The European Proceedings of
Social and Behavioural Sciences
EpSBS

www.europeanproceedings.com
e-ISSN: 2357-1330

DOI: 10.15405/epsbs.2021.07.13

LEASECON 2020
International Conference «Land Economy and Rural Studies Essentials»

FOSTERING SOCIAL COMMUNICATION OF ELDERLY RURAL RESIDENTS IN THE MODERN DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

Population aging is typical of most civilized countries, among which Russia is no exception. This trend has brought about the need for additional research in the field of sociology, pedagogy, economics and other sciences. Reaching old age entails a whole set of challenges, both for the elderly and society at large. One of the most crucial issues is social isolation of the elderly, associated with a modified social circle and reduced social contact, interactions, etc. In rural conditions, the problem is aggravated by a limited number of links between older people and society, by long distances to social infrastructure facilities. However, modern information environment provides its participants with a variety of resources to solve many problems in the field of social communication, including for elderly citizens living in rural areas. The paper is devoted to fostering social communication of elderly rural residents in the digital environment under a social humanitarian project. Its main participants will be senior schoolchildren and students who have a basic command of modern smartphones, on the one hand, and rural population aged 60+ years, who need to improve social communication, on the other hand. The project is aimed at basic training of older people, focused on smartphone literacy. During the project, it is expected to ensure the participation of third-age persons in society through mobile technologies.

Keywords: Elderly people, rural settlement, social interactions

https://doi.org/10.15405/epsbs.2021.07.13
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eISSN: 2357-1330

1. Introduction

In recent years, many state and public institutions in Russia have paid increased attention to various aspects of the life of older people, which is due to a wide range of reasons, with a major one to be rising life expectancy. In April 2020, the national media, citing the Ministry of Health, unanimously declared that life expectancy had reached a historic high, surpassing 73 years. This is forecast to be far from the limit, as evidenced by the Presidential Decree On the National Development Goals of Russia until 2030 signed on July 21, 2020, which establishes rising life expectancy to 78 years (Decree on the National Development Goals of Russia until 2030, 2020). These considerations, alongside the pension reform adopted in the Russian Federation in 2019, special requirements for self-isolation in the context of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 and other problems, have brought about a deeper awareness of the ways towards a more productive life ensured for older people (as per the WHO classification, these include 60+ population).

An important component of a full-on life for older people is their ability to comfortably interact with society, which helps them not to lose social contact and satisfy basic needs. Information and communication technologies currently in operation assist in developing communications at all levels for all participants. It is difficult to imagine the life of a modern person without being involved in a digital environment that permeates the daily routine of the entire population, regardless of age, type of activity, place of living and other characteristics. To get a public service, find out opening hours of some institution, make an appointment to see a doctor, communicate with relatives and friends, etc., it is enough to use any digital device with Internet access, which greatly reduces the time spent by replacing offline contact with online. It so happened, and there are many reasons for this, with a major one being low income, that a large portion of elderly populations is unable to live a full-fledged life in the modern digital environment. Undoubtedly, this situation prevents the older generation from making priority and vital decisions easier, promoting health, and saving time.

Elderly residents in rural settlements deserve special attention within the development of social communication in the digital environment. Firstly, they often have limited rapid access to services from various institutions over long distances, and secondly, they do not always have the required communication facilities, even if there is an Internet network available in the region (Zubova, 2018). According to most sources, the share of a rural population in Russia in recent years has made up 25-26% (in 2018 – 25.6%), which corresponds to 36.8-38 million people (in 2018 – 37,553 thousand people), of which people over the able-bodied age (over 65) in 2018 was 26.2%, i.e., almost 10 million people. Provided that citizens aged 60 to 65 are also involved, in line with WHO recommendations, the figure will be even higher. The author believes that this segment needs a special approach from state and public organizations when it comes to ensuring full-fledged social communication, with all the attributes concerned like the place of living, age, low level of provision with modern communication facilities, etc.

2. Problem Statement

Social isolation of older people, both in the country as such and particularly in rural settlements, requires a search for approaches to its mitigation. Detachment from society, provoked primarily by

retirement, makes older Russians unable to live in a way they used to do. Most colleagues stop communicating, children and grandchildren often live far away, the media are limited to television, the main means of communication is a stationary phone. Besides this, even more issues seem to get added in old age. Declining health requires more frequent visits to hospital and pharmacy. It is not always convenient to receive a pension on the dates fixed. There is free time for a hobby, but there are few sources of information on how to take it. An obvious solution to address insufficient development of social communication of the elderly rural population is the use of modern digital devices (computers and smartphones with Internet access). However, they are not so common for every rural pensioner. It is an exception rather than a rule. Moreover, not all elderly people have skills enabling to deal with modern technologies easily. In this regard, it seems relevant to explore ways to improve ICT literacy by citizens aged 60+ living in rural settlements. A poor command of information and communication technology prevents this category from leading a full-on life within the modern digital environment (Zaitseva et al., 2019).

A multifaceted topic of the paper required scientific exploration in several dimensions concurrently: socialization of the elderly, including social interactions, social life of elderly people in rural areas, social interactions in the digital environment. Thus, the target issue spans a wide range of sources. The socialization of elderly citizens, including social interactions, was found to be addressed by V. D. Alperovich, T. A. Boldyreva, K. B. Eremenko, A. V. Kiryushina, I. S. Cohn, P. S. Kuznetsov, N. V. Kurilovich, T. Lukman, O. Yu. Matsukevich, T. Parsons, N. A. Perinskaya, E. Rosset, M. V. Subochev, T. E. Tikhonova, L. V. Tkhorzhevskaya, M. N. Fedorova and others.

The social aspects of the life of elderly people in rural areas, including settlements, were studied by such scientists as A. A. Antipova, U. S. Borisova, N. F. Garipova, I. Yu. Gnezdilova, L. N. Medvedeva, M. S. Minvaeva, A. M. Misharina, N. O. Mugurova, T. V. Teterina, M. A. Timoshenko, G. N. Tyurikova, E. I. Kholostova, A. B. Khramtsov and others.

Within the target topic, special attention was paid to publications on social communication of the elderly population in the digital environment. Based on bibliographic analysis, this area was investigated by O. A. Alekseeva, O. Yu. Bestuzheva, A. S. Bikkulov, Yu. I. Bogatyreva, O. N. Vershinskaya, A. Yu. Galyuzhin, D. N. Maryashina, L. N. Medvedeva, I. V. Miroshnichenko, E. V. Morozova, N. V. Plotichkina, N. A. Ptitsyna, O. V. Sergeeva, E. E. Skvortsova, V. V. Solomatova, M. A. Timoshenko, Yu. V. Sharanovskaya and others.

Despite quite extensive bibliography, scientific papers on the topic addressed, that integrate all aspects in the national scientific medium, have not been identified yet, which proves the relevance of the chosen direction of research.

3. Research Questions

The object of research is social communication of elderly people living in rural settlements of the Russian Federation. The subject of research is social communication of the rural population aged 60+ in the digital environment.

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According to the VCIOM (Russian Public Opinion research Center), less than 20% of pensioners spend their free time surfing the Internet, which is derived from inaccessibility of the World Wide Web or inability of this age group to use Internet services rather than from the reluctance to do it.

In this regard, it seems quite relevant to address the issue at least in two ways:

- to make the leisure of the elderly more diversified
- help older people learn useful apps and websites for improving the quality of life

4. Purpose of the Study

The paper aims to deepen theoretical and methodological approaches to the development of social communication of elderly citizens living in rural settlements of Russia, with the use of modern communication and information technologies.

The scientific novelty lies in the proposal of the author's project for the development of social communication of elderly people living in rural settlements, through basic training focused on the modern information environment.

The theoretical and practical significance is to improve ICT proficiency by citizens aged 60+, which will help them to lead a full-fledged life within the modern digital environment.

5. Research Methods

The study was based on analysis, synthesis, induction, deduction, comparison, sociometric survey.

6. Findings

Among all possible ways for the development of social communication among the elderly (Alekseeva et al., 2019; Garipova, 2017; Kurilovich, 2017) living in rural settlements, the paper proposes the implementation of a social humanitarian project geared to involve young people to teach the older generation the basic skills of handling mobile digital devices with Internet access (smartphones).

Within the Education national project, designed for 2019-2024, one of the global objectives was the upbringing of a harmoniously developed and socially responsible individual based on spiritual and moral values of the peoples of the Russian Federation, historical and national-cultural traditions (National project Education, 2019). Helping older people adapt to the modern digital environment contributes to the achievement of this goal, since, besides involving the older generation in a convenient information and communication medium, it is aimed at developing social and humanitarian responsibility among young people.

One of the tasks under the Education project established by the Government of the Russian Federation is the creation of conditions to enable mentoring and support of public initiatives and projects, including in the field of volunteering (National project Education, 2019). The project will speed up the issue, thanks to the development of mentoring and support of public initiatives and projects, including the attraction of senior schoolchildren and students to volunteers (tutors).

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During the implementation of the project, public relations will develop in two directions: firstly, during the training process, contacts between volunteers-trainers and older people-trainees are inevitable, and secondly, resulting from training, older villagers will be able to independently get in touch with various institutions, organizations and individuals (Bogatyreva et al., 2017; Maryashina, 2019).

The project proposes the use of a smartphone as a mobile digital device, which is due to its superiority compared to other devices (tablets, laptops, etc.) in terms of price, weight, level of user proficiency, etc. The idea of developing computer skills in third-agers has not gone any further, since not everyone can afford to buy a computer and install Internet at home. Internet connection is characterized by a lack of mobility, and generally has functionality that is not required to achieve the goals set.

An important condition for the project to be implemented is the availability of Internet in rural areas, which is improving every year, as evidenced by the statistics given in Table 01 (Russia in Figures, 2019).

Table 1. Household Internet in % of the total number of households

Indicator	Households, total			Including					
				Urban			Rural		
	2016	2017	2018	2016	2017	2018	2016	2017	2018
Households with Internet access	74.8	76.3	76.6	78.5	79.5	79.7	63.6	66.5	67.1
Households using for Internet access:									
desktop (stationary) computer	42.4	40.6	39.9	45.6	43.6	42.7	32.8	31.5	31.4
portable computers (laptop, notebook, netbook, ultrabook)	39.1	40.6	39.3	42.7	44.2	42.8	28.3	29.6	28.3
tablet PC	24.5	26.8	25.6	27.8	30.1	28.7	14.7	16.8	16.3
other mobile devices (mobile phones, smartphones, etc.)	48.9	56.0	61.9	53.1	59.8	65.9	36.3	44.3	49.3

The above data show a slight positive dynamics of the Internet access indicator in both urban and rural areas for the period 2016-2018. There is a shift in users' interest to opt for devices providing WWW access. Thus, during the target period, the use of smartphones increased by 13% among the population in general and by 13% among the rural population in particular. Of course, the data presented indicate that Russians have insufficient opportunities to use the Internet, which proves the need to take measures to improve the situation. This campaign is already underway. On April 7, 2020, amendments to the Law On Communications were adopted, whereby the Internet would enter almost 20 thousand more settlements in Russia, including hamlets, villages and towns with a population of 100 people (Federal Law of April 7 2020 N 110-FZ On Amendments to the Federal Law On Communications, 2020).

The topic of adaptation of senior citizens to the digital environment is far from new in modern society. A fairly large number of organizations offer, both on a paid and on a free basis, training of the population, including older people, in core computer literacy. Currently, the Internet is literally filled with advertisements and articles about computer literacy courses designed for older people, both at the national and regional levels. The paper clarifies the main differences between the existing courses and those recommended by the author (Table 02) (Medvedeva & Timoshenko 2018; Ptitsyna, 2018).

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Meanwhile, it would not be right to ignore those programs that are announced as specializing in teaching how to work with smartphones and tablets, etc. The services presented on the market are reflected in Table 03 (Plotichkina et al., 2020).

Table 2. The project proposed herein vs current computer literacy programs

Project	Current computer literacy programs
Telephone with a mobile operating system and Internet access	Computer with Internet access
A phone is relatively cheap (from 7,000 rubles)	A computer is relatively expensive (from 15,000 rubles)
Optional production base	Mandatory production base
Individual approach	Group and individual approaches
No need to attend educational center	The need to attend educational center
Possibility for home study	An overwhelming majority of proposals lack the opportunity to study at home
Relatively high chances of finding a sponsor to buy a phone	Relatively low chances of finding a sponsor to buy a computer (if it was agreed on in the program)
Little time spent on training basic computer skills, with no need to study office programs (Word, Excel, etc.)	Much time spent on training basic computer skills, with a need to study office programs (Word, Excel, etc.)
Telephone with a mobile operating system and Internet access	Computer with Internet access
Possibility of implementation in any locality	Proposal for the implementation of programs in regional and district centers

Table 3. Competitive services presented on the market

Criterion	Proposed project	Competitors
Availability of smartphones	Scheduled	n/a
Providing a smartphone if need be	Scheduled	n/a
Need to attend educational center	n/a	Assumed
Individual approach	Scheduled	Assumed for single programs
Focus	Smartphones alone	Smartphones, tablets, and other gadgets
Consultations after courses	Scheduled	Assumed for single programs

Thus, the data in Table 03 result in the core unique characteristics of the project (Figure 01).

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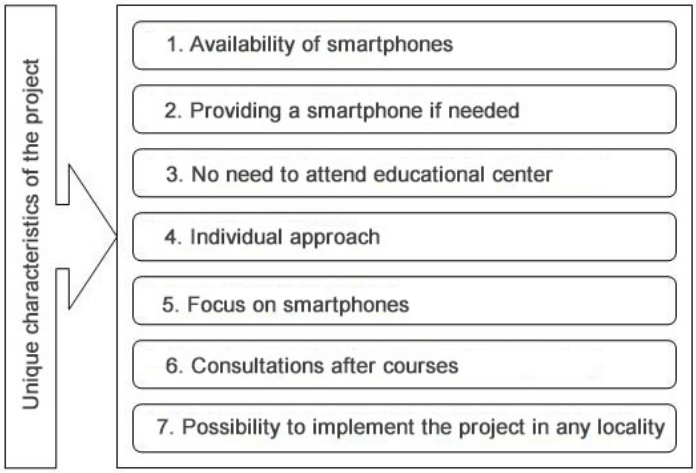

Figure 1. Unique characteristics of the project

The list of these differences between the project and competitive options suggests that the project is broadly unique.

The main stages and objectives of the project are presented in Table 04.

Table 4. Stages and objectives of the project (pilot version)*

Stage No.	Stage	Objective
		Preparation
1	Creation of target users' database	Using PF data and other sources of information, a database of target group is created with respect to regional proximity to consultants
2	Search for sponsor investors (motivation – PR)	Creation of a base of potential sponsors to purchase smartphones
3	Search for volunteer consultants	Creation of a base of potential consultants with respect to regional proximity to the target group
4	Training of volunteer consultants	Familiarization with consultant's job description
		Analysis
5	First meeting	Questionnaires for identifying the need to provide a smartphone and determine Internet experience
6	Detailing of sponsor database and sponsor engagement	Based on the created database, holding meetings with potential sponsors and providing the group with communication means
		Piloting
7	Repeated outreach to potential users	Provision of smartphones (if need be)
8	User training	Organizing classes delivered by consultants for the target group
		Self-analysis and auxiliary activities
9	Summing up preliminary results	A focus group survey, interviews with relatives
10	Organization of distance learning	Organization and delivery of consultations
11	Final assessment	A focus group survey, analysis of effective access to applications and sites

* - The list of stages was generated based on the fact that some of them had already been taken by the author in the process of developing the project (problem statement, expertise, etc.)

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Once successfully piloted, the future project can be elaborated (scaling, update, start-up, etc.).

Project participants

The project team is made up of:

Volunteers: 10 senior schoolchildren, college and university students who have basis skills required to use a smartphone.

Mentor: 1 tutor – a project manager with teaching experience and basic skills required to use modern smartphones.

Expert: 1 programmer – a specialist with a high level of IT (involved if necessary).

Users: non-working citizens aged 60+, living in rural settlements, who need to improve social communication (a general group will be determined based on the results of the 1st stage of the project and then will be divided into subgroups in multiples of 2 project participants for 5 users).

Investors: commercial organizations committed to provide users with smartphones (the number depends on the results of the 2nd and 4th stages of the project).

Customer: a state institution engaged in national projects implemented in the field of Education.

The characteristics and number of project participants are determined for the pilot version. During subsequent scaling, it is expected to have a proportional increase in the number of users, team members, mentors, experts.

Since the project team during project implementation is actually divided into subgroups of 2 people, the functions of these participants should be universal and interchangeable. The project team was mainly responsible for questioning, training and consulting users. The project team was composed of senior schoolchildren, college and university students who have basic skills required to use a smartphone and are ready to communicate with elderly citizens. If there are no branches of colleges or universities in a rural settlement, students are encouraged to be attracted during holidays to participate in the most labor-intensive stages of the project.

The timeline is shown in Table 05.

Table 5. Project timeline

No.	Activities	Weeks							
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	Creation of target users' database								
2	Search for sponsor investors (motivation – PR)								
3	Search for volunteer consultants								
4	Training of volunteer consultants								
5	First meeting								
6	Detailing of sponsor database and sponsor engagement								
7	Repeated outreach to potential users								
8	User training								
9	Summing up preliminary results								
10	Organization of distance learning								
11	Final assessment								

The project environment is a rural settlement where the target group of users and the project team are concentrated. An educational center is not a must to establish some extra interactions, and can be

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provided remotely. If team members and a mentor from one educational institution are involved, it is possible to organize meetings on its premises. Additional attributes of the environment including an atmosphere of tolerance, mercy, striving for mutual understanding and help should determine the style of interaction both with the target group of users and within the team (Golova et al., 2019).

The project requires the involvement of certain resources, which should include external participants (expert and sponsors), equipment (smartphones with Internet access), financial costs for purchasing smartphones, paying for the Internet, phone calls, printing out questionnaires. A project implementation site – an educational or socio-cultural institution (school, club, branch of a college, university) – can be used as a support site.

The implementation of a socio-humanitarian project, like any other, involves forecasting the results achieved. The author believes that this type of project activity implies shaping product and learning outcomes that can differ between team members (Uvaleyeva et al., 2019).

The product outcomes can be specified for different beneficiaries as follows:

For target educational group (non-working citizens aged 60+, living in rural settlements):

- established full-fledged communication with relatives and friends (communication via SMS, WhatsApp, Instagram, etc., including the exchange of texts and photos);
- clients of the Gosuslugi website educated to use necessary services online;
- developed basic skills for using mobile banking;
- developed skills to pay utility bills remotely;
- developed skills to make an appointment to see a local doctor and experience information on the websites of other healthcare institutions (Golova et al., 2020);
- developed basic approaches to mastering thematic mobile applications based on user interests (culinary sites, gardeners' blogs, online knitting courses, etc.);
- developed online shopping skills (medicines, clothing, household appliances, etc.).

For volunteer consultants (senior schoolchildren, university and college students):

- performed educational functions, thanks to a humanitarian component of the project;
- instilled sympathy, awareness of social significance, responsibility;
- promoted rapprochement with the older generation;
- effectively allocated free time.

For sponsor investors (organizations that finance the purchase of smartphones for target educational group):

- organizations positioned as a socially responsible market entity;
- provided opportunity to mention participation in the project in advertising and PR campaigns;
- taxation system streamlined through charity events arranged.

In addition, it is worth mentioning stakeholders concerned. They include educational institutions that perform educational functions, profit organizations acting as sponsors (investors), government bodies involved in national projects implemented in the field of Education.

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Thus, the results of the project can be beneficial for the older people, living in rural areas and requiring the proposed training; senior schoolchildren, university and college students as volunteers; educational institutions that perform educational functions; profit organizations acting as sponsors; government bodies involved in national projects implemented in the field of Education.

The key learning outcomes include:

- developed communication skills to interact in a new environment;
- strengthened skills of using a smartphone;
- extended knowledge of current mobile applications;
- developed teamwork skills;
- improved database of vulnerabilities identified in educational group.

These results are planned to be achieved at the stages of communication with potential beneficiaries. Subject (professional) knowledge and skills to be acquired by the participants involve:

Know: the main features of modern hardware and software used to solve various problems; automated IT for data generation, processing and presentation; modern hardware and software for transmitting and receiving information; basic information security requirements.

Be able to: use IT tools mastered for solving practical issues; use application packages as an end user in solving typical problems; handle information in global computer networks; choose and use modern software tools to solve various problems.

Basic abilities and competences to be developed while achieving learning outcomes:

- ability to communicate in oral and written forms to solve problems of interpersonal and intercultural interaction;
- ability to work in a team, being tolerant towards social, ethnic, confessional and cultural differences;
- ability for self-organization and self-education;
- ability to show a civil-patriotic position, demonstrate conscious behavior based on traditional universal values;
- ability to use information technology in professional activities (Tkhorzheskaya et al., 2019).

During project implementation it is crucial to check the compliance of the result with the plan. The most accessible way of self-analysis should be a survey of students through a questionnaire as a tool, and a telephone or personal contact as a method of communication with the audience. Besides, more indicative approaches to assessing the achievement of the result could be such options as: interviews with relatives about changes in the quality of digital communication with respondents, measuring the frequency and effectiveness (number of services provided) of students' access to mobile applications. It is the proposed methods that will provide answers to questions about the solution of the project idea, since they are characterized by relative availability and probability of obtaining objective data for summing up intermediate and final results of the project.

The characteristics of the project can be aligned in case of successful implementation of the pilot version after analyzing the results and identifying the need for alignment.

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7. Conclusion

The author proposed a socio-humanitarian project aimed at fostering social communication among elderly people living in rural settlements. To provide the rationale for project feasibility and implementability, the situation in rural areas on the provision of households with Internet access was explored through a comparative analysis of services offered on the national market and the project option, following the unique characteristics of the project to be identified. In addition, project workplan was elaborated, including problem statement at each stage. The participants of the project were thoroughly identified, indicating their characteristics and functions performed, approaches to conducting self-analysis were developed, and product and learning outcomes were forecast. In general, the agenda proposed by the author is thought to be in demand, scientifically grounded and practically implemented in the rural territories of Russia.

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