judgement on the role of social networks, especially Facebook, in their personal, intimate and emotional interpersonal communication.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Description and Structure of the Data, Research Results and Validation of the Hypotheses

When using the term research results, we imply a functional and complementary summary of the findings through both quantitative and qualitative methods. The research involved a total of 260 participants from the Republic of Croatia (60.4% females, 39.6% males), ranging in age from under 18 to 79 years. The sample did not include any participants older than 80 years. Participants were categorised in two groups: those under the age of 50 (208 participants, or 80%) and those above 50 years of age (52 participants, or 20%). The sample was dominated by the age group of individuals between 30 and 49 years, accounting for 55.8% of the total sample. In the age group below 50 years, the majority of participants had completed high school (36.5%) and tertiary education (39.9%), while the fewest had completed primary school or held a doctoral degree. In contrast, in the age group above 50 years, the majority had completed high school education (47.2%), with an especially higher percentage of doctoral degrees (15.1%). In both age groups, the majority of individuals were married, although there were more singles in the group under 50 years (21.8%) than in the group above 50 years (9.6%). As expected, the majority of participants in both groups identified themselves as belonging to the Christian faith (nearly 80% of them).

Results and Valuation of the Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: ICT develops applications and other communication tools and languages much faster than older individuals can keep up with and successfully educate themselves to become as proficient in using social networks as younger users.

Graph 1 – Graphic representation for Hypothesis 1: PARTICIPANTS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF ICT APPLICATIONS, TOOLS AND LANGUAGES AND THEIR ROLE IN SUCCESSFULLY NAVIGATING SOCIAL NETWORKS DEPENDING ON CHRONOLOGICAL AGE
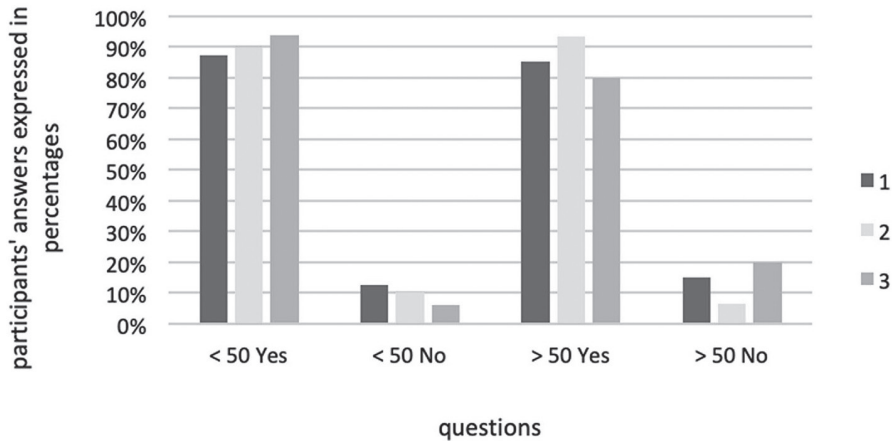
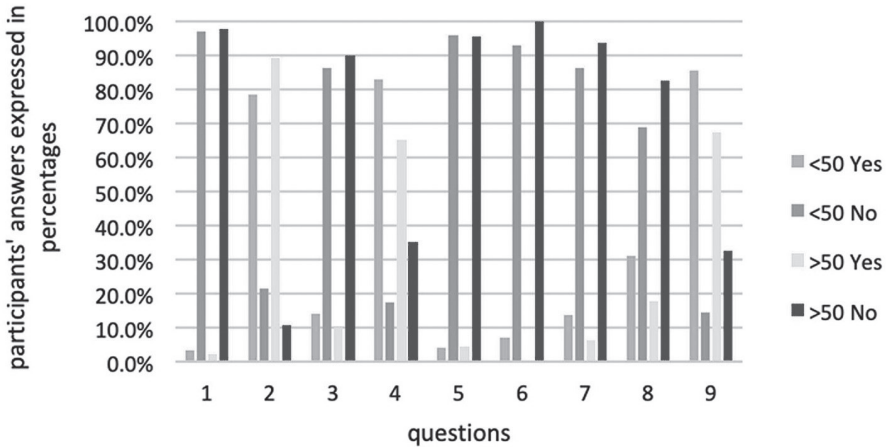
Source: the authors.

*Legend:

1. Online messages are cold and do not convey the full context of feelings or situations, which makes misunderstandings or arguments easier.
2. On Facebook, users are increasingly replacing verbal communication with drawings, abbreviations, or short videos, thus losing the emotional content they intend to convey.
3. Social platforms (such as Facebook) provide us with a lot of fun content, entertainment, and opportunities for virtual sex, but at the same time, they dull us.

Participants correctly perceive that on Facebook, instead of verbal communication, drawings, abbreviations, and short video clips are increasingly used. This shift leads to a reduction of the depth of message transmission, particularly emotional ones. Interestingly, the age group of participants in the third age perceives these changes more intensively than younger ones. Younger participants, in slightly larger numbers compared to older ones, believe that social platforms offer entertainment and amusement to users but can also contribute to a sense of mental emptiness or a decline in intellectual stimulation. Both age groups, however, equally believe that online messages lack emotional context, potentially leading to misunderstandings or conflicts among users.

Since there are no significant differences in participants' attitudes to the changes offered by ICT, which could negatively affect users' navigation on networks depending on their chronological age, the first hypothesis is not confirmed.

Hypothesis 2: Older adults exhibit greater reservations towards Facebook as a modern electronic medium for emotional communication compared to the younger population.

Graph 2 – Graphic representation for Hypothesis 2: PARTICIPANTS' ATTITUDE TO FACEBOOK AS A SUITABLE MODERN ELECTRONIC MEDIUM FOR EMOTIONAL CORRESPONDENCE

Source: the authors.

*Legend:

1. I find it more satisfying to exchange affections with someone online than in person.
2. I miss real human contact and 'face-to-face' socialising.
3. Going out to dinners, going out to the cinema, etc. are outdated.
4. Today, it is common and much easier to find someone for a sexual adventure or a date on a social network than in person.
5. I get more excited about looking for potential sex or love partners online than in person.
6. I often use Facebook to exchange sexual content (pictures, words, gifs etc.) with other people.
7. I behave (sexually) more freely on Facebook and other social networks than in face-to-face relationships.
8. I met some of my emotional and sexual partners on Facebook.
9. Facebook, as a technical system, greatly facilitates sex trips, fraud, and various adventures.

Both groups of participants, categorised by age below and above 50, equally perceive the possibility of exchanging affection through social media negatively, with the noteworthy emphasis on how older adults express a stronger preference for face-to-face human contact. Interestingly, both age groups do not consider traditional activities such as dinners and going to the movies to be outdated, even though the older age group shows greater disagreement with the possibility of finding a partner for adventures or socialising on social media.

Despite both age groups expressing greater excitement while seeking potential sexual or romantic partners online compared to traditional methods of meeting people, participants in the third age do not use Facebook at all to exchange sexual content with others. Further, both age groups state that they do not exhibit more liberated sexual behaviour on social media compared to 'real-life' contact. A significantly higher number of participants under 50 years of age report having met their emotional or sexual partners through Facebook, unlike older participants.

In addition, a significantly higher number of younger participants believe that Facebook facilitates sexual adventures and infidelity for them. The responses obtained indicate that older participants have greater reservations towards Facebook as a medium that would enable satisfactory and/or appropriate emotional communication, thereby confirming the second hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3: Age influences people's value judgement of the role of social networks, especially Facebook, in their personal, intimate and emotional interpersonal communication.

Graph 3 – Graphic representation for Hypothesis 3: PARTICIPANTS' ATTITUDE TO THE ROLE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS IN PERSONAL, INTIMATE AND EMOTIONAL INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION
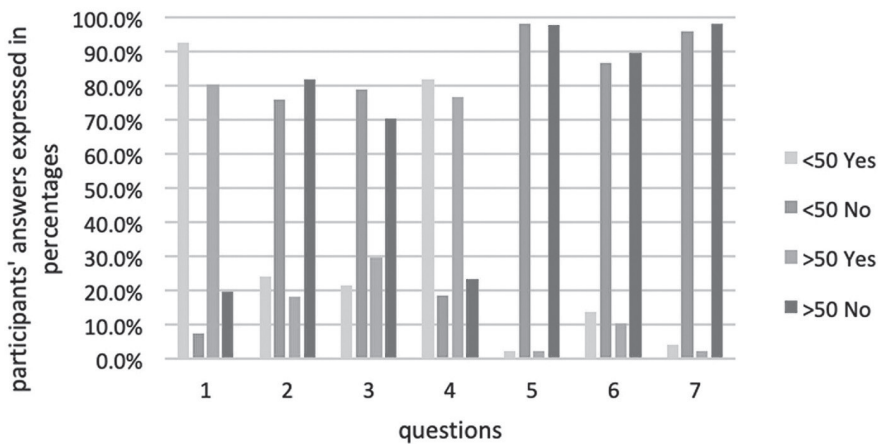
Source: the authors.
*Legend:

1. Social networks are a medium that enables the marketing of more false than true information about emotional values and sexuality.
2. It is easier for me to express my feelings, wishes and needs online than in face-to-face interaction.
3. Social networks are a good medium for making sexual acquaintances and a quality emotional connection.

4. Maintaining a love relationship at a distance (via a social network) is more complicated than in person.
5. I trust information on Facebook more than friends or relatives.
6. It's easier for me to talk to someone, especially about love or sex, via chat than in person.
7. I spend most of my time in front of the phone or computer screen precisely because of the exchange of emotional and/or sexual content with someone.

Participants in the third age tend to trust information about emotional values and sexuality disseminated through social networks more than younger individuals do. Still, both age groups equally find it challenging to express their feelings, desires and needs online compared to face-to-face interaction. Participants from both age categories share an equally negative attitude to social networks as a means of forming sexual acquaintances and quality emotional relationships. They believe that maintaining a romantic relationship via social networks is considerably more complicated than in person.

Moreover, both age groups express significant distrust in the information available on Facebook compared to information received from friends or family. They also spend a negligible amount of time in front of phone or computer screens for the purpose of exchanging emotional and/or sexual content with someone or others.

Since age does not affect the assessment of the value of social networks in emotional and intimate interpersonal communication, this hypothesis is not confirmed.

DISCUSSION

Introduction to the Discussion

Contemporary society is digitised, and this inevitable assessment is best characterised by the rapid development of ICT and its significant role in shaping people's lives and their interpersonal relationships. The continuous development of applications and communication tools aligns with the trends and needs of young people, introducing new languages and knowledge. However, this often surpasses older individuals' abilities to keep up, their skills, and the knowledge they have acquired about technologies. In this context, the challenge for older people lies not simply in bridging the technological gap with younger generations but also in improving their skills through adapted education to become experienced users of social networks like younger individuals, which Esgin Günder (2014) also mentions as a necessity in her work.

The perceived sense of powerlessness among older generations in the face of rapid changes today can manifest in reluctance to engage in emotional communication via electronic media, especially on social networks. This restraint could be the result of values acquired through early socialisation, which did not include exposure to new media. Since individuals from various age groups perceive the

role of media differently, chronological age can influence communication style, preferences for certain types of content, and openness to virtual relationships.

Given the scientific perspectives and available research on this topic, this discussion aims to summarise the impact of chronological age on how people from different age groups perceive the role of social networks, with a special focus on Facebook, in personal, intimate and emotional interpersonal communication. Through the prism of these factors, we seek to gain a better understanding of how people's age shapes the value judgments of individuals about modern electronic media, providing a foundation for further research on this complex topic.

Older People Fail to Keep up With the Rapid Development of information and Communication Technology

The research results show that the age of participants does not influence their attitude, yet support the claim that digitally transmitted messages create a greater distance among communicators and are not an effective means of accurately conveying emotions. Consequently, misunderstandings and conflicts can easily arise. Both those under 50 years of age (87.3%) and those older (85.1%) equally agree with this perspective. It is worth noting that older participants cite the increasing use of emoticons, abbreviations and videos instead of verbal expression as the reason for the loss of emotional expression in communication (93.6%). This observation is in line with the findings of Tidwell and Walther (2002) who concluded that computer-mediated communication lacks cues for developing emotional relationships. In addition, such communication offers an obvious absence of nonverbal and vocal cues and, more importantly, a lack of physical closeness and attractiveness (Riva 2002).

 A slightly higher percentage of younger participants (94%) than those in the third age (80%) perceive social networks as a means of entertainment and an opportunity for intimacy on a virtual level. On the other hand, they are viewed as potential causes of intellectual decline and manipulation of their users. Interestingly, older users are either more confident in their rational and practical use of social networks or, alternatively, naiver due to their unawareness of the intellectual, emotional and other pitfalls lurking on virtual channels. Regardless of the reason, both age groups are considered sufficiently successful and skilled in overcoming the challenges and obstacles posed by the rapid evolution of digitisation.

Older Adults Refuse to Accept Facebook as an Equal Tool for Emotional Communication

According to the research results, both age groups strongly reject the idea of replacing live affection with virtual affection (over 80%). This finding is consistent with the study by Fox et al. (2013), which confirms that the majority of people meet their potential romantic partners outside of Internet networks. This is also in line with the conclusions of Bell et al. (2013) who argue that there is no

significant difference in the feeling of loneliness between Facebook users and non-users.

Nevertheless, participants in the third age express a stronger longing for authentic, immediate human contact (89.4%) compared to younger individuals (78.6%). Macdonald et al. (2021) note that the latter group considers personal interactions more beneficial than digital or even telephone interactions. Consistent with the findings of Riva (2002), it seems that older participants, more than younger ones, miss nonverbal communication elements in virtual communication, making it a deficient communication channel compared to those that provide users with a comprehensive experience. Spitzer (2019) stresses the importance of a cautious approach to the concept of comprehensive media, arguing that even very modern audio-visual media can give users the impression of complete involvement, albeit they still lack something inherently human.

Both age groups equally strongly reject the claim that dinners out, trips to the cinema, and similar social activities are outdated (86.2% younger, 90% older). Younger participants perceive the relevance and ease of finding someone for adventures or socialising on social media much easier (82.8%) than those in the third age (65%), yet both groups equally deny the excitement that accompanies finding love or sexual partners online (96%). It seems that both age groups do not support the concept of the de-individualisation effect of computer-mediated communication, as discussed by Postmes et al. (1998, 698), which is supposed to facilitate such behaviours.

All older participants in the study stated that they do not often use Facebook as a means of exchanging explicit content with other individuals on Facebook (100%), while younger participants were only slightly more open to such experiences (92%). This suggests the research participants have increased discretion offered by virtual channels (Pauley and Emmers-Sommer 2007) or they do not inspire enough trust to engage in the exchange of 'sensitive' content, or lack enthusiasm for such types of communication with others.

A large share of participants from both age groups state that their expression of sexuality on Facebook and other social networks is not significantly different from that in personal relationships. However, although older participants are somewhat more inclined to express their sexuality in direct contact (94%), younger ones also express it in this way (86%). Almost twice as many younger participants (31.1%) had met their romantic partner through Facebook compared to older participants (17.6%). This corresponds with previous research by Fox et al. (2013) who argue that Facebook plays an interesting role in the development of romantic relationships, giving a certain initial boost to dating, and Goldberg et al. (2022) who state that some users consider this platform favourable for building romantic relationships as it does not make a considerable difference between behaviour in real life and online. This is, in contrast, not the case for older individuals.

As a result, a significantly higher number of younger participants (86%) perceive Facebook as a platform that provides considerable support for easier sexual

encounters, affairs, and various adventures compared to participants in the third age (67%). This finding supports the thesis about the discretion of virtual channels discussed by Pauley and Emmers-Sommer (2007), which is why some people opt for this option with less caution. Yet, it seems that individuals over 50 generally approach the 'conveniences' provided by modern social networks with more caution and are less willing to give up the interpersonal interactions they are accustomed to. It is understandable to assume that they do not want to give up interactions from a time when emotions were less distant, media less complicated, and people more 'human'.

Value Judgment of the Role of Social Networks on Personal, Intimate and Emotional Communication Depending on Chronological Age

Participants in the third age exhibit slightly less scepticism of the information available on social media platforms and to a smaller extent generally consider these platforms to be vehicles for disseminating false information about emotional values and sexuality (80% older, 93% younger). This is in line with the conclusion of Walther's study (1996), which asserts that social media users shape messages to present themselves in a positive, socially acceptable light, rather than necessarily adhering to the truth.

Expressing their emotions, desires and needs via virtual means is somewhat more challenging for participants in the third age than for younger participants (82%), as opposed to younger participants (76%). This supports the findings of Hope et al. (2014), who see Facebook as an auxiliary means of communication for older individuals but recognise that it lacks the power to replace deep and thoughtful conversation and fails to meet their need for active engagement in interpersonal relationships. Still, both age groups consider direct contact as a superior way of conveying their inner experiences to another person, contrary to some earlier findings (Parks and Floyd 1996; Joison 2001) that suggest computer-mediated communication reduces uncertainty and promotes reciprocity in presenting one's personality compared to face-to-face interaction.

Younger participants slightly more than older ones perceive social media as an inefficient medium for establishing intimate relationships and quality connections (79%), a view shared by 70% of participants in the third age. This aligns with the research of Tidwell and Walther (2002) but contradicts the perspective held by Cooper and Sportolari (1997) who claim that online connections can positively contribute to interpersonal relationships, including emotional ones.

Both age groups equally find it challenging to maintain an emotional bond over the Internet compared to in-person interaction, with 82% of younger and 77% of older participants agreeing. Almost all older and younger participants consider the information published on Facebook to be less credible than what they learn from friends or family (98% in both groups). The findings of Walther (1996) and Choi et al. (2015, as cited in Selak and Kuhar 2019) regarding the prevalence of false self-representation on social media and the fertile grounds

for establishing numerous superficial contacts, allowing individuals with narcissistic tendencies to spread their grandiose self-image (Selak and Kuhar 2019), mean that is not surprising that both age groups are sceptical about information which reaches them through this channel.

Both age groups are equally hesitant to communicate about their intimacy via messages and prefer to discuss love or sex in personal contact with another person (87% younger, 90% older). This finding is surprising considering previous findings of Joinson (2001) and Ben-Ze'ev (2003), which point to the less inhibition while self-disclosing and greater sense of security offered by virtual reality compared to physical reality. Both age groups, in very low percentages – 4% for the younger group of participants and 2% for the older group – also admit they spend most of their time in front of the screen exchanging sexual or emotional content with other people online.

Overall, according to the research results, both age groups generally lack trust in the information 'served' to them by social media, although social media has become an integral part of the online public space and, according to Sekloča (2020), trust in them continues to decline and is currently at its lowest level since this construct started to be measured in 2014. This makes it understandable that the participants in this study, regardless of age, are more focused on creating and maintaining emotional relationships outside the online space, which is more familiar to them and thus easier to navigate.

In terms of the culturally specific environment of the study, the results of this research reveal that the traditionalism, culture and spirituality of a given region are equally important factors in the acceptance of new digital technologies in the process and practice of interpersonal communication. This accordingly represents a contribution to scientific thought which, of course, implies an area that researchers are recommended to further research in the future.

The limitation of this study lies in the relatively small number of participants in the third age, which is certainly suggested to researchers in future research. In addition, it is advisable to explore the modes of communication of older individuals on other social platforms that enjoy in wide used today.

CONCLUSION

The relevance of the topic lies in the increasing digitisation of interpersonal relationships and the migration of real-life interactions to social media, including emotional connections among people. Social media (as a result of ICT development and digitalisation processes) are accepted uncritically by people. Their use is not determined by the distances between correspondents but by their advantages, especially those resulting from digital convergence or need due to some form of limitation, which achieves better communication.

Although possessing knowledge and competencies concerning the use of digital technology, especially social media, is today recognised as a crucial means for achieving social, and therefore emotional, interactions, as the results reveal,

it does not play such a significant role in Croatia. This country (as a research sample) is characterised by pronounced traditional values, strong patriotism, and a predominantly Christian faith. Accordingly, the spiritual and cultural tradition, as an important factor in accepting changes in society, can be generalised to other countries in this geographic area since they share the same traditional postulates. This claim is supported by the results of our research, which show that age, a critical socio-demographic characteristic affecting access to digital technology, does not affect the perception of possessing a satisfactory level of competence for adapting to new media forms or the propensity to form and maintain emotional relationships online. The opinions of the participants in this study reflect the public's preference (Supek 1968, 42) for authenticity and a traditional, personal experience of interpersonal relationships, as well as serious doubts in the authenticity of information coming from social media, as a consequence of perceived manipulation by other users and greater trust in information from the immediate social sphere.

The research results show that individuals in the third age, compared to younger members of the communication community, are less inclined to abandon conventional forms of interpersonal emotional communication. They also have certain dilemmas or reservations when it comes to expressing intimacy through social media. Yet, they use social platforms to maintain relationships with family and friends at a distance. Their behaviour on the Internet is likely shaped by a socially conditioned fear of potential inappropriateness, due either to concerns related to age or learned behaviour that prioritises direct social contact as the cornerstone of human society. Finally, the progression of chronological ageing excludes people from the sphere of mass communication with the public and increasingly involves them in the field of social interpersonal communication, which is based on the principles of reversibility, equivalence and solidarity. In this context, direct communication 'in vivo' is emerging as a need that counters the process of people being alienated from their humane essence as social beings.

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