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Article

Ageism at Work: Students' Perspective

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Suggested Citation: Grah, Barbara; Penger, Sandra (2023) : Ageism at Work: Students' Perspective, ENTRENOVA - ENTERprise REsearch InNOVation, ISSN 2706-4735, IRENET - Society for Advancing Innovation and Research in Economy, Zagreb, Vol. 9, Iss. 1, pp. 181-195, <https://doi.org/10.54820/entrenova-2023-0017>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/302080>

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Ageism at Work: Students' Perspective

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Abstract

Ageism symbolises negative beliefs, opinions, expectations, attitudes, and stereotypes about age. Ageism is frequently recognised as a crucial barrier to obtaining and retaining work. In dealing with older people in the workplace, a study showed that regardless of the perceived challenges (e.g., the ageing workforce), most employers take no necessary measures or actions to retain and recruit older workers or advance their productivity (Van Dalen et al., 2009). Younger generations must become aware of this phenomenon and act proactively towards intergenerational support. Therefore, we performed the study based on the content analysis of the first-year students of the School of Economics and Business perspective on the ageism phenomenon. Specifically, we investigated the topic under study through qualitative research. Namely, we collected their opinions and presented their results with explanatory quotations that offer a phenomenological alternative to the social perspective of ageism in the workplace, advancing research in an organisational context through students' perspectives. Practically, our study contributes to the understanding of the lifelong challenges that our societies face and a possible pathway to addressing the broader future perspective by linking different generations.

Keywords: ageism; content analysis; students' perspective.

JEL classification: J26; J28; J60

Paper type: Research article

Received: 26 January 2023

Accepted: 10 May 2023

DOI: 10.54820/entrenova-2023-0017

Acknowledgements: The authors acknowledge that the paper was financially supported by the Slovenian Research Agency, Program P5-0364 – The Impact of Corporate Governance, Organizational Learning, and Knowledge Management on Organizations in Ageing Societies.

Introduction

Ageism is often identified as a critical barrier to obtaining and retaining work (Dimovski et al., 2022). In dealing with older people in the workplace, a study showed that regardless of the perceived challenges (e.g., the ageing workforce), the majority of employers take no necessary measures or actions to retain and recruit older workers or advance their productivity. Recent research has shown that statistics on ageing and older people were not given sufficient priority in the past (Gardner, 2021; Dimovski et al., 2022). As a result, according to the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, data are not systematically produced, analysed, or disseminated by national governments. In 2020, the WHO launched the Decade of Healthy Ageing 2020-2030, observing that three-quarters of the world's countries have limited or no data on healthy ageing or older age groups. The UN Decade of Healthy Ageing calls for action to increase the significance of ageing, create an urgency to act, and generate changes that transform population ageing from a challenge to an opportunity (Dimovski et al., 2022). The lack of data and analysis contributes to the invisibility and exclusion of older people.

In our study, based on a content analysis of the perspective of first-year students of the School of Economics and Business, we analysed the phenomenon of ageism. In particular, this study aims to investigate the view of student generations on the challenges of ageism and the ageing of the EU population.

The paper is structured into two parts; in the first part, we present the theoretical background on ageism and the phenomena of ageing of the population. In the second empirical part, we present the results of the qualitative research based on the explanatory quotations of students in the first year of study at the School of Economics and Business in Ljubljana, Slovenia.

Population ageing

The ageing of Europe's population is changing much of the economic and social order, with profound and overarching consequences for production, consumption, labour, and, above all, wealth. The combination of an increase in life expectancy over the last century and a decline in birth rates since the 1970s has resulted in an ageing EU population (Castro-Conde & Gutiérrez de Rubalcava, 2018). Due to advances in socioeconomic development, the global population has grown rapidly in recent decades (Chang et al., 2019). According to the United Nations, the number of people aged 65 years and older is projected to increase from 0.7 billion (9%) in 2019 to 1.5 billion (16%) in 2050 (United Nations, 2019). However, population change is more dramatic in some countries, where the age structure is more directly affected (Raeside & Khan, 2008). Today, older adults are more likely to face various challenges in later life, including the need to work longer, and those living in developed countries are even more likely to face these challenges. These findings are also essential from the perspective of policymakers and decision-makers as they develop plans and consider ways to put policy into practice (Khan, 2019). The demographic, social, and economic challenges and conclusions arising from population ageing depend on specific national contexts and are influenced by the maturity of national welfare systems (Dimovski et al., 2022).

Ageism is defined as "systematically stereotyping and discriminating against people because they are old" (Butler, 1975). Ageism refers to how negative beliefs, attitudes, assumptions, and stereotypes about age are used to implicitly and explicitly support discriminatory behaviours that exclude older adults (Harris et al., 2018). A study of age discrimination in the workplace found that although governments in many countries have addressed age discrimination and promoted longer working lives, age

discrimination is a barrier to achieving and maintaining satisfying work (Harris et al., 2018). It is important to consider that older workers may have different resources and skills to counter age discrimination. In particular, ageism is often cited as a critical barrier to obtaining and retaining employment.

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Active ageing and definitions of ageing concepts

The World Health Organization defines active ageing as a process that aims to ensure health, participation, and social security opportunities for older people to improve their quality of life (Dimovski et al., 2022). Active and successful ageing are ubiquitous concepts in today's society. Table 1 provides a history of the most widely used definitions of ageing concepts.

Table 1

A history of the most widely used definitions of ageing concepts

Ageing concept	Definition
Successful ageing (1961)	Conditions promoting maximum satisfaction and happiness
Successful ageing (1963)	Having inner feelings of happiness and satisfaction with one's present and past life
Successful ageing (1987, 1998)	The interplay between social engagement with life, health, and functioning for a positive ageing experience (low probability of disease and disease-related disability)
Active ageing (2002)	Active ageing is the process of optimising opportunities for health, participation, and security to enhance the quality of life as people age.
Healthy ageing (2007)	Optimising opportunities for good health so that older people can take an active part in society and enjoy an independent and high quality of life
Healthy and active ageing (2011)	The process of optimising opportunities for health to enhance the quality of life as people age and grow old
Healthy ageing (2015)	Healthy ageing is more than the absence of disease. It is the process of developing and maintaining the functional ability that enables well-being in old age.

Source: Dimovski et al., 2022; Michel, 2019.

To enhance the positive aspects and reduce the risks associated with living longer, "active ageing" has been proposed as a "process of optimising opportunities for health, participation, and security to improve the quality of life in old age" (Zanella et al., 2021). In the European Union, active ageing is monitored and promoted mainly through the Active Ageing Index, a policy tool used since 2012 (De São José, Timonen, Amado, & Santos, 2017). Indices of active ageing and well-being serve as a tool to assess progress in realising the potential of the elderly population (Dimovski et al., 2022). One of the most commonly used indices is the Active Ageing Index (AAI), a

multidimensional index developed as part of a joint project between the European Commission for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion and the Population Division of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE). The AAI reflects the multi-faceted concept of active ageing and has a multidimensional structure consisting of 22 indicators (more details on the list can be found here: <https://unece.org/population/active-ageing-index>, accessed March 25, 2023). The EU-28 average AAI was 32.0 in 2010, while the preliminary index for 2018 was 35.7 (Ortega, 2021).

Age-related changes among the workers

Although interest in researching age differences in the workplace has increased, few studies have examined actual interventions aimed at supporting workers at different points in their lifespan (Truxillo et al., 2015). Ageing is associated with a decline in certain physiological and physical abilities. Thus, age-related losses and changes are related to several biological functions, including sensory (e.g., vision and hearing), muscular (e.g., strength and flexibility), aerobic capacity (e.g., VO2 max), and immune response (Maertens et al., 2012). This section describes age-related changes in humans that may affect the workplace. Table 2 presents the within-person age-related changes.

Table 2
Within-person age-related changes

Age-related change	Subcategory
Physical changes	Sensory: Reduced visual acuity and reduced hearing ability Muscular: Reduced strength, power, and balance Cardiovascular/aerobic capacity: Reduced VO2 capacity; higher blood pressure Immune response: Reduced production and effectiveness of white blood cells, resulting in increased susceptibility to illness Homeostasis: Longer physiological recovery from stressors (e.g., heat, cold, humidity, lack of sleep)
Cognitive changes	Fluid intelligence: Age-related reductions in processing speed, working memory, and selective attention Crystallised intelligence: Age-related gains in knowledge, skills, and wisdom
Affective changes	Emotional regulation: Positive relationship between age and affective well-being (positivity effect) Emotion generation: A less negative appraisal of stressful events and a tendency to concentrate on positive rather than negative environmental cues in older adults
Personality	Big Five personality traits: Increase in conscientiousness and agreeableness and decrease in neuroticism over the life span Big Five facets: Larger increase in self-discipline (a facet of conscientiousness) than in orderliness; increase in social dominance (a facet of extraversion) through adulthood; moderate decrease in social vitality (a facet of extraversion) over the life span
Motivation	Intrinsic motives: Positive relationship between age and accomplishment, connection with others, and autonomy Extrinsic motives: Negative relationship between age and extrinsic motives such as compensation, benefits, and promotions Growth motives: Negative relationship between age and growth motives such as achievement and mastery

Generativity: Positive relationship between age and the social motive of helping people or contributing to society

Source: Dimovski et al, 2022; Truxillo et al., 2015.

Age-related changes within the person may contribute to crystallised intelligence, for example, in the study in which they compare 'young' and 'old' judges. Young people are faster and solve more cases (this refers to fluid intelligence), but at the same time, more of their cases 'fall' after appeals to higher courts. On the other hand, older judges are slower and solve fewer cases. However, they are also more experienced, and their judgments are relatively often enforced even after appeals (this refers to crystallised intelligence) (Dimovski et al., 2022).

Methodology

This study aimed to gain insight into the student's view of the challenges of an ageing society (ageism and ageing). The Slovenian and European age structure is changing due to decreasing birth rates and increasing life expectancy, which is reflected on the one hand in a decrease of the younger population and, on the other hand, in the rapid growth of the older population (65+) that poses a challenge to the sustainability of the existing pension system, which is also reflected in the increase in the retirement age in Slovenia and the EU member states.

Specifically, we collected the responses of part-time business students enrolled in the "Fundamentals of Management" course in the 2022/23 school year. The course is taught in Slovenian as part of the curriculum of the School of Economics and Business at the University of Ljubljana. Surveys with open-ended questions were conducted to collect content-rich data and to gain a deeper understanding of the research phenomenon.

Of 21 students, 8 responded with valid answers. In order to get an overview of the collected data, the first part of the analysis was performed using the WorldCloud application to identify the most frequently used words related to the phenomenon under study. Before the analysis began, all the collected responses were translated into English to identify the 100 most frequently used words (with synonyms). In the second part of the data analysis, the content analysis (Stemler, 2000) was performed, which allowed us to classify the collected answers into a few categories based on certain rules, thus quantifying the qualitative data.

Results

Table 1 presents a diverse range of opinions on how different individuals envision spending their old age, perceive an ageing society, and suggest solutions for successful coexistence between younger and older generations both in the workplace and in private life. Additionally, it discusses potential changes in the labour market and the advantages of older and younger employees.

- Spending Old Age: The responses illustrate a mix of aspirations and concerns. Some individuals express a desire to remain active, both socially and physically, engaging in hobbies and sports and maintaining strong family connections. Others anticipate continuing to work beyond the traditional retirement age, driven either by economic necessity or personal choice. There is a notable emphasis on health and active lifestyles as central to enjoying old age.
- Perceptions of Aging Society: Young people's perceptions of the elderly seem mixed. Some view older individuals as reluctant to adapt to modern technology and lifestyle changes, potentially hindering societal progress. Others express

- empathy towards the challenges faced by the elderly, such as isolation and the need for more comprehensive healthcare and social support.
- Solutions for Coexistence: Suggestions for improving interactions between generations include educational initiatives to bridge the technological gap, promoting mutual understanding through shared activities, and encouraging workplace and community integration. These responses emphasise the need for patience, tolerance, and ongoing communication to foster a harmonious coexistence.
- Changes in the Labor Market: Predictions for the labour market's future include more remote work, a shift towards shorter workweeks, and an increasing reliance on technology. Soft skills and experience are expected to become more valued as demographics shift towards an older workforce.
- Advantages of Older vs Younger Employees: The responses highlight older workers' experience and wisdom as valuable, particularly in fostering personal connections and mentoring younger colleagues. Younger workers are appreciated for their adaptability and technological prowess, which are crucial in a rapidly changing professional environment. Suggestions for leveraging these strengths include creating mentorship opportunities and integrating technology training for all ages.

Table 1

Quotations provided by respondents

Question	Explanatory quotations
1) How do you imagine you will spend your old age (65 and over)?	<p>I would have been happy to spend time with my family in my old age, to travel the world with my partner and not to see age as a barrier.</p> <p>I want to spend my old age relatively active and, therefore, in good health in the company of my children and grandchildren. I imagine that, just as I am active in sports now, I will also be active in sports when I am older. I also see myself still somehow involved in the world of football, either as a football coach or as an official.</p> <p>Of course, the first thing that comes to mind is retirement. However, I believe that in 45 years, there will be no pensions at all, so by then, you will need to have accumulated enough assets to last another 25 years or still be working after 65. Both options are very difficult to achieve, but I have plenty of time before then, so I am not too scared about it. I am most looking forward to spending my free time with my friends and grandchildren, and I am also going to concentrate more on cooking.</p> <p>Given today's living standards in Slovenia and elsewhere in the world, where it is almost a practice for working lives to increase (almost annually), I believe that I will spend my old age (from 65 onwards) remaining in employment. Of course, there is some small hope that this will not be the case. However, since statistics predict a rapidly growing elderly population and a lower birth rate, there will be a problem recruiting staff, so the population will be forced to work as long as possible.</p> <p>To start with, I hope that the definition of old age will be raised above 65; otherwise, I will be old far too soon. I also hope that I will be given the years of old age because despite all the advances in knowledge of how the human body works, understanding the mechanisms of disease and advanced treatments, living in old age</p>

is far from a fact. I imagine myself as a socially, physically and mentally active older woman whose body will serve her well and adequately. I want (and am already laying the foundations for) to be able to cycle, swim and hike in the mountains, to keep a clear mind and to look back on life with gratitude and optimism, and to be able to do so in the company of my friends, as long as possible, in old age. Moreover, I want to be surrounded by the people I love.

How I will spend my old age from 65 depends on the life path I choose now. If I decide to have children, I hope to spend my old age with my grandchildren. If I decide not to have children, I will probably spend most of my time travelling. However, I certainly cannot imagine not still working and being active, at least to some extent.

I would not like to spend my old age still working after 65. I imagine relaxing and enjoying life. I want to devote myself to hobbies that I did not have time for before. I would also like to travel and spend the time I have left with family and friends.

2) How do you young people perceive an ageing society - what barriers would you highlight?

I think a lot of older adults want to live in the past and maybe do not even want to admit how much better we can live today than in the past. Some want to live too humbly and not afford to be different because that used to be impossible. Then, reproach others who do. Another thing, perhaps, is that they use old age as an excuse not to learn, change, do something ...

I would point out the lack of shared homes for the elderly and the lack of professionals working with the elderly. The elderly are also more in need of medical attention than younger people, so doctors, especially family doctors, will become even more overstretched, and access to health services will become more difficult due to longer waiting times. As there will be more older adults, there will consequently be more people earning their pensions, so there will also be a risk that the pension pot will not collapse.

I have a high regard for the elderly. However, I often find that most of the older population is unwilling or uninterested in learning about current technology that would help them. They do not want to learn how to use telephones or computers, some do not want to go to a retirement home, even though it would make them less lonely, and some do not want to have any contact with the present world at all and prefer to be confined to their homes. Many pensioners, of course, cannot afford such things, so I hope that the state will do something to help them.

One of the main obstacles I would point out for an ageing society is, above all, the lack of homes for the elderly and the lack of staff to care for the elderly. These people increasingly need extra care every day, where they are dependent on others and need help with daily chores and other activities such as getting up, feeding, and dressing. Because there is a stigma in today's world that older adults no longer contribute to the well-being of the country, they are more often than not forgotten and labelled as incompetent, even though they have their advantages.

Today's elderly have experienced incredible technological developments in their lifetime. Even younger people sometimes find it difficult to keep up with all the changes, but for them, it is even more challenging. Infrastructure is not adapted to an ageing society;

there are no lifts in older blocks of flats, and in many rural areas, older people live alone and face daily challenges. Poor public transport infrastructure. The importance of preventive health care was not emphasised in their more active lives, and many people now have health problems and expect a doctor, an operation or a pill to restore their health. I see the digitalisation of healthcare as a very positive solution. However, at the same time, it will be necessary to find a way to help people who are not skilled or even computer literate. I have come across people at the post office on several occasions who have asked the staff to help them to submit referrals.

Drawing on my experience in student work, I have seen most of the barriers in technology. I worked at Arnes, where I worked with and helped teachers and computer technicians with various services. Older individuals did not know how to keep up with new services or the motivation to learn them.

I often notice a big gap between the older and younger generations. Younger people often perceive the elderly as a burden, unable or even unwilling to move with the times. A big barrier for older people is technology, which they do not understand or do not know how to use. Over time, people develop certain habits and ways of working that are difficult to change or replace. Young people perceive an ageing society as reluctant to change.

3) What solutions would you suggest for a successful coexistence of young and older adults in the working environment and private life?

We need to understand each other better. We come from different upbringings and different circumstances in which we grew up. In the work environment, we need to understand that everyone's interests are only in the interests of the company and that we need to compromise and not just be stubborn in our ideas.

Understanding each other seems to me to be the key to successful coexistence. Therefore, I suggest organising joint seminars and workshops where older and younger people can share their experiences, opinions, and suggestions. Then, together, we can find solutions for better coexistence. I also think it is an interesting idea to organise as many social and sporting events as possible to bring the two generations together.

As we know, it is always the younger generations who follow the current technological trends. So, the first thing we should do is educate the elderly on how to use today's devices and applications properly. It is clear that nowadays, everything is done more efficiently with new trends, and it is these trends that most older people are afraid of. Moreover, all of this is also being transferred into private life. Older people who know how to use a phone and a computer will be able to communicate more easily with their family and their work and also learn how to use new technology that is changing year by year.

For almost a year now, I have been working in a company where I share an office with an elderly lady. It is important to me that my working environment is positive and that the office climate is good. Unfortunately, I also often encounter problems when it comes to coexistence with an elderly colleague. In particular, I would be happier to go to work if there was more tolerance and accommodation between us and more mutual help at work.

The most important thing is the right communication from both sides. Young people could try to understand the older generation, listen to

their advice and learn from their mistakes, while older people could be more open to change and try new things.

For successful coexistence in the work environment, I would suggest patience, understanding and a willingness to change from both sides. Younger people need to be more patient and understanding with older people if they happen to be unaware of the latest trends. This can also be an opportunity for education. However, the older ones have to be willing to do things differently and to accept change.

I see the solution first and foremost in education for tolerance and mutual respect. So that the elderly are not seen as a necessary evil and the young as troublemakers who want change at any cost. I believe that there used to be more generational diversity in everyday life and more coexistence between the generations. Encouraging young people to carry out activities in the homes of the elderly, encouraging cooperation between kindergartens and homes. Peer mentoring could also be encouraged in the work environment - for example, younger and older people could be paired up to do a task a week.

4) How do you think the labour market will change?

I think that soon, an even greater proportion of people will work from home. I also think that the working week will be reduced to four working days with three weekend days.

The labour market will value soft skills and experience gained outside studies more. This trend seems to be gradually coming into force. As the proportion of older people in the labour market increases, emotional intelligence, wisdom, and the ability to work as part of a team will become even more valued.

In the future, many professions will be replaced by computers, simply put, so I believe that the most in-demand will be machinists and programmers. Moreover, most of these are not, of course, part of the older population. The labour market today and in the future is much more dependent on young people.

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The labour market will change dramatically in the coming years, if only because of demography itself. The average age and the number of people in employment are rising, which means that both the young and the middle-aged population will decline sharply. On the other hand, the proportion of the elderly population will increase. The consequences will be seen in particular in the increased competition for young employees. The older population will force the country to create new occupations that will benefit both young and old.

Since COVID-19, I have seen a lot more people working from home, and I think this trend will intensify. The big theme of the last period is artificial intelligence, which will change the way we work and potentially displace certain jobs. I believe that this will open up new, different jobs, which will, of course, require different skills.

If the population continues to age, there is likely to be a shortage of labour in the future, and we will look elsewhere. There will be more older people at work and a shortage of young people. There may also be a shortage of skilled staff.

I see changes in the labour market in terms of a change in the needs of certain profiles - there will be an increase in the need for health and social care profiles and, therefore, an increase in the demand for these profiles (well, we are already seeing it in a sense). I expect the average age of employees to rise, as well as the average age of job seekers. Technological developments will also certainly have an impact on changes in the labour market.

5) Where do you see the advantages of older employees for society and companies, and where do you see the advantages of the younger generation? How could companies make better use of this?

I see the advantage of older people in their enthusiasm for work and their habituation to hard work. The advantage of young people is mostly their knowledge of modern technology, which can save companies time, effort and money today. Taking shortcuts is also a trait that I think occurs more often in younger people.

The younger generations are more receptive to innovation, including the use of social networks.

Older generations build on the experience and knowledge they have acquired throughout their lives and are, therefore, very reliable in running a business. Young people, on the other hand, are still gaining knowledge. However, they are much more experienced in using today's technological trends, which can make it much easier for companies to do their job and also reduce costs on some projects. Put the two together, and you have a great combination.

The advantages of older workers for society and the companies in which they work are mainly the breadth of knowledge they have in their field of work. I believe that older people value personal contact with their fellow human beings much more and that, at certain moments.

I see the advantages of the younger generation as motivation to learn new skills. This is the generation of the digital age, which the company can make good use of to teach digital skills to the older population. Young people are also fast learners and do not find new challenges strenuous.

Older employees have more experience and knowledge than young people. They can pass on this knowledge to younger generations and help them on their way to success with their advice. Younger generations have more knowledge about new technology and fresh ideas that could improve work and increase productivity. Businesses could take advantage of both by connecting the generations and employing both older and younger generations.

Younger people have the advantage of being able to adapt to change more easily and learn faster. In comparison, older people have the advantage of having more experience, being more responsible, and being able to mentor younger people. Businesses could take advantage of this by employing older people and supporting them with additional training as part of their work so that they can adapt to change more easily and be more skilled.

Younger people are more agile; they adapt more quickly to change, they are more receptive to technological innovations, and they learn faster. Older people are more experienced, more

Figure 5

Wordcloud analysis of question 5: Where do you see the advantages of older employees for society and companies, and where do you see the advantages of the younger generation? How could companies make better use of this?



Source: Author's illustration

Discussion and conclusion

The world population was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, both health-wise and economically, psychosocially and educationally (Garcia et al., 2021; Dimovski et al., 2022). The pandemic has reduced opportunities for socialisation and consequently increased the use of information and communication technologies in the workplace, education, health care, public administration, shopping, and leisure. The need for increased use of ICTs has led to unequal access to digital technologies within and between population groups (UNECE, 2018). It turns out that older people are more likely to be affected by digital exclusion. The consequences of this exclusion can be seen in the limited opportunities to access goods and services through online tools or in the lack of digital literacy, which results in the premature exit of older people from the labour market. In our study, we examined students' perspectives on the phenomenon of ageing based on a content analysis of first-year students in the School of Economics and Business. Our study outlined that older generations build on the experience and knowledge they have acquired throughout their lives and are, therefore, very reliable in running a business. Young people, on the other hand, are still acquiring knowledge but are much more experienced in dealing with today's technological trends, which can make companies' work much easier and, in some projects, reduce costs. The two together make an excellent combination. Young people are more adaptable to change, while older people find it very difficult. This is where mutual aid between generations should be established, where both sides can learn a little tolerance. Young people like to learn new skills and are quick on their feet, so young people could take the initiative to help older people adapt to change. On the other hand, older people represent a huge treasure trove of knowledge and skills that young people lack and could use in their careers. Limitations of our study are to be found in its qualitative nature, as the findings cannot be generalised. We suggest conducting a multi-country analysis, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to gain additional insight. Our study contributes to the understanding of the lifelong challenges that our societies face. This offers a possible pathway to addressing the broader future perspective by linking different generations.

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