

## Seniors and the Use of New Technologies: Loneliness and Support Networks

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### Abstract

The study of seniors' perception of the use of technology is the main topic of this article. This is relevant because of the topicality and the need to understand how active aging and the use of new technology are realized in a seniors' dedicated program in Romania. In the literature review section, the following concepts are presented: the role of technology in everyday life, the types of technologies seniors use, the meaning of information and communication technology concept, and understanding the concept of loneliness and seniors' needs. The second section of the article consists of qualitative research using based on a case study (in-depth interviews and participatory observation) on the *Telefonul Vârșnicului* Program (Senior People Phone Line) in Romania. The purpose of the research is to identify the seniors' needs, faced problems, reached needs, and the qualities a social worker should have. The main findings of the research emphasize the fact that senior citizens are guided to various state institutions, providing them with useful, verified, and official information. Older people face several problems, both financial and medical, but they also need to communicate to relieve loneliness and meet new people. The digital skills of the elderly are quite limited but have been growing in recent years.

### Keywords

Aging; new communication and information technologies; loneliness; support networks; *Telefonul Vârșnicului*.

### Introduction

The topic of older people and the use of new communication and information technologies have been researched and debated over the last decades (Anderson & Perrin, 2017). With the development of technology and social media, the desire and motivation of older people to learn about technology and social media applications have increased (Cotton et al., 2022). Thus, this topic is a developing one, being theoretically relevant to the project I intend to carry out. Several articles have been written in this direction, but the subject is far from saturation.

This article aims to identify how new technologies impact seniors, what problems they face, and what values and qualities a social worker should have. It also describes the *Telefonul Vârșnicului* program taking into consideration its history and its work to help seniors from all over the country.

The reason behind choosing this topic is the gap between seniors' needs and the ability to use technology. We hope this article along with the conducted research can help fill this gap. Moreover, this topic has attracted me since college. I wanted to be closer to seniors and to understand them, to see what situations they face and how open or reluctant they are to new technologies, and how much it helps them fight loneliness. Also, the close relationship with senior people in my own family and the openness they have had to embrace new means of communication through technology has led me to find out what other seniors think of these.

### How to cite

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Using the Internet offers seniors the chance to improve their quality of life, escape from everyday life, interact with family, loved ones, and friends, and connect through online communities, groups, and forums. Peacock and Künemund (2007) showed that individual biographical experiences and the ability to integrate into a community are responsible for differences in the use of new communication technologies between different age groups.

In the past years, more studies have emerged on seniors and the use of new technologies. Interest in this field has grown both in the academic and practical areas where various associations, NGOs, and foundations are dedicating their time to helping seniors, combating their loneliness, and making them more digitally competent (Tsertsidis et al., 2019).

Hutto et al. (2015) highlight the desire of older people to use technology more and more. Seniors realize that they need to adapt to new trends, but also because they need to keep in touch with their families. They still feel left behind because they can't learn as quickly. With a little help from some NGOs, they can go far and help more seniors.

Regarding the methodology, the second section describes the qualitative method that was used for collecting responses (in-depth interviews along with observatory participation). The discussion guide was built taking into consideration the research objectives and research questions. It was applied to a sample of four social workers from the *Telefonul Vârșnicului* program.

The article is divided as follows: *Section One* is a review of the literature on the use of new technologies and loneliness in older people, *Section Two* is about the research methodology, *Section Three* highlights the analysis and interpretation of the case study data from the *Telefonul Vârșnicului* Program, and *Section Four* highlights the conclusions.

### **Studies on older people and the use of new technologies**

Digitalization is a new topic for seniors that has been increasingly developed in recent years. In studies, such as "Loneliness in elderly people, associated factors and its correlation with quality of life" (Arslantaş et al., 2015), "Technology to reduce social isolation and loneliness" (Baecker et al., 2014) and "Examining social media use among older adults" (Bell et al., 2013) can be found the digitalization topic. Seniors can't always keep up with new trends or features that emerge. However, what keeps them connected to technology and the plethora of apps is the desire to create a habit and the desire for escapism and self-expression. The apps seniors frequently use are Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter, and Instagram (Bell et al., 2013).

Seniors' desire to use technology has increased in recent decades. They are more motivated to use it to keep in touch with their families (Hutto et al., 2015). Older people feel an emotion of fear about others' perceptions of how they use new communication technologies. They experiment the fear that they cannot reach the level of knowledge needed to use new technologies correctly and effectively (Hutto et al., 2015).

As we get older, the desire to make new friends decreases, so older people focus on maintaining existing connections with those close to them (Wu et al., 2020). Older people feel the need to connect with those close to them and find comfort using technology for various purposes: to reduce loneliness, but also anxiety caused by the pandemic situation in recent years (Marston et al., 2020).

Ageism in social media can partly be explained by the digital divide between younger and older individuals, with most older adults facing limited access to digital technology (Soto-Perez-de-Celis, 2020). Social media is significantly more popular among

individuals aged 15–29 years, and only 7% of Twitter users in the United States are aged ≥65 years. That is why most of the time, seniors need the help of younger ones in using social media or even their devices.

At the basis of the *Technology Acceptance Model* (TAM), there are several stages: perception of usefulness, perception of difficulty, intention to use (behavior moving towards the acceptance phase), and the final stage of actual use of that device (Martín-García et al., 2022). Four external variables are added to this model: social influence, facilities, anxiety generated by the use of new devices, and self-satisfaction. Seniors' perception of usefulness and acceptance is evidenced by the simplicity and usefulness of apps among seniors (Martín-García et al., 2022). External factors may influence this acceptance. The majority of seniors in the study admitted that they would be open to learning to use apps better, but often face barriers, taking into consideration different studies, such as those written by Guner and Acarturk (2020), Cotton et al. (2022) and Kavandi and Jaana (2020).

Web-based socialization is the most promising method for mitigating potential mental health effects. Providing telephone training, creating task lists, and implementing the facilitators described by seniors are important strategies for addressing barriers, and these strategies can be implemented during and beyond the pandemic to bolster the mental health needs of older adults (Haase et al., 2021).

Among the reasons why seniors use technology are to keep in touch with family and friends, follow the news, use social media applications, gain new knowledge, learn new skills, and use banking services (Zhang, 2021). Older people vary in their needs, desire, and ability to learn and this is evident in the context of technology. Seniors are actively learning in different countries how to use SNS (social networking sites), VR (virtual reality headset), Wii (console), and how to properly use technology to be up-to-date and gain new skills (Boulton-Lewis et al., 2006). The most commonly used apps readily accepted by participants in the study conducted by Guner and Acarturk (2020) are Facebook (65.95%) and Whatsapp (61.21%).

### ***Reasons behind the use of new media***

One trigger for older people to use technology is when children and grandchildren move out of town or even out of the country (Cotton et al., 2022). At such a time, they are challenged to learn how to use technology and social media applications to maintain long-distance communication with family, the latter being the motivating factor. There are several stages of the technology-approach model: ignoring, approaching, rejecting, and reapproaching (Ivan & Fernández-Ardèvol, 2017). Seniors often do not leave the place where they have spent their entire lives to move in with their children and grandchildren because they are attached to the community where they grew up. Social insideness also sets in, which refers to meaningful social relationships built with people throughout life (Woolrych, 2020).

The channel through which older people choose to talk to loved ones also depends on the rewards they provide, especially for communication and relationship maintenance. When they are away, they prefer to use Skype, Facebook, or email because they are personable, help them to focus, and give them the chance to make eye contact, providing reciprocity (Ivan & Fernández-Ardèvol, 2017).

### ***Seniors and the use of SNSs (Social Networking Sites)***

SNS offers various gratifications to seniors, including the desire not to be alone, to search for different topics of interest, to communicate, escapism, and relaxation (Gitari, 2015). Another reason behind the use of SNS is continuous learning. Seniors are motivated to keep up with others and not miss out on the benefits that technology has to offer,

especially as technology has become indispensable over the past few decades (Fernández-Lores et al., 2021).

There are also negative aspects of SNS use that may arise among the seniors, such as addiction or that they may be victims of online fraud. They do not have much experience in anticipating such situations and identifying them. Cyberbullying is another negative effect of social media to which seniors are also exposed and often receive inappropriate and offensive comments on their Facebook pages (Roberto et al., 2014).

For seniors, a trigger to use SNS comes mainly from family and friends who encourage them to get used to using them. The level of trust they can have in the SNS is also important, but at the same time, the safety and security components play an important role. They are often reluctant to use the SNS, either because they feel they do not have enough experience to use it and are afraid of doing something wrong, or because they are not so confident in the ability of the SNS to work.

### ***Loneliness and growing old***

Loneliness refers to experiencing negative feelings about social contact, while social isolation refers to the lack of contact that provides the necessary social support. Social isolation occurs when a senior lacks a network of friends with whom to communicate effectively (Khosravi, 2016).

Blake and Kerr (2019) discuss the association between loneliness and health problems (such as a higher risk of heart attack, depression, or other mental illnesses). Seniors recognized that social isolation is something that would happen to another person but not to them (the third person effect), meaning they were not accurately aware of their current or future situation.

Seniors who have lost a life partner and have fewer friends or family at a considerable distance are more likely to experience social isolation. Loneliness and social isolation can lead to cognitive dysfunction, higher mortality, inability to rest, and reduced physical activity. Khosravi et al. (2016) discuss that SNSs have a particular ability to prevent the onset of loneliness among seniors compared to the use of SNSs among youth, where loneliness is often amplified by SNS.

The following factors are assumed to influence feelings of loneliness: socio-demographic, personal, individual mobility characteristics, social network, and living environment characteristics. Thus, older people who have a better-developed social network are more likely to be more satisfied with their social network and subsequently less likely to feel lonely. Seniors who have experienced deeper feelings of loneliness are found to be less likely to feel attached to their neighborhood. Thus, the sense of belonging is not felt as strongly, leading them to feel lonely (Kemperman, 2019).

New information technologies are increasingly part of older people's lives and give them a new perspective on relationships and leisure. It also helps them to keep fit and create habits that keep them active. New means of communication help them to be closer to their loved ones, and to keep in touch with them, even if they are far away. At the same time, new information and communication technologies can also have drawbacks, such as cyberbullying. This can affect seniors way worse than youngsters because they are not aware of its risks.

### **Methodology**

Through this case study, we want to understand the history of the *Telefonul Vârșnicului* program, how it supports older people, their needs, the problems they face, the guidance offered, and the digital skills of seniors. Last but not least, we would like to find out what

qualities a person working in this field should have and what a typical day at work looks like for them. The research objectives are the following:

- 01. The identification of the particularities of the Telefonul Vârstnicului program*
- 02. Assessing the problems faced by seniors and the level of digitalization*
- 03. Defining the skills that a social worker should have to help seniors*

We chose qualitative research so that we can receive detailed responses, observe nonverbal communication, go as in-depth as possible on the proposed themes, and learn each employee's story in as open and pleasant a way as possible.

This research starts from the general objective of identifying the particularities of the *Telefonul Vârstnicului* program, but also to find out what are the obstacles that seniors face in their daily life and why they use this program. The purpose is to identify both through the use of in-depth interviews and participatory observation what are how the 4 employees of *Telefonul Vârstnicului* interact with seniors. The objectives are followed by three research questions that address the three areas of discussion: *the characteristics of the program, the difficulties seniors face and how the employees of this program help them, and the qualities an employee working with seniors on a daily basis should have.*

*RQ1. What are the particularities of this program and how exactly does it interact with seniors?*

*RQ2. What are the problems that older people call about and how are these solved/monitored/addressed? What is the role of digital skills in addressing and solving these problems?*

*RQ3. What kind of resources and communication skills are needed by those running such a program?*

To achieve the research objective, and the research questions and to find answers to them, we conducted qualitative, case study-based research. We interviewed four social workers, employed at *Telefonul Vârstnicului*, who were able to provide me with information about this program.

Most of the information we obtained from the program coordinator referred to the history, founders, activities, volunteers, employees, and purpose of the program. Interviews were not conducted with volunteers, as they only take over the call-back part of the seniors and would not have been able to provide me with information about the problems seniors face, the degree of their digitalization or the qualities a person working with seniors daily should have. The sample used for interviews, consisting of the four social workers of the program, is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. The sample**

Code	Gender	Age	Educational Background	Present positions	Experience as a social worker at <i>Telefonul Vârstnicului</i>
I1	Female	32	Faculty of Sociology and Social Assistance	Social Worker	3 years
I2	Female	26	Faculty of Sociology and Social Assistance	Social Worker	2 years
I3	Female	35	Faculty of Sociology and Social Assistance	Program Coordinator	8 years
I4	Female	29	Faculty of Sociology and Social Assistance	Social Worker	5 years

The method used for the research was an in-depth interview, supplemented by observation sheets/observation notes taken during site visits, specifically relating to the three probing questions, with a focus on each employee physically present in the room. We chose this research method because it allowed us to see nonverbally how employees

respond as social workers to the challenges of this job and to observe the tone of voice, speech rhythm, posture, and facial expressions.

If we refer to the interviewees, they have been selected by the program coordinator, who has been tested on the skills and knowledge needed to be able to give an honest and open answer to the questions in the interview guide. The age of the respondents to the survey ranged from 26 to 32 years old, being people who have graduated from the Faculty of Sociology and Social Assistance, both Bachelor and Master graduates. The interviews were recorded on a mobile phone in mp3 format.

Interviews ranged from 27 (Interview 2) to 44 minutes (Interview 1). The interview started with the moderator's introduction, and a few opening questions, followed by the first topic on information and history of the *Telefonul Vârșnicului* program, and the problems they face. After that, we talked about communication with seniors, what qualities a social worker should have, and finally a reflection question on how this program could be improved. Finally, some questions regarding socio-demographic data.

Respondents were selected by the coordinator of this program. They are all social workers with practical experience in the field. Interviews were conducted individually with each of the four respondents. Each had a background as a social worker, only one of the respondents, namely the coordinator of the program, had other duties in addition to those related to the social work area, such as organizational, management, motivational, and evaluation duties.

The main limitation of this research is the number and gender of the participants who were only women. It would be interesting to also find out the volunteers', both male and female, opinions regarding their involvement in this program. The second limitation is the time frame in which the interviews were conducted. For each of the social workers, we set a favorable time when the interview could be conducted. The limitation we encountered was related to the busy schedule of these employees, especially the program coordinator, which affected the data collection time. A final limitation is the level of study of the participants. All participants in this research come from urban areas (Bucharest) where they had access to similar means of communication. The social workers interviewed and observed are graduates. However, we did not have employees from rural areas to make a comparative analysis between them.

### **Data analysis and interpretation - Case Study: *Telefonul Vârșnicului* Program**

*Telefonul Vârșnicului* Program was established in 2015 and aims to help older people socialize and stop feeling lonely. It was born out of a desire to help the seniors. Through this program, the founders aim to change the way people think, feel, and act towards the issue of aging, how communities develop so that they are responsive to active aging, and aim to provide integrated person-centered care and primary health services that meet the needs of older people.

The vast majority of older people who call the Seniors Helpline do not demonstrate high digital skills. In general, those who have a family away in a foreign country have had to learn how to use technology to somehow keep in touch with family.

One of the reasons why the seniors turn to the program is because it meets their needs, such as the need to socialize, not to feel lonely to receive useful information from social workers, and to be guided according to their needs to certain homes for the seniors. The demand for home care and socialization are two of the main reasons why older people turn to the program.

The *Telefonul Vârșnicului's* team consists of four social workers, one of whom is the project coordinator, plus 15 call-back volunteers and 5 psychologist volunteers who

provide psychological counseling to the seniors. Volunteers must be from Bucharest, training is provided at the headquarters during the time they come and it depends on each individual how quickly they accumulate information and how quickly they set their limits.

*We are a team of four social workers, three social workers who answer the phone daily, chat, socialize, and provide information, I, who is the coordinator of the program and we have a team of volunteers, 15 volunteers who call regularly, weekly for socialization and 5 psychologist volunteers who call for psychological counseling. These services are provided free of charge. (I3)*

Volunteers can be from any field of activity, they just need to enjoy working with the seniors and have patience and empathy. Most volunteers come with a desire to help, which in turn arises from a personal need. Either something has been activated on a personal level and then most of them don't come with the idea that they are going to stay for a certain period of time, but they get attached to the seniors, they become friends with them very quickly. Some volunteers have grown up with the seniors, even from the beginning of the program they have been in close contact with them.

*We've had pupils, we've had students, from various fields, lawyers, doctors, retired people, programmers. We even have pensioners who are volunteers. They have this desire to actively age, they want to pass this energy on to the senior people they talk to. We don't see the concept of volunteering as we do in other countries, they have been doing it since kindergarten, but maybe we want to fill a gap or we need experience in this field. (I3)*

What is important to mention is that the seniors who use the call-back service do not mean they have a problem with their families. They just feel the need to socialize with other people, maybe even not to burden their family with certain problems.

Among the vital needs of seniors are: the need for moral support, socializing, getting away from the feeling of loneliness, care at home or on the move, and the desire to receive useful information to support them on various topics relevant to seniors. Although the family is in the same place as some of the seniors, they still experience loneliness because family members are so caught up in daily chores that they cannot give them the time they need.

*From what I see, I see that the needs would be for socialization, moral support, and talking to someone because, for a long time, they haven't talked to anyone. They feel lonely. Many people live with their families, but they still feel lonely. That's why it's important not how we see it from the outside, but how they feel it. As well as socializing and the need for moral support, to talk to someone, and to relieve the feeling of loneliness, there is also the need to receive useful information. Also, on the care side, they are looking to move even into a home where they can be helped, we also give them information and contact details of various institutions. Maybe they don't find the need, but we identify it and then we refer them. The three most important needs of seniors would be daily care, socialization, and useful information. (I1)*

*In addition to the need for useful information, information that we verify and provide only from reliable, official sources, there are also financial, and medical issues, the need for home care, but also the desire to be involved in as many activities as possible and to age actively. The problem of loneliness is more of a mentality, it's a bit easier to solve, even we, young people, have this problem. (I1)*

To provide an answer to the second research question, we mention that among the issues for which seniors turn to *Telefonul Vârșnicului* are medical problems, financial problems, problems related to the emotional side, moral support, home care, and travel. There is also the desire to find out certain useful information. There are also some day-clubs to encourage them to meet people of the same age and socialize. Sometimes even social workers find out about certain services from seniors themselves and then investigate them on their own. Their needs also come from the fact that technology has

developed, but they have somehow fallen behind and then they need support in the digital area.

*There would be the need for socialization, psychological counseling, home care, financial needs, and useful information to contact certain institutions. We try to provide them with the most accurate information that will help them as much as possible, we offer guidance, information, guidance, not actual solutions. (12)*

*Technology has advanced a lot and everything is modern and they are a bit behind and need guidance. The fact that they are not visited, some of them don't talk to anyone, some of them find it hard to find their words, so some of them don't talk to anyone but us, and they feel the need to tell stories a lot. (14)*

The majority of the seniors are quite poorly digitalized. There are a few seniors whose families live abroad who had to adapt. On the other hand, some seniors cannot even use their smartphones well. In this regard, some day-clubs offer training for seniors to develop digital skills, but more could be done in this direction precisely so that they embrace technology more easily.

*More and more older people are going to have access to a smartphone, we are trying to develop digitalization projects, how to search for general information, small steps, and how to use Zoom, Whatsapp, or Google. They don't know how to initiate the call or send pictures. Knowing how to check an account from the provider. Now all institutions are starting to go digital, they're going to get different email notifications, we want to teach them the basics. They use Facebook and Whatsapp the most. They answer the call, initiate the call, and Facebook account they can't do it themselves, they call relatives and then they scroll, give comments, everything at a basic level. There are exceptions. But in general, that would be it. (13)*

To answer the third research question, among the qualities that a social worker working in this program should have are: being a good communicator, listening actively, understanding, guiding, being patient, being calm, being resilient to stress, and being empathetic and being able to handle various situations with calm and understanding. Furthermore, employees must have a degree in Sociology and Social Work.

*You have to be a graduate in Social Work, we need these degrees, but we need the knowledge from university, but not everyone who has finished this field is cut out for communicating with the seniors, you have to love the seniors, be empathetic, patient, open, be willing to learn every day, always looking for new services, new solutions, but patience is the most important quality. (13)*

*Patience, empathy, and very good communication skills. Patience about the fact that the seniors, because maybe they understand and take notes more slowly. There is also the empathy part, to understand the problem and what it means for us, but at the same time we have to not get very involved because we get consumed, there is also detachment, but also empathy. It's something you have to have already, but it can also be acquired along the way. We already know the same problems that come up, it's a habit and it doesn't affect us so much anymore, but empathy is there all the time, otherwise, we wouldn't be here. (12)*

For some problems seniors face, there are not certain services, and the fact that social workers can't help them all the way or in certain situations affects them because they would like to help all the way. Even in the most difficult situations, social workers feel satisfied when seniors thank them for their help even with a kind word or simply socializing with them.

*It affects me that I would like to offer guidance to services and these don't exist. The fact that I can't help all the way. (11)*

*In general, people who are in a state of deep depression and feel they have no escape, would not want us to refer them to someone else, but we are not psychologists. We explain several times, give them the phone number and hang up the call. (12)*



Employees also benefit from training to help them in their continuous professional training and give them the chance to develop in this field.

*Training is available for employees. There is the one at the beginning, it is specific for each employee, how to take calls, where the database is, how to enter notes in the CRM, and how to do the initial form. (12)*

*If they happened to need information that I didn't know, then I told them that I would get back to them so that I could find out, look for that information or consult with my colleagues. People who have medical problems call us, and we understand, but we don't give advice in that direction, they go to their family doctor who knows their medical history. Guidance is offered, but the senior person makes the final decision. (14)*

*Telefonul Vârstnicului* Program is seen as a real success for employees (social workers) and also for the program coordinator who has been in the program for over 8 years. She has seen how much it has developed and how many seniors beneficiaries it has helped. The most important thing in terms of the visibility of the program is to get more and more publicity to reach as many senior people as possible.

*I don't want to change anything, it's working very well, I would like more senior people to know about us, to become more and more known. Things are changing for the better, me being from the beginning, I have seen the evolution, and the involvement of civil society and not necessarily, which is growing. We are moving slowly and surely, but at the project level, we are doing very well. (13)*

### **Case study implications**

This case study has the purpose of presenting how seniors benefit from social, moral, and sociological help. Also, by researching this program, we identified useful information regarding clubs that seniors have access to. This is useful in the process of seniors' digitalization. More importantly, the *Telefonul Vârstnicului* Program helps seniors age actively and become more digitalized. This is a great initiative and example for other programs in Romania because this is an area that should be more and more developed so that seniors benefit from a more digitalized environment where they can socialize and age actively. Among other research regarding this topic, this case study comes along with useful and insightful information regarding seniors, the use of new technology, and ways of alienating loneliness.

### **Discussion of results**

#### *The program*

The results of this research confirm several previously presented studies on this topic. As Peacock and Künemund (2007) point out, older people do underestimate their abilities to use technology. Although limited, as we observed from the research conducted, they become more intentional in these steps to learn to use the Internet. They either turn to dedicated services, are helped by social workers, or volunteers, as in the case of the Seniors Phone, or are taught at senior clubs. This is a step forward towards digitizing the seniors.

Communication is key in discussions with seniors (Caldeira & Chen, 2019), but also in team discussions, because whenever there are more difficult cases, employees consult among themselves to find a good way to guide seniors. In the case of the project coordinator, every day comes with new challenges, she makes sure that everything is going in the right direction and that employees have the necessary resources to carry out work. She solves technical problems, makes reports, attends conferences, and is active in e-mail and many other responsibilities.

#### *Use of technology*

On the other hand, it has been disproved by Marston et al. (2020) that with advancing age, the desire to create new friendships decreases. In the present research, we observed that older people do want to socialize a lot, to meet new people, especially people of a close age with whom to socialize. Older people feel the need to connect with those close to them through technology to reduce loneliness.

At the same time, some seniors find it more difficult to learn to use technology because it is something they have not been used to since their youth and they find it difficult to learn something new. It takes time and patience to become more digitally literate and to satisfy their need for socializing and combating loneliness. This information is also confirmed by the previously mentioned study by Kim et al. (2016) on the difficulties older people face in using new technologies.

The majority of senior citizens who call the *Telefonul Vârstnicului* Program do not have high digital skills. In general, those who have a family away in a foreign country have had to learn to use technology to somehow keep in touch with family.

There are some day-clubs to encourage seniors to meet people of the same age and socialize. Sometimes even social workers find out about certain services from seniors themselves and then investigate them on their own. Their needs also come from the fact that technology has developed, but they have somehow fallen behind and then need support in the digital area.

#### *Social workers' skills*

Blake and Kerr (2019) mentioned that loneliness can create states of anxiety or depression among seniors, which is even reflected in the case study conducted because as seniors get older, they are prone to illness and may lose their life partner or even their children and then there is a need for referral to a doctor or psychotherapist. At such times, loneliness can become overwhelming.

Social workers benefit from training and continuous professional development to keep up with the latest developments in the field and the challenges they face. They also need to be patient, understanding, and calm in their discussions with older people, which are the most important qualities for a social worker working with older people.

### **Conclusions**

Through this case study, we found out that the *Telefonul Vârstnicului* Program wants to help seniors and provide them with guidance to various state institutions, useful, verified, and official information. It also offers the opportunity to socialize and supports active aging. The results are in line with other studies regarding this topic, such as the ones written and discussed in the literature review by Peacock and Künemund (2007), Marston et al. (2020), and Blake and Kerr (2019).

The added value of this research is revealed from the qualitative research. Older people face several problems, both financial and medical, but also have a need to communicate, alleviate loneliness and meet new people, even those of close age, with whom to share their thoughts. The need to age actively is satisfied by participating in various activities through senior clubs.

The digital skills of older people are quite limited, but growing in recent years. The most commonly used apps are Whatsapp and Facebook. These are used to keep in touch with family, especially those abroad. The qualities that an employee of the *Telefonul Vârstnicului* Program must have are patience, calmness, understanding, empathy, and pleasure in working with seniors.

This paper complements the studies carried out on this topic so far to provide another way of approaching it and to find out how older people combat loneliness through technology. It thus adds significant information to the research that has been carried out so far, seeking to highlight the concept of aging and to underline its importance and the need for improvement. The objectives of the paper (to highlight a brief history of the *Telefonul Vârstnicului* Program, to see exactly what actions it takes to support the seniors, what are the needs, the multitude of situations and problems faced by seniors, and what values and qualities a person working in this field should have) were achieved.

It would be interesting to conduct research to establish clear differences between women and men in their ability to manage the problems faced by older people, to interpret their degree of digitalization, to analyze the practical experience of a male versus a female social worker, and to see if there are differences between the qualities and values that the two sexes have. Regarding further research, we could carry out comparative research between a program of this kind in Romania versus one abroad, to see similarities, and differences, what can be improved, if it is going in a good direction or not, as well as the level of openness towards new technologies from the seniors' perspective.

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