

## Fear of aging among young people

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*Fear is a natural emotion that individuals experience throughout their lives. Growing up, fear manifests itself in the emotions, behaviour and actions of young people, often associated with stressors such as fear of failure, social problems or too high expectations. Among the most important fears at a young age is the fear of death (thanatophobia), which can intensify anxiety and stress, especially when combined with social media pressures. In addition, the fear of aging (gerontophobia) stems from existential concerns about mortality and the social stigmatization of aging. Addressing these fears through psychological interventions, confidence building, and cultural coping mechanisms is key to reducing anxiety and building resilience. For the purposes of the research, a quantitative methodology with an online survey was used. Primary and secondary sources were collected, analysed and synthesized. Primary data were obtained through a survey aimed at Slovenian secondary school students. Secondary sources were obtained from professional literature and websites. The survey sample included 1,234 respondents aged between 15 and 29, including high school and university students. The data collection was carried out using the method of improbable (occasional) sampling. To ensure representativeness, data were weighted by gender. Statistical analysis, including descriptive and multivariate analysis, was performed with the SPSS 21 program, where the internal consistency of the scales was measured with the Cronbach alpha coefficient.*

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*With the research, the authors wanted to check whether there is a fear of aging among young people. It turned out that the average fear of loss is 51.2%, while the fear of physical appearance and psychological worries is present in 20.5% and the fear of the elderly in 6.7%. Statistically significant differences were found in terms of gender, status, place of residence and frequency and quality of contacts with the elderly, indicating the complexity of factors that influence the fear of aging.*

Key words: *aging, contact with the elderly, fear of aging, young people.*

### *Introduction\*\*\**

Every individual goes through periods of fear, which is completely normal. Fear occurs in new-borns and accompanies the individual throughout life, but is reflected in different ways at different stages of development. We perceive fear in growing individuals both from their emotions, behaviour and actions. The most common emotional states include sadness, despondency, irritability, and behavioural states include reduced attention, reduced ability to understand external impressions, forgetfulness, non-communicability.<sup>1</sup> Fear causes young people stress, which they are still learning to cope with. The most common factors of a young person's stress are fear of darkness, fear of heights, fear of the death of parents or loved ones, fear of failure, problems with friends, too high expectations.<sup>2</sup> In such cases, a young person experiences stress or distress. In fact, distress always means an emotional state in which the child or adult does not see a way out, or does not know how to help themselves. The difference between a child and an adult is primarily that we can put a child in distress much faster with our actions, because he/she is much more helpless, dependent on adults, has less experience and knowledge of how he/she can help himself.<sup>3</sup>

Fear of death or thanatophobia is an increasingly recognized problem among young people. Recent studies show that this fear is closely related to existential anxiety, uncertainty about the future, and social pressures to achieve and experience life to the fullest. For example, the link between death anxiety and fear of missing opportunities is highlighted in modern research. Anxiety

\*\*\* Translated by Eliana Geržević Macan.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Helena JERIČEK KLANŠČEK, *When a student is shaken by stress and what a teacher can do about it*, Ljubljana, Institute for Health Protection of the Republic of Slovenia, 2011, 12-18; Thomas Berry BRAZELTON, *Child: Emotional and Behavioral Development of Your Child*, Ljubljana, Mladinska knjiga, 1999, 5-8.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Maja HMELAK, Jurka LEPIČNIK VODOPIVEC, *Selected Topics of Preschool Pedagogy*, Koper, University Publishing House Annales, 2015, 94-110; Brazelton, *Child: Emotional and...*, 9.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Leopold BREGANT, Milona BREGANT, *Child in distress*, Ljubljana, Cankarjeva založba, 1966, 7-27.

about death increases the fear of missing opportunities, as young people feel the need to seize every opportunity because they fear that life is fleeting and full of uncertainty. This can lead to increased anxiety, especially when constantly exposed to social media and compared to the achievements of others.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the psychological effects of fear of death are often manifested as general anxiety or depressive symptoms. Cultural and religious coping mechanisms such as spiritual beliefs and rituals can alleviate some of this anxiety by providing an existential meaning and sense of control over the inevitability of death. Conversely, individuals with less strong cultural or spiritual frameworks have greater difficulty coping with these fears and therefore need more targeted psychological interventions.<sup>5</sup> Studies also show that higher self-esteem acts as a buffer against the fear of death and helps young people better manage thoughts of death.<sup>6</sup> These findings highlight the importance of addressing death anxiety using therapeutic approaches that promote self-image, meaning-seeking, and resilience, especially in a social context that promotes ongoing productivity and success.<sup>7</sup>

The link between the fear of death and the fear of aging is discussed in a number of psychological and sociological studies that highlight how both anxieties stem from existential concerns about mortality, loss of control, and inevitable aging. Researchers have found that aging is feared not only because of physical deterioration, but also because aging brings an individual closer to death, which increases pre-death anxiety. They argue that the fear of aging is inextricably linked to the fear of death, as aging confronts the individual with the reality of physical decay and the loss of social roles, which increases existential anxiety. In addition, people are often afraid of losing their autonomy and independence, which is usually associated with later life periods, which connects the fear of aging with the fear of death.<sup>8</sup> In addition, Routledge and Juhl discuss how the fear of aging can be a mechanism to cope with death. They

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Rachel E. MENZIES, Ross G. MENZIES, Death anxiety in the time of COVID-19. Theoretical explanations and clinical implications, *Cognitive Behaviour Therapist*, 13 (2020) e19, 1-11, doi:10.1017/S1754470X20000215; Kuhanesan N. C. NAIDU, Peter K. H. CHEW, Effects of death anxiety on fear of missing out, *Current Psychology*, 43 (2003) 15, 1-12, doi:10.1007/s12144-023-05382-7.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Apurva-kumar PANDYA, Tripti KATHURIA, Death anxiety, religiosity and culture: Implications for therapeutic process and future research, *Religions*, 12 (2021) 1, 61, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12010061>.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Tom PYSZCZYNSKI et al., Why do people need self-esteem? A theoretical and empirical review, *Psychological Bulletin*, 130 (2015) 3, 435-468, doi:10.1037/0033-2909.130.3.435.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Jon D. ELHAI et al., Depression and anxiety symptoms are related to problematic smartphone use severity in Chinese young adults: Fear of missing out as a mediator, *Addictive Behaviors*, 101 (2020) February, 16-20, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2019.04.020>; Pandya, Kathuria, *Death anxiety, religiosity...*, 61.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Andy MARTENS, Jamie L. GOLDENBERG, Jeff GREENBERG, A terror management perspective on ageism, *Journal of Social Issues*, 61 (2005) 2, 223-239, doi:10.1111/j.1540-4560.2005.00403.x.

suggest that when individuals focus on aging, they psychologically distance themselves from death, but this often leads to greater general anxiety about the finality of life.<sup>9</sup>

In the professional and scientific literature, the English terms »gerontophobia« or »fear of aging« and »aging anxiety« are often used for negative attitudes and beliefs that affect an individual's emotions and behaviour regarding older people. Gerontophobia is a complex phenomenon that, in the broadest sense, means fear of aging. More specifically, Palmore and Bunzel defined it as unreasonable fear and/or irrational hatred of older people, both by society and by oneself.<sup>10</sup> Two decades later, Lasher and Faulkender defined anxiety and fear of aging as »a combination of worry and anticipated losses« in the aging process. The authors note that the fear of aging differs in content from other types of fear and partially overlaps with the concept of psychological well-being and attitude towards old age. In the study »Measurement of aging anxiety: development of anxiety about aging scale«, they formed a scale of fear of aging, which consists of four main dimensions: physical, psychological, social and interpersonal. These dimensions consist of specific fears, namely the fear of one's own aging (one's subjective perception of one's own aging), the fear of old age itself (old age as a personal condition) and the fear of the elderly (the perception of others as elderly).<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Lynch defined fear of aging as »a combination of concerns or fears about older people.«<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, Palmore estimates that gerontophobia (in the sense of nervousness) is only an extreme form of ageism and is rare in modern society. He points out that most people are afraid of their own aging, but they are not afraid of chronological age (as such). Above all, people experience fear of losing their independence, respect, as well as they fear of unwantedness and »invisibility«. Often, gerontophobia is associated with other great fears – the fear of losing love, of poverty, of illness and death.<sup>13</sup> We point out that this fear is overcome by learning about measures for a healthy and happy old age and understanding the processes of aging.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Clay ROUTLEDGE, Jacob JUHL, When death thoughts lead to death fears: Mortality salience increases death anxiety for individuals low in personal need for structure, *Journal of Research in Personality*, 44 (2010) 6, 689-693, doi:10.1080/02699930902847144.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Erdman B. PALMORE, Gerontophobia versus ageism, *The Gerontologist*, 12 (1972) 213; Joseph H. BUNZEL, Recognition, Relevance and Deactivation of Gerontophobia: Theoretical Essay, *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, 21 (1973) 2, 77-80, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-5415.1973.tb01222.x>.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Kathleen P. LASHER, Patricia J. FAULKENDER, Measurement of aging anxiety: development of anxiety about aging scale, *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 37 (1993) 4, 247-259, doi:10.2190/1U69-9AU2-V6LH-9Y1L.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Scott M. LYNCH, Measurement and Prediction of Aging Anxiety, *Research in Aging*, 22 (2000) 5, 533-538, doi:10.1177/0164027500225004.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Palmore, *Gerontophobia versus ageism...*

Given individuals' personal fears about age-related changes, the fear of aging is relative to 'I', which is different from ageism, which refers to the relationship to members of an external age-based group and is relative to *them*. So, we are dealing with two different constructs that are positively related to each other.<sup>14</sup> Fear of aging is also positively associated with stereotypes towards the elderly<sup>15</sup> and negatively associated with age.<sup>16</sup> Anxiety about aging seems to interfere with one's attitude towards one's personal future; however, as with aging, these attitudes can also stem from knowing and interacting with elders.

The Allport Intergroup Contact Hypothesis is also undoubtedly important for understanding the fear of aging. The author proves that contacts between members of different social groups (under certain conditions) can improve intergroup relations and reduce prejudices and warns that contact between groups alone is not enough to reduce prejudices and the decline in fear of aging.<sup>17</sup> Researchers who also took into account the quality of contact with the elderly in the research found that the attitude towards the elderly and, consequently, the fear of aging depends on both the quality and frequency of contact.<sup>18</sup>

### 1. *The aim and research questions*

The aim of the research was to determine whether there is a fear of aging among young people. To this end, we have formulated three research questions:

- Do young people feel fear of the elderly?
- Are young people afraid of loss?
- Are young people experiencing psychological concerns and fear because of their physical appearance?

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Linda J. ALLAN, James A. JOHNSON, Scott D. EMERSON, The role of individual difference variables in ageism, *Personality and Individual Differences*, 59 (2014) March, 32-37. doi:10.1016/j.paid.2013.10.027; Robert C. INTRIERI, Maria L. KURTH, Racial differences in attitudes towards aging, aging knowledge, and contact, *Educational Gerontology*, 44 (2018) 1, 40-53, doi: 10.1080/03601277.2017.1388962; Ehud BODNER et al., The interaction between aging and death anxieties predicts ageism, *Personality and Individual Differences*, 86 (2015) November, 15-19, doi:10.1016/j.paid.2015.05.022.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Lori HARRIS, Stephanie DOLLINGER, Participation in a course of aging: Knowledge, Attitudes and anxiety about aging in oneself and others, *Educational Gerontology*, 27 (2001) 8, 657-667, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2015.05.022>.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Lasher, Faulkender, *Measurement of aging...*, 257-258.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Gordon W. ALLPORT, *The nature of prejudice*, Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books, 1954.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Natalie M. HALE, Patient Effects of age and interpersonal contact on stereotyping of the elderly, *Current Psychology*, 17 (1998) 1, 28-47, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-998-1019-2>; Jane V. KNOX, William L. GEKOSKI, Edward JOHNSON, Contact with and perceptions of the elderly, *The Gerontologist*, 26 (1986) 3, 309-313, <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/26.3.309>; Lisa K. SCHWARTZ, Joseph P. SIMMONS, Contact quality and attitudes towards the elderly, *Educational Gerontology*, 27 (2001) 2, 127-137, doi:10.1080/03601270151075525.

## *2. Methodology*

### *2.1. Research methods*

The empirical part of the research is based on a quantitative method using an online survey. For the purposes of the empirical part, we collected, analysed and synthesized primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained using an online questionnaire for Slovenian high school and university students; secondary sources were collected using scientific and professional literature and websites. The research is based on descriptive and causal-nonexperimental methods of empirical social science research.

### *2.2. Research sample*

Data collection at the level of inferential statistics was carried out with the help of improbable (occasional) sampling. The sample included 1234 students of Maribor secondary schools and students of the University of Maribor aged between 15 and 29. Since the respondents were selected on the basis of different probabilities, as well as due to non-participation and other »mistakes«, the demographic characteristics of the selected sample deviate slightly from the characteristics of the target population. For a better representativeness of the sample, the data were weighted and thus brought closer to the data of the target population. The representativeness of the sample was ensured on the basis of gender.

The survey included 1234 respondents, namely 42.9% men and 57.1% women, of all surveyed 50.4% university students and 49.6% secondary school students, which ensures appropriate and relevant comparability of the results obtained. The share of respondents living in the village is the highest (44.4%), followed by those living in the city (34.7%) and in the suburbs (20.6%).

### *2.3. Data collection procedures*

Data were collected through a survey questionnaire which was submitted online (online survey) using the online survey tool (1KA). The measuring instrument was rationally and empirically (probing) tested and, in accordance with the findings, supplemented and modified. When sampling, we asked for help from individual principals of secondary schools in Maribor and the deans of some faculties of the University of Maribor. We were assisted in the implementation by some teachers and higher education teachers and colleagues, who

enabled us to fill out an online survey as part of regular classes or lectures or seminar exercises.

We used the quantitative survey method that contained closed-ended and open-ended questions and a scale of views (Likert type). More specifically, the survey questionnaire contained closed-ended and open-ended questions to verify fear of aging, intergenerational cooperation and sociodemographic data.

#### 2.4. *Measuring instruments*

The fear of aging was measured by the standardized AAS scale<sup>19</sup> which requires respondents to indicate the degree of agreement or disagreement on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither-nor, 4 = agree, 5 = completely agree) with the statements. The scale checks the fear of the elderly, the fear of loss, psychological concerns and the fear of physical appearance. For the purposes of the survey questionnaire, we used only 12 out of 20 statements (variables) from the source scale, but we nevertheless provided a measurement of all components of fear of aging.

Not all original statements were turned in the same direction, so we recoded them so that for each statement, the value of 1 means that the respondent does not agree with the statement at all, and the value of 5 means that the respondent completely agrees with the statement.

First, we performed a factor analysis on the basis of which we excluded the statement »when I am older, I will lie about my age to give the impression of a younger person« due to the utility of less than 0.4. Three factors were formed, with a value (eigenvalues) above one, which together explain 61.99% of the variance.

The frequency of intergenerational cooperation was checked with the question »How often are you in contact with at least one elderly person? (65 years and over)?«, in which respondents chose between answers (1 = every day, 2 = 2–3 x per week, 3 = 1 x per week, 4 = 1 x per month, 5 = rare, 6 = never). The quality of the relationship between generations was determined by the question »Think of the older person (65 years and older) with whom you have the most contact. How would you rate your relationship with this person?«, for which we created a five-point response scale (1 = very good, 2 = good, 3 = poor, 4 = very poor, 5 = none).

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Lasher, Faulkender, *Measurement of aging...*, 248-249.

Table 1: Matrix of rotated aging fear components

	Fear of loss	Fear of the elderly	Psychological worries and fear of physical appearance
I am worried that as an older person, people will ignore me.	0.838		
I am afraid that I will not be happy in my old age.	0.794		
I am afraid that over the years, I will become more and more concerned about my health.	0.790		
I'm worried that all my friends will pass away when I'm old.	0.731		
I like to visit my older relatives.		0.858	
I am comfortable with the company of an elderly person.		0.833	
I like to help the elderly.		0.786	
I expect to feel good when I'm old.			0.759
I believe that I will be able to do a lot of things independently in my old age.			0.712
It doesn't bother me to imagine myself as an older person.			0.646
I will never tremble before the day I see my first grey hair in the mirror.			0.633
	$\alpha = 0.82$	$\alpha = 0.79$	$\alpha = 0.66$

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. Rotation converged in 5 iterations.

### 2.5. Data processing procedures

The data were statistically processed in accordance with the aims and predictions of the survey using the statistical software package SPSS 21. Quantitative data analysis was based on descriptive statistics (frequency distributions, mean values, standard deviations). For the purposes of hypothesis verification, bivariate (Mann-Whitney U-test, Kruskal-Wallis test, Spearman correlation coefficient) and multivariate analysis (factor analysis) were also used. The internal consistency of the scales was measured using the Cronbach alpha coefficient. All three factors have an acceptable Cronbach alpha value that meets the criteria for the methodological conclusion: fear of loss ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ), fear of the elderly ( $\alpha = 0.79$ ), psychological worries and fear of physical appearance ( $\alpha = 0.66$ ).

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Frequency and quality of young people's contacts with the elderly

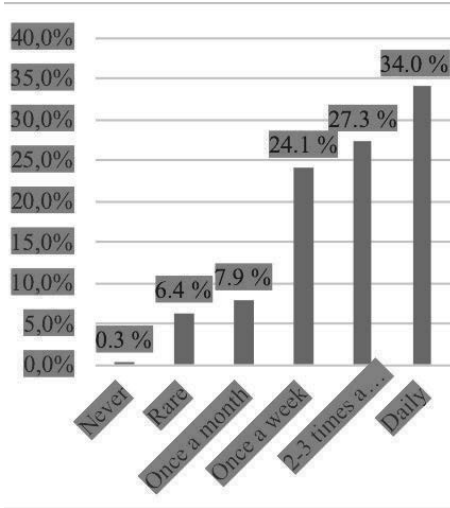


Chart 1: Frequency of contacts

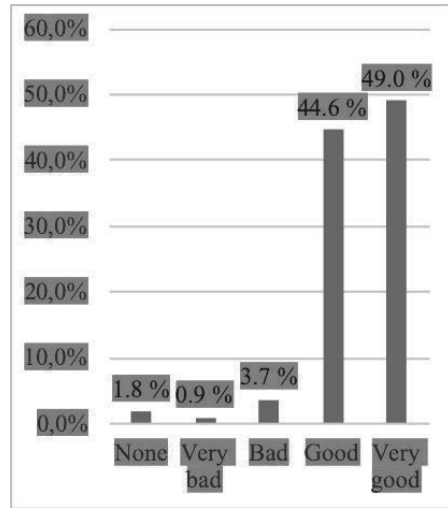


Chart 2: Quality of contacts

Based on empirical data, we find that the vast majority (85.4%) of the surveyed young people have contact with the elderly at least once a week. The quality of contacts is rated as good by the surveyed young people since as many as 93.6% of respondents have good or very good contacts with the elderly. The correlation between the frequency and quality of contacts is statistically significant and weak positive ( $\rho = 0.126, p < 0.01$ ), which means that the more frequent the contacts with older people are, the higher the quality.

Table 2: Relationship between frequency and quality of contacts and fear of aging

	Fear of the elderly	Fear of loss	Fear of physical appearance and psychological worries
Frequency of contacts	-0.141**	-0.010	-0.062*
Quality of Contacts	-0.504**	0.001	-0.138**

Note: \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

In the following, we analyse the connection between intergenerational cooperation (in terms of frequency and quality of contacts with the elderly) and fear of aging. The data in the table above show that the frequency of contacts statistically significantly and weakly negatively correlates with fear of the el-

derly ( $\rho = -0.141$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), fear of physical appearance and psychological concerns ( $\rho = -0.062$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). In the case of the latter, the degree of connection is negligible, so we will not explain it below. The quality of contacts is also negatively and statistically significantly associated with fear of the elderly ( $\rho = -0.504$ , strong;  $p < 0.01$ ), fear of physical appearance and psychological concerns ( $\rho = -0.138$ , weak;  $p < 0.01$ ). Both frequency and quality of contact are not statistically related with fear of loss.

### 3.2. Characteristics of fear of aging among young people

The presence of fear of aging was checked with the help of three composite variables (fear of the elderly, fear of loss and fear of physical appearance and psychological concerns), which were turned into dichotomous variables ( $M \leq 3 = 0$  have no fear,  $M > 3 = 1$  have fear).

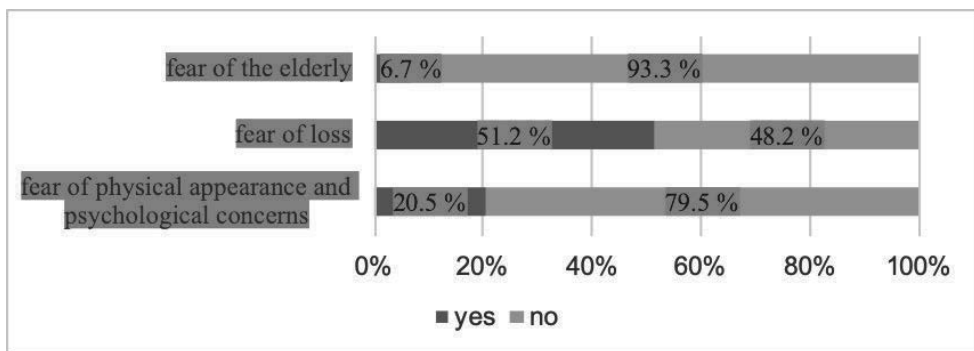


Chart 3: Extent of fear of aging among young people

As illustrated by the results shown in Chart 3, the fear of loss is the only form of fear experienced by a narrow majority (51.2%) of the surveyed young people. The other two forms of fear are much less present among the surveyed young people, namely: fear of physical appearance and psychological concerns (20.5%) and fear of the elderly (6.7%). Thus, based on the analysis of the obtained empirical data, we find that the surveyed young people are more afraid of their own aging than of the elderly.

### 3.3. Differences in fear of aging among young people according to gender

When determining the differences between genders and individual forms of fear, the U-test shows statistically significant differences between the surveyed women and the surveyed men (Table 3): fear of the elderly ( $U = 248297$ ,

$p < 0.01$ ), fear of loss ( $U = 188664$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), fear of physical appearance and psychological concerns ( $U = 215288$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

Thus, based on the results, we estimate that the surveyed women ( $M = 3.35$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ) are more afraid of loss than men ( $M = 2.80$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ), and the surveyed women ( $M = 2.66$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ) are more afraid of physical appearance and psychological concerns than men ( $M = 2.38$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ). In contrast, fear of the elderly is more common in men ( $M = 2.04$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ) than in women ( $M = 1.90$ ,  $SD = 0.66$ ).

Table 3: Differences in fear of aging among young people according to gender

	Gender	R	U	P
Fear of the elderly	Male	811.12	248297.00	0.000
	Female	729.36		
Fear of loss	Male	614.80	188664.00	0.000
	Female	861.98		
Fear of physical appearance and psychological concerns	Male	658.94	215288.00	0.000
	Female	830.49		

### 3.4 Differences in fear of aging among young people according to status

Non-parametric tests (Mann-Whitney) were used to check the forms of fear of aging according to the status of young people (secondary school student/university student).

Table 4: Differences in fear of aging among young people according to status

	Status	R	U	P
Fear of the elderly	Secondary	812.07	248033.50	0.000
	University	707.79		
Fear of loss	Secondary	750.04	280899.50	0.360
	University	770.58		
Fear of physical appearance and psychological concerns	Secondary	789.49	265598.50	0.008
	University	730.59		

The results of the U-test in the table above show statistically significant differences between the surveyed secondary school students and the university students regarding the fear of the elderly ( $U = 248033.50$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and the fear of physical appearance and psychological worries ( $U = 248033.50$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Secondary school students ( $M = 2.02$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ) had a more frequent choice of fear of the elderly than university students ( $M = 1.88$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ), and secondary school students ( $M = 2.58$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ) were more likely to choose fear of

physical appearance and psychological concerns than university students ( $M = 2.50, SD = 0.70$ ). This means that the higher the level of education of the surveyed young people, the less fear of aging is present. This was further verified by the correlation between the age of the respondents and the forms of fear of aging. Spearman’s correlation coefficient showed a statistically significant very weak negative correlation in fear of the elderly ( $\rho = - 0.088, p < 0.01$ ) and fear of physical appearance and psychological concerns ( $\rho = - 0.073, p < 0.01$ ). Despite the negligible indication of potency, the analysis indicates a significant negative correlation, which means that as the age of respondents increases, the frequency of fear of aging decreases.

*3.5 Differences in fear of ageing according to the place of residence of young people*

Table 5: Differences in fear of ageing according to the place of residence of young people

	Place of residence	R	H	g	p
Fear of the elderly	City	799.61	9.66	2	0.008
	Suburbs	773.23			
	Village	723.35			
Fear of loss	City	740.94	6.74	2	0.034
	Suburbs	726.69			
	Village	793.39			
Fear of physical appearance and psychological concerns	City	756.89	0.56	2	0.756
	Suburbs	747.89			
	Village	769.07			

Based on the Kruskal-Wallis test, we examined the existence of statistically significant differences in the fear of aging according to the place of residence (Table 5). These were determined with the fear of the elderly ( $H(2) = 9.66, p < 0.01$ ) and the fear of loss ( $H(2) = 6.74, p < 0.05$ ).

The empirical data in Chart 4 show that among the respondents living in the city, the highest percentage, 9.6%, are afraid of older people, followed by 5.3% in the suburbs, and the lowest percentage, 4.7%, in rural areas.

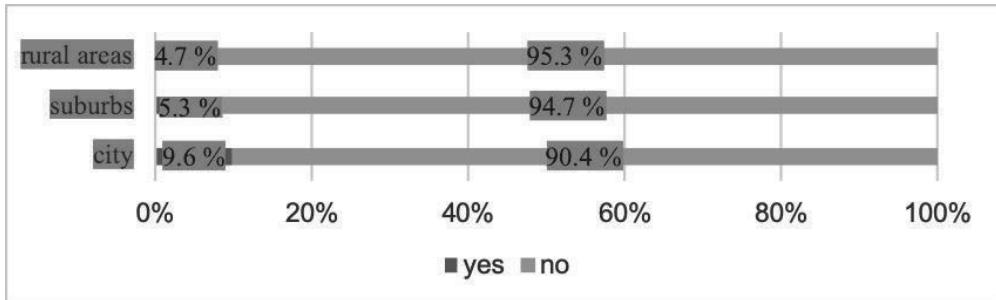


Chart 4: The extent of fear of the elderly by place of residence

Chart 5 shows that among the respondents living in the village, 54.7% are afraid of loss, 49.4% in the city and 47.5% in the suburbs.

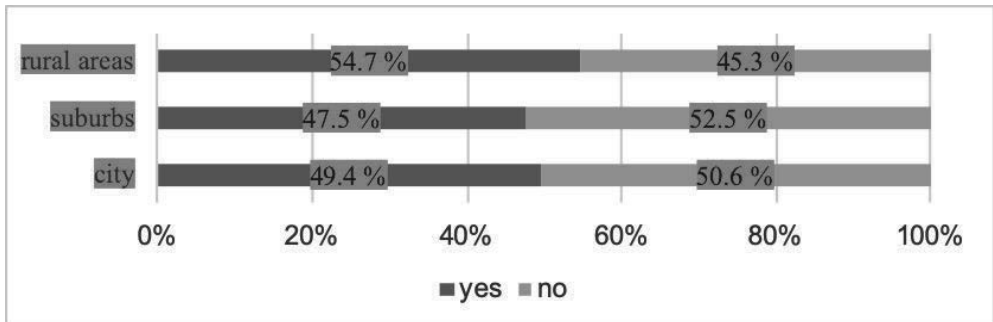


Chart 5: Share of fear of loss by place of residence

Fear of aging indicates statistically significant differences depending on the place of residence, as there are differences in the extent of two of the three forms of fear of aging between urban and rural environments.

### 3.6 The correlation between fear of aging and ageism

Spearman’s correlation coefficient showed that there is a statistical correlation between ageism and fear of aging. Specifically, ageism is strongly positively associated with fear of the elderly ( $\rho = 0.426, p < 0.01$ ) and weakly positively associated with fear of physical appearance and psychological concerns ( $\rho = 0.155, p < 0.01$ ). This means that with the increase in the incidence of fear of aging among young people, the incidence of ageism is also increasing.

Table 6: The correlation between fear of aging and ageism

	Fear of ageing		
	Fear of the elderly	Fear of loss	Fear of physical appearance and psychological concerns
Ageism	0.426**	0.010	0.155**

Note: \*p < 0,05; \*\*p < 0,01.

#### 4. Discussion

As part of the characteristics of fear of aging, we wanted to check whether there is a fear of aging among young people, more specifically fear of the elderly, fear of loss, and psychological concerns and fear of physical appearance. In doing so, we examined differences in the degree of fear of aging according to individual indicators, such as gender, status, place of residence, and frequency and quality of contacts.

The central finding in the context of fear of aging is that 51.2% of young people surveyed are afraid of loss (e.g. of loneliness). McConatha et al. also note this<sup>20</sup>, but the shares of fear of physical appearance and psychological concerns (20.5%) and fear of the elderly (6.7%) are markedly not predominant. Therefore, based on our research results, we cannot conclude that there is a widespread fear of aging among young people, as found by some other studies.<sup>21</sup> The differences are due to the different size and composition of the research sample, as well as the specifics of the factor analysis.

Similar to the findings of other studies,<sup>22</sup> our research has shown that there are statistically significant gender differences regarding fear of aging. The surveyed women are more concerned about aging, especially in terms of loss and physical appearance, as McConatha et al. also note in two separate surveys<sup>23</sup> while fear of the elderly is more common among the surveyed men.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Jasmin Tahmaseb McCONATHA et al., Turkish and U.S. Attitudes towards Aging, *Educational Gerontology*, 30 (2004) 3, 169-183.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Linda J. ALLAN, James A. JOHNSON, Undergraduate attitudes towards the elderly: The role of knowledge, contact and aging anxiety, *Educational Gerontology*, 35 (2009) 1, 1-14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03601270802299780>; Harris, *Participation in...*, 662; Lasher, *Measurement of aging...*, 257.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Olusegun BAIYEWU et al., Attitudes to aging among different groups in Nigeria, *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 44 (1997) 4, 283-292, doi:10.2190/EF2A-XFUL-DX07-N2L3; Harris, *Participation in a course...*, 663; Lasher, *Measurement of aging...*, 257; Jasmin Tahmaseb McCONATHA et al., Attitudes toward aging: A comparative analysis of young adults from the United States and Germany, *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 57 (2003) 3, 203-215, doi:10.2190/K8Q8-5549-0Y4K-UGG0; McConatha, *Turkish and U.S....*, 176.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. McConatha et al., *Attitudes towards aging...*, 203-215; McConatha, *Turkish and U.S....*, 176.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. McConatha, *Turkish and U.S....*, 176.

That women are more concerned than men about the physical changes associated with aging may be partly due to the pervasive impacts of youth promotion in Western (and other) societies and cultures. Women, compared to men, are more frequently discriminated against due to age, and although they live longer than men, they are often categorized as *old* at an earlier age.<sup>25</sup> Women are also socialized to place greater value on their appearance compared to men and often internalize social and cultural perspectives about their physical selves, which can foster shame and fear about aging bodies. This, in turn, increases the fear of aging, as noted by Huebner and Fredrickson, as well as McConatha and colleagues.<sup>26</sup> We add that in most modern societies, women are valued on the basis of their appearance, while men are valued on the basis of achievements.

The lower fear of older people in women can be attributed to the role of caregiver in most societies.<sup>27</sup> Given that women are generally the primary caregivers in the family, even in extended families, they are likely to have more contact with elders. This contact can otherwise lead to better emotional closeness and, consequently, a more positive attitude; on the other hand, it can further intensify fears and concerns later in life.<sup>28</sup>

When determining the differences between the surveyed secondary school students and university students regarding the fear of aging, the results of our research confirmed a statistical connection. The surveyed secondary school students ( $M = 2.02$ ) were more likely than the surveyed university students ( $M = 1.88$ ) to be afraid of the elderly, and secondary school students ( $M = 2.58$ ) were more likely than university students ( $M = 2.50$ ) to be afraid of physical appearance and psychological concerns. We can conclude that the higher the level of education, the lower the presence of fear of aging among young people.

The results of the analysis also showed differences in fear of aging depending on the place of residence of the surveyed young people. The differences were manifested in fear of the elderly ( $H(2) = 9.66, p < 0.01$ ) and fear of loss ( $H(2) = 9.74, p < 0.05$ ). Among those who live in the city, a higher proportion of young people (9.6%) are afraid of the elderly than among the surveyed young people who come from a village (4.7%). Among young people living in rural areas, there is a higher proportion of young people (54.7%) who are afraid of loss, compared to young people from the city (49.4%) and suburbs (47.5%). The

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Nathan KOGAN. Attitudes toward older people: the development of a scale and an examination of correlates. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 62 (1961) 1, 44-54; McConatha, *A comparative analysis...*, 211; Jasmin Tahmaseb McCONATHA, Haley HUBA, Primary, secondary and emotional control across adulthood, *Current Psychology*, 18 (1999) 2, 164-170, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-999-1025-z>.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. David M. HUEBNER, Barbara L. FREDRICKSON, Gender differences in memory perspectives: Evidence for Self-Objectification in Women, *Sex Roles*, 41 (1999) 5-6, 459-467, [doi:10.1023/a:1018831001880](https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1018831001880); McConatha, *Turkish and U.S. ....*, 171.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Baiyewu, *Attitudes to aging...*, 289.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. McConatha, *Turkish and U.S. ....*, 179.

differences in fear of aging between the urban and rural environment are most likely due to the prevailing traditional values of the village inhabitants and the greater connection between the inhabitants in the country, which often leads to a high level of trust between them. In contrast, in the city, young people are more individualistic and independent of others, so they are more often afraid of the elderly and less often afraid of loss (of close people).

The research found that there is a negative correlation between contact with the elderly and fear of aging. Both the frequency ( $\rho = -0.141$ , weak) and the quality ( $\rho = -0.504$ , strong) of contacts negatively correlate with fear of the elderly, as well as the quality of contact is negatively correlated with fear of physical appearance and psychological concerns ( $\rho = -0.138$ , weak). We find that the quality of contacts with the elderly is in very strong connection with the fear of the elderly, which suggests that quality intergenerational relationships (as well as frequent ones) reduce the fear of the elderly among the surveyed young people.

At the same time, Witting and Grant-Thompson point out that the voluntary nature of interactions is crucial in understanding the impact of intergenerational relationships on the fear of aging. Only insofar as interactions are voluntary can they involve mutual cooperation, have the potential to form friendships and consequently break stereotypes about the older generation and fear of aging.<sup>29</sup>

Last, but not least, is the finding of the research on the interaction between ageism and fear of aging.

In accordance with the theory of terror and fear management, the analysis of the obtained data showed that the higher the level of fear of aging, the higher the level of ageism among young people.<sup>30</sup> Similar findings are confirmed by another research.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. Michele Andrisin WITTING, Sheila GRANT-THOMPSON, The utility of Allports' conditions of intergroup contact for predicting perceptions of improved racial attitudes and beliefs, *Journal of Social Issues*, 54 (1998) 4, 795-812, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1998.tb01249.x>.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Jeff GREENBERG, Tom PYSZCZYNSKI, Sheldon SOLOMON, The causes and consequences of the need for self-esteem: A terror management theory, in: Roy F. BAUMAISTER (ed.), *Public self and private self*, New York, Springer Verlag, 1986, 189-212.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Allan, *Undergraduate attitudes toward...*, 7; Stefanie S. BOSWELL, Predicting Trainee Ageism Using Knowledge, Anxiety, Compassion and Contact with Older Adults, *Educational Gerontology*, 38 (2012) 11, 733-741, doi: 10.1080/03601277.2012.695997; Harris, *Participation in a course...*, 662; Nick M. WISDOM et al., The Relationship of Anxiety and Beliefs Toward Aging and Ageism, *Journal of Scientific Psychology*, 9 (2014) 10-21.

## Conclusion

Fear of aging is certainly an important factor that affects both the attitude and behaviour of individuals towards the elderly, as well as the adaptation of the individual to their own aging process. Gerontophobia is present in most people, including the elderly.

Kristančič states that all age groups in our society misperceive the importance of the aging process, often due to insufficient information. Everything shows that in our society, we do not just move away from the realization that the population is aging, regardless of the fact that this is the future of everyone among us.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, it is important that educational content on age and aging is included in educational programs at all levels of education, from pre-school to tertiary education.

At the level of the family institute, we especially emphasize information on aging, old age and the elderly through non-formal education and awareness raising.

According to Wishard, parents and other adult members serve as an initial source of information about aging and old age, and their attitudes towards the elderly are observed and learned by children at an early age and can significantly affect the child's perception of age and aging as they grow up.<sup>33</sup>

At the level of the wider community and society as a whole, we propose to promote and maintain intergenerational interactions between all generations, intergenerational learning and the importance of lifelong learning. However, these suggestions for information on aging and old age do not work if myths and fears of aging are not (at least partially) dispelled at the social level.

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<sup>32</sup> Azra KRISTANČIČ, *A new image of aging - the gray revolution*, Ljubljana, AA Inserco, 2005, 42.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Debra Lee WISHARD, *An Analysis of Children's Attitudes Toward Older Adults*, Dissertation, Austin, The University of Texas at Austin, 2003.

Danijela Lahe\* – Maja Hmelak\*\*

*Strah od starenja među mladima*

Sažetak

Strah je prirodna emocija koju pojedinci doživljavaju tijekom cijelog života. Tijekom odrastanja, strah se očituje u emocijama, ponašanju i djelovanju mladih, često povezan sa stresorima poput straha od neuspjeha, socijalnih poteškoća ili prevelikih očekivanja. Među značajnijim strahovima u mladosti je strah od smrti (tanatofobija), koji može pojačati anksioznost i stres, osobito u kombinaciji s pritiscima društvenih medija. Osim toga, strah od starenja (gerontofobija) proizlazi iz egzistencijalnih briga vezanih uz smrtnost i društvenu stigmatizaciju starenja. Suočavanje s tim strahovima kroz psihološke intervencije, jačanje samopouzdanja i kulturne mehanizme suočavanja ključno je za smanjenje anksioznosti i jačanje otpornosti. Za potrebe istraživanja korištena je kvantitativna metodologija s *online* anketom. Prikupljeni su, analizirani i sintetizirani primarni i sekundarni izvori. Primarni podaci dobiveni su pomoću ankete slovenskih srednjoškolaca i studenata. Sekundarni izvori preuzeti su iz stručne literature i internetskih stranica. Uzorak istraživanja obuhvatio je 1.234 ispitanika u dobi od 15 do 29 godina, uključujući srednjoškolce i studente. Prikupljanje podataka provedeno je metodom neizvjesnog (prigodnog) uzorkovanja. Da bi se osigurala reprezentativnost, podaci su ponderirani prema spolu. Statistička analiza, uključujući deskriptivnu i multivarijatnu analizu, provedena je pomoću programa SPSS 21, a interna konzistentnost skala izmjerena je Cronbachovim alfa koeficijentom. Autorice su istraživanjem željele provjeriti postoji li među mladima strah od starenja. Pokazalo se da prosjek straha od gubitka iznosi 51,2 %, dok strah povezan s tjelesnim izgledom i psihološkim brigama ima 20,5 %, a strah od starenja 6,7 % ispitanika. Uočene su statistički značajne razlike s obzirom na spol, status, mjesto stanovanja te učestalost i kvalitetu kontakta sa starijima, što upućuje na složenost čimbenika koji utječu na strah od starenja.

*Ključne riječi: kontakti sa starijima, mladi, starenje, strah od starenja.*

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