# Digital Benefits to Sustainable Presence: A Qualitative Study on Seniors' Use of Social Networks to Support Their Social Participation

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## Abstract:

The article focuses on seniors' sustainable presence and social participation with the use of digital tools. The research consists of a qualitative exploration of how seniors, often referred to as "silver surfers," leverage social networks to support their social status, i.e., their social presence and participation. Semi-structured interviews, which enabled control over the direction and content of the interviews, were conducted with twenty-eight seniors in Slovakia. The starting point of the research findings was knowledge levels as reported by the

seniors, which created a thought-provoking research context. The research highlights the potential for technology to a) catalyze positive change and socially empower seniors, as well as b) the involvement of seniors in the processes of the digital era for a more sustainable future. The advancement of the digital competencies of seniors requires building skills and a deeper knowledge level of using social networks.

## Introduction

Scholars identify three distinct types of aging: biological, social, and chronological. Biological aging involves physical and psychological changes, such as muscle deterioration and memory decline, which impact an individual's overall well-being. Social aging refers to shifts in an individual's social roles and lifestyle, often influenced by new responsibilities and status changes, such as becoming a senior. These social changes can affect an individual's social presence and participation, with technology playing an increasingly significant role in sustaining social connections. Continuing to work and maintaining social contacts are crucial factors for avoiding loneliness and enriching seniors' lives (1).

Chronological aging, on the other hand, is determined by reaching a specific age threshold. As Janet Roebuck noted in 1979, chronological age is often used to define old age based on biological aging, even though these two measures may not align. This discrepancy is evident in the varying definitions of old age across different contexts—while the United Kingdom has historically considered old age to begin at fifty (2), in the United States, individuals are legally recognized as seniors at 65 and older (3).

In Slovakia, the term "seniors" is commonly used to describe older adults aged between 60-65 and 75, after which the following stage is classified as "old age" (4). This classification aligns with the United Nations, which, along with most researchers studying population aging, defines older individuals as those aged 60 or 65 and above based on chronological age (5, p. 5). Similarly, institutions such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Economic Forum consider the elderly population to consist of individuals aged 65 and over (6, 7). These distinctions in aging categories underscore the importance of understanding how different life stages influence seniors' social participation, particularly in the context of digital tools that support a sustained presence and engagement.

Recent research in Slovakia revealed that 63% of individuals aged 15-79 use social networks daily, marking an all-time high. This increase in social media engagement has been observed across all age groups, with a notable rise in the online activity of women. While men's usage has remained relatively stable, women's higher engagement with social networks and other digital platforms is a pattern observed across generations and cultures. Interestingly, A. R. Hochschild has pointed out that creating and maintaining social networks, both online and offline, are traditionally seen as female competencies as they focus on fostering connections with family, friends, and neighbors (8). For seniors, these platforms become essential tools for their social presence and social participation. Additionally, the increasing technological literacy among seniors in Slovakia, driven in part by the shift from traditional mobile phones to smartphones, highlights how digital tools are empowering this demographic.

According to Slovak online marketing expert Tony Dúbravec, the overall increase in internet usage across all demographics, regardless of age or gender, is influenced by greater internet accessibility, the expansion of social networks, and the shift of media consumption from physical and print formats to digital platforms. Specifically, according to Dúbravec, the rising online activity of seniors in Slovakia is also linked to the transition from traditional push-button mobile phones to smartphones, which has contributed to both increased digital engagement and greater technological literacy among seniors (9).

Moreover, we consider the latest findings

in the context of Slovakia intriguing. These findings declare that the total number of social network users over the age of 60 is only slightly increasing, but we notice a more significant increase in the number of daily users among seniors. Seniors' interaction with social networks on a daily basis is already approaching 40% (10). In 2014, it was less than 10% in Slovakia, and in 2020, the number of seniors on social networks grew to almost 20% (11). Just to illustrate, we present a comparison of seniors in Slovakia with seniors in America, where similar findings were measured in 2009. In America too, although five years earlier than in Slovakia, the increase in the intensity of the use of social networks was significant; while in 2009 only 10% of aging Americans reported using social networking sites daily, a year later it was already one in five (20%) seniors (12). We can see that even in America, social networks have gained popularity relatively quickly in the lives of older Americans. Currently, up to 80% of older Americans are online at least six hours a day. As an additional comparison, the results are similar among seniors in Israel, with a slight increase of between 10%-20% in the use of social networks in 2024, depending on which site and its use (13). The researchers refer to them as "digital seniors," recalling the reasons for their daily digital existence. These reasons include, for example, keeping in touch with friends and family, organizing finances, and improving health and well-being (14).

This research aims to qualitatively explore seniors' knowledge, motivations, and perceptions of using social networks to support their social presence and participation. The following research questions guide this study: 1) What are seniors' perceived digital literacy levels regarding social networking sites? and 2) What benefits do seniors derive from using social networking sites in the context of social participation and sustainable presence?

We believe that the research findings can help researchers and policy makers identify gaps in knowledge and support their understanding of what might be needed to properly support older people in fully enjoying the benefits of social media use, while doing so safely.

## The role of technology in enhancing social participation among seniors

Accoriding to experts, the increase in the intensity of social network use contributes to the increasing adaptation of seniors to technology (10, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19). Experts even deny that the increase in social network use is caused by an influx of young people. As Adam Kršiak stated, based on findings by the Statistical Office of the European Union, "it is the older generation that tries and learns to use the internet and modern technologies" (9). The indicated trend opens the question of the degree of adaptation of seniors to technology as well as the question of the benefits and positive consequences that follow from it.

Technology plays a pivotal role in enhancing social participation among seniors by facilitating connections that might otherwise be limited due to physical or geographical constraints. Kondrla et al. highlight that seniors' desires for the future often revolve around a few basic needs, particularly family needs (20). In this context, increasing the use of digital platforms becomes essential, as it enables seniors to stay socially engaged, combat isolation, and maintain active involvement in family life and the broader community (21). Social networks offer a convenient and accessible medium for maintaining relationships, sharing experiences, and staying informed. Such platforms have been proven to help improve mental well-being because they allow seniors to maintain and build their social capital (22).

Moreover, technology not only improves connectivity, but also supports seniors' social roles and interactions. Research has demonstrated that seniors who are active in online communities experience better social inclusion and engagement in societal matters, both online (23) and in the offline environment (24). Thus, researchers have confirmed that social networks foster a sense of belonging and purpose, particularly when seniors engage in group activities that correspond to their specific needs and interests (25).

Interestingly, the ability of social networks to enhance seniors' well-being extends to fostering intergenerational connections because they bridge the age gap (26). Platforms like so-

cial networks and messaging apps allow seniors to interact with their peers and younger family members, thereby improving communication and reducing generational divides. These platforms often facilitate conversations that might not happen otherwise. They strengthen relationships and encourage social and emotional benefits (27), i.e., benefits that are essential for everyone, including individuals with problematic life situations (28) or illness. These conversations contribute to maintaining social relationships, overcoming isolation, and fostering meaningful engagement in society (29). This aligns with the fundamental notion that humans are inherently social beings who rely on the company of others for their well-being and development (30).

On the other hand, while technology facilitates social participation, the digital divide remains a significant barrier. Not all seniors have equal access to or are comfortable with digital tools. Additionally, research has shown the need to protect seniors, perhaps even more so than younger users.

According to experts, seniors should take protective measures for the following reasons:

a) Low digital literacy (31);
b) Limited computer self-sufficiency (32);
c) Less knowledge and lower confidence in performing protective behaviors compared to younger users (33);
d) Higher susceptibility to certain cyberattacks, such as consumer fraud (34);
e) Lagging behind younger users in internet security awareness, confidence, and knowledge (35, 36, 37).

Morrison, Coventry, and Briggs therefore state that seniors appear to be the type of users who do not show a willingness to fully follow the challenges in the field of cyber security. According to these researchers, this is the result of a combination of their "low computer self-efficacy, mistrust, and lack of awareness" (36, p. 1034).

The dangers associated with the use of social networks can also have an impact on the mental well-being of seniors. The rapid evolution of digital tools can create frustration and a sense of exclusion among seniors; experts even speak about the so-called "grey digital divide," which highlights the growing gap between younger and older generations in their ability to access and effectively use digital technologies that often leads to social exclusion and reduced well-being among seniors (38). Similarly, the pressure to keep up with trends and popular culture on social media can create a feeling of inadequacy or a "Fear of Missing Out" ( FOMO), leading seniors to have unwanted stress (39). This pressure to constantly stay connected or respond quickly to messages and posts can also induce stress, particularly if seniors feel overwhelmed by the demands of online engagement (40). Additionally, seniors may experience cognitive overload from the constant flow of information, making it harder to focus or make informed decisions (41). Moreover, exposure to toxic content, misinformation, media manipulation, and fake news can lead to confusion (42, 43) or even radicalization, as seniors may have difficulty distinguishing credible sources from misleading content (44).

Seniors themselves acknowledge the psychological strain associated with online engagement. Many report experiencing fear, anxiety, and a lack of personal control over online processes, often stemming from ignorance about existing services and the potential pitfalls of using them (45). They associate these negative feelings with a range of digital tools and platforms, including online banking (46, 47), tablets (48), smartphones (49, 50), and even regular websites (51). These experiences highlight the need for comprehensive digital literacy programs tailored to seniors to help them navigate the online world with confidence and security.

In this context, a more optimistic perspective is noteworthy. Despite challenges, technology brings significant benefits for seniors, particularly in boosting their social participation and well-being (21, 52, 53). One example is a study from the University of Missouri that highlighted the positive impact of social network use on seniors' well-being. Interestingly, in the study, social media generally contributed to a sense of connection and engagement. While the risk of depression was noted in individuals who used social media for self-comparison, many seniors experienced positive emotions, such as happiness and a sense of belonging through on-

line interactions. If seniors used social media to maintain contact with other people, the risk of depression dropped sharply (54). Other research findings have confirmed from a sample of retired seniors in the US that internet use also reduced the odds of depression by one-third (19).

It seems that tailored digital literacy programs can significantly enhance seniors' ability to utilize technology effectively and safely, increasing their social participation and well-being (55). Educating seniors on digital platforms improves their connectivity and empowers them to maintain active social roles in an increasingly digital world (56). This emphasizes the importance of equipping seniors with the necessary skills to thrive in the digital age (57) and ensuring that they continue to have high social value in the digital environment as well (58).

Finally, an international comparison of Slovaks in all age groups has found that seniors not only lag in digital skills and media literacy compared to the rest of the population, but there is also a lack of broader and representative media research on the group of current Slovak seniors (59). In addition, there is no database of knowledge concerning the use of new means of communication among this population group, and there is no clear overview of the level of their media skills. The lack of research on seniors in the Slovak population also leads to a lack of information on, for example, the level of critical thinking and the ability to understand media products (60). This article also wants to respond positively to the research conclusion of Ľubica Gálisová, who focused on the status and life of older Slovaks. She found that seniors in Slovakia "feel like they are on the margins of society" (61, p. 2). It is a long-term problem in Slovakia, which T. Hangoni, D. Cehelská, and M. Šip also drew attention to more than ten years ago (62, p. 4).

## Methodology

This study explores how seniors use social networks to maintain their social participation and how these platforms contribute to their sustainable presence in the digital era. Specifically, the research examines seniors' perceived digital literacy levels, motivations, perceived benefits, and challenges associated with using social networking sites.

The goal is to understand how technology can enhance seniors' social connections and involvement in society while identifying potential barriers to their engagement.

### Research questions

The following research questions guided this research:

Q1: What are seniors' perceived digital literacy levels regarding social networking sites?

Q2: What are seniors' perceived benefits of social networking sites?

### Research approach

The study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing semi-structured interviews to gain in-depth insights into seniors' experiences with social networking sites. This approach allows for flexibility in responses while ensuring consistency in addressing key research themes. The researchers aimed to clarify how respondents "come to an understanding of what is happening, why they act in a certain way, and how they organize their everyday activities and interactions" in their everyday environments (63, p. 52).

By focusing on seniors' personal narratives, the study captures the complexities of their engagement with social networking sites and the broader implications for their social participation.

### Participants

The study included twenty-eight seniors from Slovakia that were selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse range of experiences with social networking sites. The participants varied in age, prior digital experience, and frequency of social network use, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of their engagement with these platforms.

### Digital literacy assessment

To assess seniors' perceived digital literacy levels regarding social networking sites, a self-evaluation scale was applied based on

school grades from 1 to 5, where 1 represented the highest level of digital literacy and 5 indicated minimal familiarity. The scale was structured as follows:

1 — I am very digitally literate in using social networking sites;
2 — I am digitally literate in using social networking sites;
3 — I have some digital literacy regarding social networking sites;
4 — I am aware of social networking sites but do not have much digital literacy;
5 — I have almost no digital literacy regarding social networking sites.

This self-assessment method provided valuable insights into seniors' confidence and perceived competence in navigating social networks. These factors were then analyzed based on their usage patterns and reported benefits.

## Research method

This study employed a qualitative research approach using semi-structured interviews to explore seniors' experiences with social networks. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to guide discussions and provide participants with the freedom to express their perspectives in detail, ensuring that key themes are covered while allowing for new insights to emerge (64). Semi-structured interviews are particularly valuable as they offer a balance between structure and flexibility, allowing for both in-depth exploration and the possibility of new insights to emerge naturally during conversation (65). Compared to structured interviews, semi-structured interviews offer a deeper understanding of participants' motivations, experiences, and perceived challenges, making them a valuable tool for qualitative inquiry (64, 66).

## Data collection

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted over several weeks from September - December 2023, both in person and online to accommodate participants' preferences. The interviews focused on topics such as digital literacy levels, motivations for using social networks, perceived benefits, and challenges encountered.

## Data collection process

Participants were asked eight open-ended questions designed to capture their motivations for using social networks, the benefits they perceived, and the challenges they encountered. Examples of questions included: Why do you use social networks? What benefits have you gained from using social networks? What features do you find most useful or difficult to navigate? How do you learn to use new features on social media? Who do you turn to for help when using social media when needed? How important is it for you to stay connected with others via social media? Have you noticed any changes in your social participation and well-being since you started using social media? A semi-structured format using open-ended questions ensures that a broad range of topics is covered systematically. At the same time, it allows participants to express personal experiences and perspectives in detail and give detailed and personal insights into their social media experiences, all of which are essential for capturing rich qualitative data (64, 65, 66).

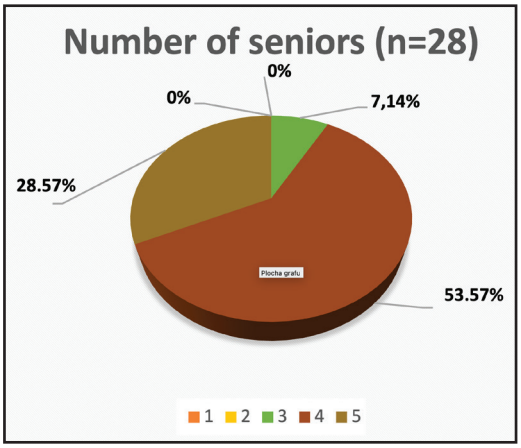
## Results

The results section presents findings from an analysis of seniors' perceived digital literacy levels regarding social networking sites and the benefits these platforms provide. Likewise, the findings provide insights into areas where seniors may need further support.

### Perceived digital literacy levels of seniors regarding social networking sites (Q1)

Graph 1 shows the results of the seniors' perceived digital literacy levels concerning social networking sites among the respondents of our study.

**Graph 1** Self-reported social networking sites knowledge level (n = 28)




*Source:* Own research.

As we can see in Graph 1, among the 28 seniors surveyed, most rated their digital literacy as a 4, indicating that while they were aware of social networking sites, their ability to navigate them remained limited. A total of 15 participants (53.57%) selected this rating. Notably, no respondent rated their digital literacy as 1 (very high) or as 2 (digitally literate), and only two rated themselves as 3 (moderate digital literacy), comprising 7.14% of the group. Conversely, 8 participants (28.57%) reported having almost no digital literacy regarding social networking sites (rating 5). Despite these self-assessments, all respondents expressed a willingness to engage with social networking sites, reflecting a notable gap between digital literacy levels and the motivation to participate in online interactions.

The data further revealed that many seniors linked their digital literacy to their immediate needs. One respondent stated, "I use social networks to eliminate boredom when I rest in the afternoon and can't fall asleep," emphasizing a practical approach. Others highlighted the importance of family support in overcoming digital barriers, as expressed by one participant: "Whenever I get stuck, my grandson helps me. He even made me a small guide on paper." These insights suggest that while many seniors may not feel confident in their digital literacy, they rely on family members to navigate them in the digital environment.

Additionally, some respondents reported feeling comfortable using basic social networking features, but they required assistance for more advanced functions. One participant shared, "I can scroll through posts and comment, but I don't know how to post pictures." Another stated, "I mostly use Facebook because I'm familiar with it, but I don't understand other social networks like Instagram." These responses highlight varying levels of digital literacy, as some seniors engage with social networking sites at a basic level, while others avoid unfamiliar features altogether.

Several seniors also described their engagement with social networking sites as being motivated by social and emotional connections. One participant noted, "I use social networks mainly to stay in touch with my family and friends. It makes me feel included in their lives." Another shared, "Sometimes I just scroll through posts to pass the time and see what's happening in the world." A different respondent expressed, "Even though I don't know all the functions, I enjoy reading my children's and grandchildren's posts and seeing their pictures." These findings indicate that while digital literacy levels among seniors may be limited, social networking sites play a significant role in maintaining their social presence and emotional well-being.

## Perceived benefits of social networking sites for seniors (Q2)

As we saw above, social networks motivate seniors to foster connections and communicate by providing a platform for their various activities. The following are some of the most often expressed benefits of using social networks according to the seniors in our research (n = 28). Similarly, we present the order of benefits from the most important to the least important in our research sample.

- Communication and the company of other people — The most valuable benefit of social networks among the respondents of our research is staying connected with family members, friends, and distant relatives. Thus, seniors not only receive but also share updates, photos, and videos, comment on posts, and engage in real-time conversations through messaging and video calls. As they stated, all of these possibilities help them combat social isolation and solitude. Respondents speak about maintaining meaningful connections as the main reason for using social networks.
- Entertainment and boredom buster — A big benefit of social networks is that they offer a wide range of entertainment options for elderly individuals. Respondents follow pages and groups related to their favorite hobbies, engage in discussions, and do shopping. This provides them with an important source of enjoyment and, as several of them stated, "It helps alleviate boredom."
- Finding and joining interest communities — Social networks provide a platform for seniors to find and join interest-based groups. Whether it's a hobby, a recreational activity, or a cause they are passionate about, they can connect with like-minded individuals, share experiences, and engage in discussions related to their interests. According to respondents, when many people are dying in real life, it is positive to meet new people who share interests with them.
- Health and well-being support — Social networks are a good tool for seeking advice, information, and support related to health and well-being. Seniors in our research sample stated that they join groups focused on specific health conditions. In these online groups, in addition to specific web sites, respondents find resources and tips for healthy living. Seniors also participate in discussions on topics such as nutrition, herbs, and exercise. Moreover, in our research sample, social networks are not only a popular tool for seeking advice, information, and support. Respondents also talked about the mutual support and encouragement they receive from other users. This confirms the importance of relationships and connections that develop on the basis of reciprocity in the social network environment. A parallel phenomenon is the strengthening of the social role and personal meaning of each user.
- Information and education — Social networks are utilized by respondents as a platform for seeking information. Some of the seniors in this research spoke about using internet tools for their education and continuing education. As we can see, for them social networks serve as sources for other websites where education takes place; i.e., education is not directly a benefit of social networks, although social networks create a connection with educational content, online courses, and webinars. Thus, with the use of social networks, respondents can find information and increase their knowledge.
- Memory presentation allows them to engage with loved ones — Social networks serve as a digital platform for seniors to preserve and share memories. Our respondents are not primarly users who actively upload new video content or create photo albums. The seniors in our research sample use social networks to preserve and share memories (especially by uploading and sharing photos on social networks). They do it especially because they want to share their memories and allow family and friends to engage with their memories.
- Learning from life experiences of others — Social networks provide a space for the seniors in our research group to share their life experiences, wisdom, and stories with a wider audience. Our respondents create posts and engage in discussions on various topics. In doing so, they are exposed to and learn from conversations, experiences, and others' perspectives.

- An aid and a tool to save effort — Experts point out that the adaptation of older people to changes related to aging is not always natural and problem-free. The situation is also complicated by the accumulation of losses in several different spheres of life (e.g., the loss of professional status, the loss of social contacts, etc.) (58). Attempts by seniors to satisfy their own needs also appear problematic if they have no help. In that case, seniors most often do not even reach out to services that would solve their difficulties (67). Social networks, as shown in our research, represent a suitable way for respondents to help. In the words of one respondent, social networks are often the place where he tends to "look for what he needs to improve his own situation or solve a problem." Respondents talk about getting help promptly using easily available information thanks to the use of social networks. An accompanying phenomenon is the subsequent support of independence that the internet gives to older users.
- A stimulator for human discussions, personal intelligence, and memory — Respondents refer to social networks as "fast newspapers that change every moment." They appreciate learning new information that turns out to be interesting to others: "I'm glad that when I talk to my granddaughter or daughter, I always have something to talk about! I realised that some of the topics in our conversations are topics that I know from the social network." In this context, participating seniors also point out another benefit, the training of personal intelligence and memory, which is then fully manifested during conversations with other people. One respondent stated: "I have difficulty remembering what I wanted to say if I don't say it immediately. However, if the information (from the social network) is also interesting for me, I find that I not only remember the main idea better, but also many details related to the information." This benefit naturally also supports the quality of seniors' discussions with other people.
- The use of social networks and their impact on structuring the day — Similar to television, seniors are used to watching "their programs" broadcast at "their time." Thus, their time on the internet is scheduled in advance. One respondent stated, "I'm used to watching TV starting at half past five because my favorite show is on." After that, I have dinner and sit down to watch TV again at seven when the news comes on. I watch social networks exclusively on my mobile phone during the afternoon break, as I can't sleep but I need to rest and straighten my back." Another respondent described herself as an "all-day viewer of televison." She keeps the TV on all day so she doesn't feel alone. She said, "I go to Facebook in the evening, but only on those days when my series is not on TV." Television is the dominant medium among the participants that largely determines how seniors structure their day. However, it seems that the use of the internet and social networks also has its place in the daily routines of the research group members.

## Discussion

By 2050, the United Nations projects that one in six people will be aged 65 or older, signaling a growing global aging population (5). With this demographic shift, a crucial challenge is the perception of quality of life and life satisfaction among seniors (68, 69, 70, 71, 72). Experts emphasize that the use of digital tools can positively impact seniors' well-being, fostering a more optimistic outlook. These tools not only enable them to stay connected, they also contribute to a better sense of purpose and fulfillment. Moreover, this demographic shift further underscores the importance of addressing the social participation and well-being of seniors in the current digital era.

Despite assessing themselves as having low perceived digital literacy when it comes to social networking sites, the seniors in our study actively engage with these platforms, demonstrating the digital benefits that support their sustainable presence and social participation. Many respondents acknowledged difficulties in navigating social networking sites beyond basic functions (Q1). However, this self-perception does not necessarily prevent them from leveraging social networks to maintain social connections, access

information, and participate in online communities. This finding is significant in our sample and aligns with other similar studies where participants mentioned that they primarily rely on social networks to stay in touch with family and friends (21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 52).

Other respondents noted that they learn through trial and error and seek assistance from younger family members when needed. This suggests that while seniors may view their digital skills as weak, their motivation to stay socially connected and informed fosters their continued use of social networking sites. Our findings join those of many experts highlighting the role of digital tools in promoting social inclusion and sustainable engagement in the digital era (27, 53, 56, 57).

Finally, although education is not perceived as a direct benefit of social networks, respondents acknowledged that users can gain valuable information and expand their knowledge through these platforms. The observations of the respondents recorded in this research are consistent with the views of other experts who argue that computer technologies can be an integral part of innovative learning methods, as they help students better absorb material and develop critical thinking skills (73).

The set of ten benefits we identified in the research set within the second research area (Q2) point to several interesting aspects:

a) The benefits of using social networking sites positively affect seniors' personal experiences with these sites. In our research group, it is primarily about the benefits of experiencing communication and the company of other people, enjoying entertainment, using it as a boredom buster, and finding and joining communities of interest. The identification of benefits also correlates with research findings of other experts (54, 74, 75). However, let us recall what has already been said: although social networks can contribute to socialisation, according to experts, "everyday use of technology changes the perception of other people so that an individual sees others as something technical and technological" (76, p. 40). Finally, although social networks can contribute to socialisation, we believe that they will not solve loneliness that is brought about due to the loss of contact with other people. Using the internet is not enough to solve this problem. The risk is, for example, that younger relatives will meet less physically with seniors and will make up for it only with online communication. This can also be understood as a negative consequence or the flip side of the apparent benefits of seniors using social networks.
b) Adopting social media sites seems to be a rather hard job for seniors, but comes with daily mental health benefits and well-being. All respondents also perceived social networks as an aid that helped them accomplish various needs and daily tasks. They realise that the greatest impact of social networks is shown in their participation in social life, despite the fact that it is an online space, and this gives them a sense of joy and usefulness. Many repeatedly say that social networks make them feel better and less sad. These qualitative findings align with the observations of other experts who state that strengthening social ties helps seniors not only fight loneliness, but also helps them stay healthier and happier (54, 77). Maintaining existing ties and creating new ties also brings well-being (19, 78, 79, 80) because it helps reduce stress, anxiety, and sadness that is caused by social isolation and loneliness (11, 74).
c) It seems that for seniors, social networks are a welcome and utilized age-friendly place. Being a part of an online community of seniors enables the realization of social interaction with individuals of the same age, who, may or may not belong to the closest circle of family and friendship. Moreover, our research sample shows that social networks acting as age-friendly places where seniors meet acquaintances in many cases really not only complement, but even replace non-existent, past, and dysfunctional ties within the family.
d) As an age-friendly place, social networks also create space for online life and thus enable older people to continue active social life and participate in the life of the community, which many evaluate very positively. According to respondents, active participation in an

online community and the opportunity to contribute to or influence this community leads to a sense of happiness. Other experts also confirm this statement (19, 77, 78, 79, 80).

Future research worthy of attention could be comparative research of a representative layer of those seniors we consider active and those who can be understood as passive in relation to social networks; it is necessary to examine, for example, their digital skills, their understanding of digital security, and other elements of digital citizenship. We think it is important to pay attention to both groups because their members can be socially isolated, which can have a very negative effect on them. The use of the internet, social media, and specifically social networks, can, among other things, help them strengthen interpersonal relationships (e.g., 11, 74, 77, 78), improve their cognitive functions like the ability to concentrate, remember, and learn (e.g., 74, 81, 82), and improve their subjective well-being (e.g., 19, 75, 78, 79, 80). Finally, we believe that the comparative research of active and passive seniors could also confirm our qualitative research observation that the quality of life of seniors can be significantly influenced by the quality and possibilities of social networks.

## Conclusion

In this study, we explored how seniors use social networks to maintain their social participation and how these platforms contribute to their sense of presence in an increasingly digital world. We aimed to understand their knowledge levels, motivations, benefits, and difficulties while engaging with these platforms.

The findings show that although seniors may perceive their digital literacy as limited, they continue to use social networks to stay connected, entertained, and informed. Despite challenges navigating beyond basic functions, their motivation to remain socially engaged drives their active participation. This aligns with the broader focus of this research that emphasizes the importance of enhancing digital competencies among seniors to ensure their sustainable presence in society.

The study revealed that seniors' personal experiences with social networks have led to significant benefits. Communication, social interaction, entertainment, and joining interest-based communities were identified as noteworthy advantages. These benefits highlight the role of social networks in supporting seniors' social and emotional well-being. Importantly, social networks serve as valuable tools for accomplishing daily tasks and addressing practical needs, making them a crucial part of seniors' daily routines.

In conclusion, while "silver surfers" may face challenges in their digital literacy, their engagement with social networking sites demonstrates their commitment to maintaining social connections and participating in the digital world. Thus, empowering seniors with enhanced digital skills will foster their inclusion and well-being and help them navigate the digital era safely and confidently.

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