Changing the image of elderly people in Poland: the senior citizen as an important audience member and creator of culture

Alicja Jakubowska
Cultural Studies Institute and Regional Observatory of Culture,
Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland
agojlik@amu.edu.pl

Ewa Kłosiewicz
Regional Observatory of Culture, Adam Mickiewicz University,
Poznań, Poland
klosiewicz.e@gmail.com

Michał Mękarski
Regional Observatory of Culture, Adam Mickiewicz University,
Poznań, Poland
mekarski@amu.edu.pl

ABSTRACT

In Poland, as in many European countries, we can observe the inevitable process of population aging. This phenomenon and its consequences are an essential issue to be reconsidered in cultural policies and cultural management strategies. More and more seniors are becoming active participants and creators of cultural events. This increases the quantity and quality of cultural provision addressed to this social group. This article is the result of a nationwide research project "Why Do Seniors Need Culture?" The study focuses on diagnosing the cultural needs of seniors and the types of activities and places preferred by elderly people. The paper describes the ways in which seniors are vital audience members, creators of culture and transmitters of timeless values. The authors then depict the common stereotypes about old age and how we must attempt to break them and, finally, the study presents the changes that have occurred in the way elderly people are perceived, both by themselves and by the rest of the population.

Introduction

In 1950 there were about 200 million people in the world aged over 60. It is estimated that by 2050 there will be 1.2 billion (Dragan, 2011). The European population is aging – reflected in a declining share of working age people and an increasing proportion of elderly people in the EU as a whole. According to Eurostat, in 2013, people aged 65 and above accounted for 18.2% of population, while in 2080 the number is expected to be 28.7%[1]. The Central Statistical Office in Poland predicts that the number of people aged between 60 and 74 is going to increase by 40% over the next two decades, those aged 75-84 by 65.6%, while the number of people over 85 will grow by 90%. At the same time the number of people over 100 will increase by 253% (Szukalski, 2008).

Demography experts predict that this trend is going to continue and will force a number of social changes that are revolutionary in both scale and scope. These adjustments will have various consequences – economic (health care, pensions), social (redefining existing social roles) and institutional (providing services for seniors, e.g. nursing homes and adjusting cultural provision to seniors). The problem of the aging of Polish society seems to be an interdisciplinary topic of current interest because it will influence various aspects of life, and determine new behavioural patterns and relationships in society. Although we cannot stop this revolutionary change, we can quickly adjust to it and start including old people in cultural participation.

The image of Polish seniors is evolving. We no longer perceive them stereotypically as grumpy, sickly old people. Nowadays, they tend to be presented in a more positive context. They are a social group that is active, experienced, well-groomed and full of passion and desire to live their lives to the fullest. Many factors influence this image change – economic and pragmatic (they are the targets of marketing campaigns and valuable consumers), social (associated with raising awareness of the inevitable "globalisation of old age" process) (Woźniak, 2012) and media (through social campaigns, e.g. those related to the 2012 celebrations of the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations)[2]. Society has started to recognise the specific needs of elderly people and their untapped creative potential. All of these changes influence not only the image of seniors but also their own attitude towards old age.

"SOCIETY HAS STARTED TO RECOGNISE THE SPECIFIC NEEDS OF ELDERLY PEOPLE AND THEIR UNTAPPED CREATIVE POTENTIAL".

Methodology

This paper is not the result of theoretical reflection on the issues of old age; it is an outcome of the nationwide study "Why Do Seniors Need Culture? Research Project on Cultural Activity of Elderly People"[3], carried out in 2012 by the Adam Mickiewicz University's Regional Observatory of Culture and the Association of Polish Cities. The aim of the project was to diagnose the needs of seniors and study the cultural activities of elderly people in their social context. This was the first large-scale research project in Poland on the subject of elderly people as audience members and creators of culture, as well as users of new technologies. The study was conducted in 16 regions of Poland. The research team used a triangulation of methods, meaning the results of the project are an outcome of both qualitative and quantitative research. The initial phase of the project was desk research, wherein the team analysed all the available existing material associated with the topic – literature, reports from other research projects, statistical data about elderly people, etc. In the next stage, individual in-depth interviews with members of non-governmental organisations and cultural associations which focus their activity mainly on seniors were organised. They were mostly held during the International Fair "50+ Active" in Poznań. Similar interviews were conducted with cultural animateurs and coordinators of artistic groups during the 15th National Artistic Festival of Senior Movement "Ars 2012" in Bydgoszcz. Another research instrument was a questionnaire that was distributed among 534 participants at cultural events in 35 different cities. This type of research was conducted during three different types of events – philharmonic, mass/outdoor and those organised

---

[1] For more information, see http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/population-demography-migration-projections/population-data/database
[2] For more information, see http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1002&langId=en
[3] The whole report may be accessed on the webpage of the Association of Polish Cities: http://zmp.poznan.pl/strona-82-seniorzy_a_kultura_raport_z_badan.html

by cultural centres. Moreover, there were five focus group interviews (FGI) with elderly people in selected cities – Gorzów Wielkopolski, Slupsk and Zamosc. Also, during the Local Government Cultural Forum in Ostrow Wielkopolski and Kalisz, expert panels and FGI were held with local government representatives. All of these research instruments helped to answer the following questions: What kinds of activity do Polish seniors take part in? What is the value of them? In what way does cultural activity influence processes of isolation and integration of seniors, both in their social groups and in relation to society as a whole? How does Polish society perceive elderly people? How do seniors perceive themselves? How do they perceive the time of aging?

New models of experiencing old age

The results of the nationwide research projects show that more and more seniors think about the "autumn of life" as a time for themselves. It is a period in life when they can finally pursue dreams that they could not before, due to their professional activity or family obligations. After retiring, senior citizens have a lot of time on their hands and they can return to some hobbies that they neglected over their work-active years. Being involved in cultural activities is a way to satisfy needs for self-realisation and self-development (Koropetska, 2014). Some seniors are consciously rejecting their imposed social role as caregiver to grandchildren. They draw the line between time devoted to the family and time for themselves. As one of the respondents stated:

> (...) there are some passions that one couldn't fulfil because of work or taking care of family. (...) Some seniors get back to those interests after they retire. Women start to paint, play instruments, write poems and be active in their local community – something that they weren't able to do before and now finally have time to do so. Children grew up; there are no money issues to be taken care of, so they can invest some more time in themselves[4].

Through cultural participation, old people are redefining themselves and discovering their untapped potential. This participation takes three forms – seniors are creators, audience members and transmitters of culture. Those types of activities are a source of fulfilment for elderly people. Not only do they give purpose to their time of aging, they also make them feel appreciated and needed. What is more, cultural participation has the ability to make seniors feel younger at heart. A senior band member spoke about his engagement in cultural activities:

> (...) this hobby makes me feel young. When I was younger and I met someone who was in his/her fifties, (...) I was thinking to myself: "Gosh, I'm going to be so old someday!" Now I'm 68 and I don't feel old at all. A lot of things influence this way of thinking and music is certainly one of them.

Nowadays the image of seniors is changing and their behavioural patterns also differ from the ones that society is used to:

> Seniors in 2012 and the ones from 1997 – when we started to work with this age group – have completely different demands and needs. They don't want to sit with their kids all day and take care of grandchildren. Now they want to go out to the theatre and we offer it to them. They love going on trips together.

> (...) the moment we begin to feel old changed. In the past, a woman in her fifties wore black dresses, was very serious and there were a lot of things that she couldn't do because it was inappropriate. Now women this age feel young, they cycle, they're active. Not all of them, but still.

Moreover, the lifestyle of seniors is evolving. The research project of the Regional Observatory of Culture shows that more seniors are now educated, well-groomed, open-minded and active. They have the courage to pursue their passions and hobbies. Elderly people tend to do that not only individually, but also in groups. Seniors are forming societies, universities of the third age and groups within cultural institutions and organisations.

Space for seniors

In a relatively short time, a lot of institutions for seniors in Poland have been formed: places in which they can meet, pursue their hobbies and expand their knowledge. Among many others, there are seniors clubs, universities of the third age and day care centres. These places also influence the image of seniors and their lifestyle choices. What is interesting is that universities of the third age are not only located in big cities. A lot of them have been established in small towns (about 50% are located in cities with populations smaller than 50,000 people) and villages (11%). In 2012 in Poland

---

[4] All quotes in the paper are taken from in-depth interviews conducted with seniors and cultural animateurs working with the elderly.

there were about 400 universities for seniors with almost 90,000 members (Zoom na UTW, 2012). In some cities, special senior councils were formed as advisory bodies for mayors and governors, and there are institutions for old people that provide social assistance and many other services. One of them is the Centre for Senior Initiatives (CIS) in Poznań. This is a city organisational unit that runs Volunteering 50+, Information Point 50+, free legal and psychological counselling, the "Senior-friendly Place" competition and the cultural and educational festival "Senior. Poznan". The centre also implemented projects such as "RECO – regions cooperating to improve health and quality of seniors' life" and "WAKE UP – Active aging with knowledge and experience". Moreover, the CIS is coordinating the International Fair "50+ Active". During its first four editions, this annual event gathered more than 300 commercial and NGO exhibitors and was visited by over 12,000 people. It attracts a lot of organisations, state and local government entities that are involved in work with seniors. The fair is not just an exhibition space, in the Poznań International Fair pavilions a lot of artistic and educational workshops, lectures, concerts and shows take place (e.g. Nordic walking, yoga, therapeutic dance, gymnastics for seniors)[5].

In 2013 one of the biggest Polish charity organisations, The Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity, which collects money for sick children annually, expanded their fundraising to seniors. The theme of their XXI Grand Finale was "Saving the lives of children and providing adequate healthcare for the elderly"[6]. In 2014 and 2015 this foundation continued to help elderly people. Aside from collecting funds for seniors, they drew the public's attention to the oldest part of society, and started a debate about state of geriatrics and healthcare in Poland.

It is not a coincidence that the number of institutions, organisations and places dedicated to seniors has been growing recently. The attitude towards old people has been transformed by numerous educational campaigns preparing society for old age and breaking the negative stereotypes about seniors. One of many projects linking culture with education was "The third youth – initiative, challenges, integration", event organised by a nursing home in Kalisz. As a part of this project, a fashion show called "Fashion joins generations" was organised. What was so extraordinary about this event was that the models on the runway were from three different generations – grandmothers, daughters and granddaughters. Its aim was to prove that age is not an obstacle to activity and beauty is not limited to youth[7].

Another interesting project is "Seniors Take Action", organised by the Association of Creative Initiatives "ę" and the Polish-American Freedom Foundation[8]. Its goal is to distribute grants for active seniors, cultural animateurs and artists that support intergenerational activities. It influences a positive change – not only did they promote activity in elderly people, but they also created links between different generations and supported seniors volunteering. Another aim of their activity is the transformation of the image of the older members of society, breaking the stereotype of boring, passive, conservative, static, useless, isolated seniors.

Also, the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage started the nationwide initiative "60+ Culture"[9] to promote cultural activity in seniors. In Lesser Poland there was a campaign "60+. The New Age for Culture"[10]. The Regional Social Policy Centre in Poznań started a campaign against the social exclusion of elderly people: "Life is Passion"[11]. In 2012, the city was covered with billboards showing pictures of creative seniors. Moreover, there were TV commercials that presented senior citizens' passions and artistic experiences. In Szczecin, an initiative called "Time for Seniors" promoting senior citizens volunteering was run. It was a part of bigger project called "Seniors – We Want You!" that was co-funded by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy under the Government Programme for Social Activity of the Elderly 2012-2013[12].

All of the initiatives, projects and places are aimed at improving the quality of life of elderly people, but there is still a lot to be done in this field. According to the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) research, in Poland there is an extremely low level of social activity among seniors, especially when it comes to volunteering in the 50+ age group (SHARE, 2012: 15). In 2013 there was another study concerning the quality of seniors' life – the Global AgeWatch Index – and Poland was placed 62nd out of 91 countries from around the world. But it seems that all of the initiatives and hard work put into them is starting to result in positive change – in the same study in 2014, Poland was placed 32nd out of 96 (Global AgeWatch Index, 2014).

---

[5] For more information, see http://centrumis.pl/targi-aktywni-503.html
[6] For more information, see http://wosp.org.pl/final/o_finale/finaly_w_liczbach#21
[7] For more information, see http://dpskalisz.pl/aktualnosci.htm
[8] For more information, see http://seniorzywakcji.pl
[9] For more information, see http://mkidn.gov.pl/pages/strona-glowna/kultura-i-dziedzictwo/weekend-seniora/informacje.php
[10] For more information, see http://e-teatr.pl/pl/artykuly/164981.html
[11] For more information, see http://facebook.com/ZycieToPasja
[12] For more information, see http://sektor3.szczecin.pl/pora-seniora-jestes-potrzebny

respondents were inspired by their grandparents and owe them their interest in various hobbies (e.g. music, literature, sport, fishing) (Kowalczuk, 2012). We can observe that grandparents are responsible for the intergenerational transmission of culture and values. What is more, this type of transmission seems to be irreplaceable.

The desire to be needed is very important for elderly people. What is more, the image of seniors is strengthened through their usefulness to other people. The question of whether seniors are needed by society or not is a question about their role in society in general. One of the tasks for elderly people may be a role as transmitter of culture and timeless values. This takes different forms – from taking care to preserve tradition and rituals, to educating their grandsons and granddaughters. To them, their input in creating culture is an obligation and a kind of mission. They pursue their own dreams and inspire others to do the same – not only their grandkids, but also other seniors. Elderly people encourage others to take an interest in culture and enable others to benefit from their knowledge, experience and abilities.

They are trying to inspire their grandchildren. (…) Parents are usually too busy to take care of the kids, so if the grandparents are healthy and willing, they are trying to spend time with them. They tell stories to them, they read together, hike, walk the dog, play. They are trying to inspire them with their interests or to show them how to play different sports. In most cases grandparents are the ones who take care of the emotional development of children.

Seniors need to be more active to avoid the degradation of their health. The loneliness of elderly people is also a source of unfounded fears and anxiety. Relationships with other people have an influence on the general well-being of seniors (Antonucci & Ajrouch 2007). This positive impact is also stimulated by cultural activity.

The perception of elderly people in Polish society is related to the responsibilities and social roles that are assigned to seniors. The role of culture is significant here − it helps shape models of experiencing old age. In this context, its elementary processes such as cultural and historical education seem to be extremely important. In one of the questions in the survey from the nationwide research project "Competences of Local Leaders of Cultural Education. Study of Methods, Media and Conditions of Cultural Impact on Citizens of Polish Cities", which was addressed to four groups associated with cultural education (organisers, educators and cultural animateurs, cultural policy representatives and distributors of funds), respondents were asked to react to the statement: "cultural activities should be also directed at seniors". They were supposed to state their opinion using a five-point scale: from strong approval (answer "definitely yes") to strong disapproval (answer "definitely no"). Nearly 3/4 of the respondents (71.9%) agreed that elderly people should embrace taking part in cultural activities (sum of "definitely yes" and "rather yes" answers). Against the idea were only 6.4% of the respondents (from which 1.4% of answers were "definitely no"). They were also asked to justify their answers and the analysis of those responses showed a very broad spectrum of the ways in which people associated with cultural education perceive seniors' engagement in educational activities.

Different answers were grouped into several categories. The largest of them (52 answers) were groups of responses associated with the feeling of being needed and with using the experience of elderly people. Justifications for these answers included: "using their life achievements"; "life experience"; "contact with young people can enrich both of these groups"; "they have to transfer their knowledge"; "a lot of experience that they want to share"; "they will feel needed". The second largest group (48) stated that cultural education should be for all of the people interested in culture and so also for seniors: "cultural education should be available for all"; "everyone deserves access to culture, no matter how old are they"; "seniors are full members of the society"; "stupid question; why not?"; "they are people too". The third group (42) consisted of responses associated with the need to help elderly people (because of various reasons, e.g. lack of

"THE PERCEPTION OF ELDERLY PEOPLE IN POLISH SOCIETY IS RELATED TO THE RESPONSIBILITIES AND SOCIAL ROLES THAT ARE ASSIGNED TO SENIORS. THE ROLE OF CULTURE IS SIGNIFICANT HERE – IT HELPS SHAPE MODELS OF EXPERIENCING OLD AGE".

competence, fear or loneliness): "low awareness of culture and fear resulting from that ignorance"; "a group to target"; "for lonely people cultural participation is priceless"; "understanding the dynamics of change in cultural models"; "gaps in cultural education"; "they need various activities"; "they require socio-cultural development"; "updating their knowledge on current cultural trends". The next category of statements (38) was associated with the opinion that seniors are an active social group that is eager to take part in various activities: "most receptive and willing group"; "they have a desire to be active"; "very motivated social group"; "big group with great will and potential"; "they want to explore new possibilities"; "very active group in various areas"; "very creative and willing to act"; "huge interest in culture". Some of the respondents (31) also noticed that seniors have a lot of free time to spend on cultural activities: "they didn't have time to develop their talents before, now as seniors they do"; "they have time for culture"; "spending their free time". Some other respondents (26) stated that taking part in cultural activities may prevent seniors from being socially excluded: "preventing them from exclusion, so they are not invisible in the city"; "not taking part means exclusion"; "anti-exclusion and anti-alienation". The next group of respondents (23) emphasised the need to activate this social group: "motivating elderly people is a very important element of cultural education"; "it activates seniors"; "it gives them an opportunity to interact"; "motivating them to be active and to participate". Almost the same amount of respondents (22) said that number of seniors is getting bigger and bigger: "big social group"; "increasing number of seniors"; "aging society"; "in our city (120,000 inhabitants) the number of seniors is rising, young people have left". Some respondents (17) stated that a lot of cultural activities are already targeted at elderly people and it should be continued: "there are activities for them in the community centre"; "most of the folk artists are seniors"; "it's enough to just ask seniors, I asked"; "they are as important as young people"; "they are great audience members". The last category consisted of a group of responses (14) stating that seniors' involvement in cultural activities improves their life quality: "it will improve the quality of their lives and will prolong them"; "it enables them to be creative and helps to integrate them within their social group"; "they should reveal their talents"; "they want to improve"; "an opportunity for personality development".

The scope of those categories shows the complexity of the image of seniors for people associated with cultural education. To them seniors have become a social group that is not only growing in number, very active, willing and engaged, but also one that can benefit hugely from cultural education. The result of including them in cultural education practices would be: increasing their activeness, preventing their social exclusion, improving their quality of life and restoring the feeling of being needed by society (through using their knowledge and experience).

Different reasons for including seniors in cultural activities cause different attitudes towards elderly people and influence the provision of activities for them in cultural education. If we tended to perceive seniors as people that need our help because they are lost in modern society and cultural transformation, we would treat them as pupils and provide them with sources of knowledge by, for example, organising lectures with experts on subjects of modern art that will explain new trends and tendencies to them. Another way to perceive seniors would be noticing their untapped potential, valuing their life experience and treating them as sources of knowledge and transmitters of tradition. In this case, they would be more like teachers and educators that may share their knowledge with the younger generation. They may take part in intergenerational projects and their experience may serve as living history lessons for students. A lot of interesting opinions on the subject were shared by leaders of cultural educators during in-depth interviews and FGI:

Of course it [cultural education of seniors] is a very, very current issue. (…) there are more and more old people that are free, unemployed, their children are grown up and they have some free time. We have the University of the Third Age that works perfectly. I keep in touch with them and they thrive. (…) they have their lectures and take part in different forms of cultural activities. Seniors are regulars at many events. (…) it is the direction that we should go towards. They want it".

Sometimes they don't even ask if they can come to the museum. There are days when we don't have any space left. Every Saturday, except for July and August, there is a meeting of tens of seniors. They formed a club in the museum and every week someone gives a lecture on an interesting subject. It has been like that for many years now. They are not exclusive. Everyone can join the meeting. Sometimes people that are not members of the University of the Third Age find out about interesting meetings or lectures and want to join them. These seniors are the backbone of our institution.

(…) we work with the University of the Third Age. They organise lectures about history here, in the museum. (…) we talk about activities associated with local identity and it is extremely important. Seniors can help us, because they have the advantage of having such great memories.

I have a project at school now. I invented it myself. (…) the main aim of the project is to visit elderly people and

record their memories related to the liberation of Poznań. Kids can learn a great deal from them (…).

There is the threat not only of social exclusion, but also of digital exclusion, so another interesting approach would be to organise learning projects for seniors (courses, workshops) that include interacting with young people. In 2015 in Poznań the intergenerational project "Seniors and children in virtual reality" began. Children of 10-12 years old were teachers during series of workshops. They taught seniors how to plan vacations, send an email, look for local news or do the shopping using tablets and the Internet. Thanks to the project, elderly people gain valuable knowledge and skills needed to use modern information and communication technologies. Moreover, workshops allow both of the generations to get to know each other.

Seniors as cultural participants

The study "Why Do Seniors Need Culture? Research Project on Cultural Activity of Elderly People" allowed the research team to find out more about models of seniors' cultural participation. One of the issues that was brought up by the questionnaire concerned barriers to taking part in cultural activities (figure 1).

Respondents were asked to state their opinion using a five-point scale – from "strongly agree" to

"strongly disagree". The most frequently mentioned barrier was lack of money (total of "strongly agree" and "agree" answers: 54.1%). Because of limited funds, Polish seniors are forced to cut back their spending on culture. Answers varied depending on region and size of city, as in smaller towns and rural areas seniors have access to a wider range of free cultural services. Almost half of the respondents said that an important obstacle is bad health (48.6%), lack of knowledge of new technologies (39.9%), lack of cultural provision targeted specifically at seniors (34.4%) and lack of information and promotion of events (34.2%). There was no surprise that the least frequently selected answer was lack of time (total of "disagree" and "strongly disagree" answers: 82.4%). In this case answers also differed depending on the size of city that the respondent came from. Seniors from smaller cities have less free time than those from big cities. This may be caused by the fact that younger members of the family that dedicate themselves to work pass some of their obligations on to seniors.

Another topic raised in the study was factors that influence choosing a particular cultural event. Taste and cultural interest are very subjective but one can distinguish a few general criteria that determine cultural participation. Respondents were able to choose from a list of multiple answers, such as ticket price, conditions of getting to an event, guarantee of a seat and the presence of a renowned artist (figure 2).
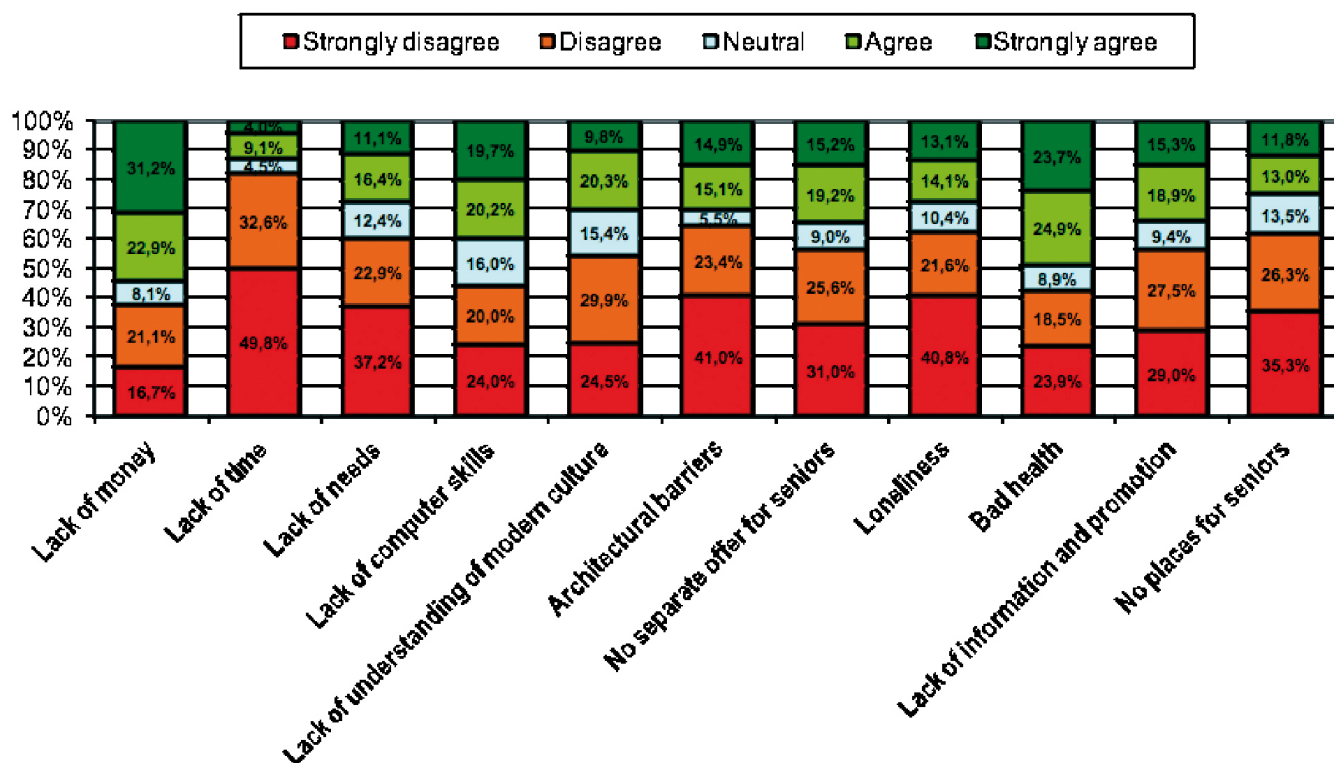

FIGURE 1. BARRIERS TO CULTURAL PARTICIPATION

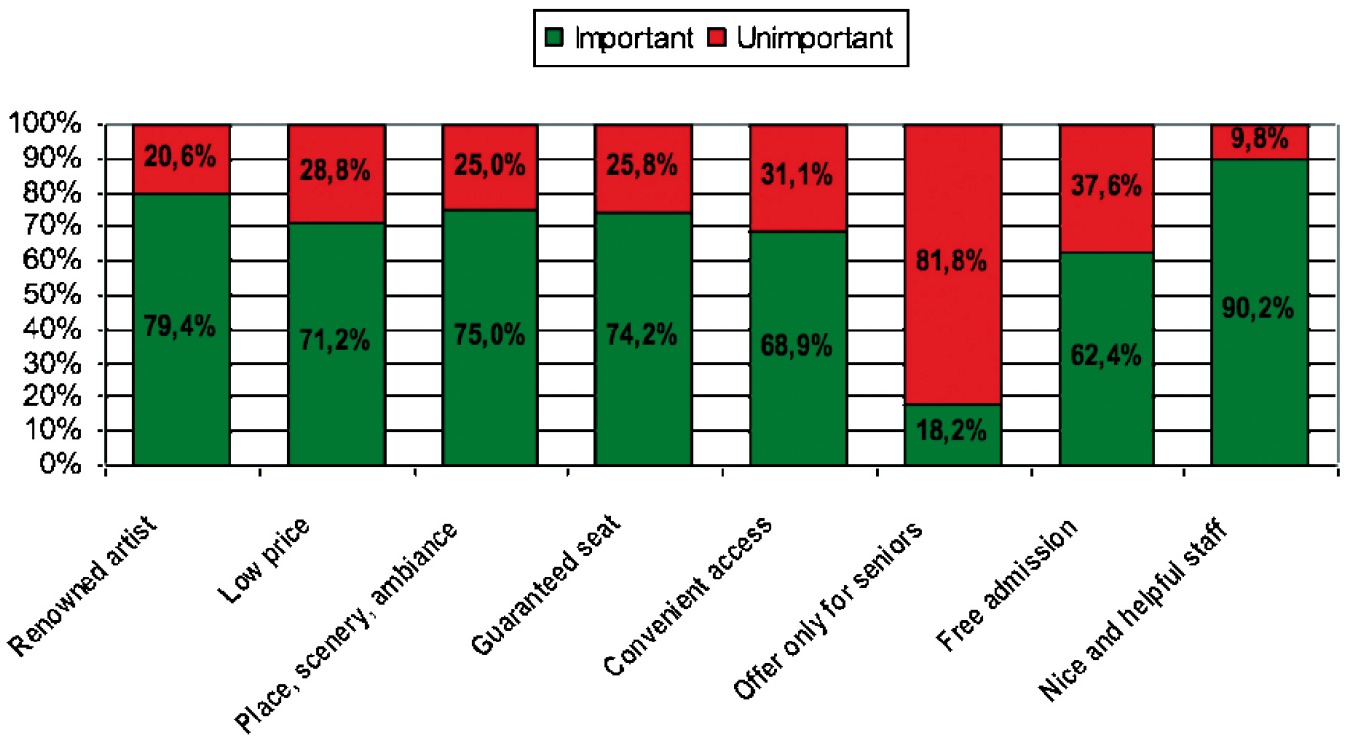*Source: Authors' own elaboration.*

FIGURE 2. IMPORTANT FACTORS WHEN CHOOSING CULTURAL EVENT

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Most of the factors were equally important to the audience (they were marked as "important" by 70-80% of the respondents). One exception was the provision that is targeted directly to seniors, which was important to only 19.2% of elderly people. This indicates that seniors do not expect exclusive cultural provision. On the contrary, they prefer events during which they can integrate themselves with other generations. The most significant factor that influences seniors' decisions was friendly and attentive staff at the cultural event (important for over 90% of the respondents). Such a high percentage shows how significant the possibility of interacting with another person is for elderly people. Seniors appreciate help, empathy and kindness from the organisers of cultural events. In-depth interviews with elderly people provided additional information about what may encourage seniors to take part in cultural initiatives. They often mentioned adjusting technical conditions (e.g. elimination of architectural barriers), changing ticket prices, organising events that promote social inclusion and modifying the content of events (which is too often the apotheosis of youth).

The research team also wanted to find out what forms of cultural activity are preferred by elderly people. The biggest share of seniors stated that they attend musical concerts (36.3%, total of answers "at least once a month" and "a few times in a month"). Fewer said that they enjoy going to the cinema (27.8%), visiting art galleries and museums (26.3%),

going to mass and outdoor events (25.8%) and going to the theatre (21%). Different forms of activities are enjoyed by seniors from small and big towns, because sometimes the closest cultural institution (e.g. philharmonic) is hundreds of kilometres away. For some members of this social group it may be a physical challenge and they may also be unable to afford it.

There are also a few cultural activities that seniors take up individually. Watching TV and listening to the radio are equally popular (almost 80% of the respondents do this every day). The majority of seniors read newspapers (60.1%) and a lot of them read books (almost 40%). The results vary depending on place of residence – 17.9% of seniors in rural areas read books, while for elderly people from cities of more than 200,000 residents it is 40.2%. In some cases individual participation (e.g. watching TV) becomes a barrier to going out and taking part in other cultural activities. Seniors' every day rituals like watching their favourite TV series are very hard to change. Paradoxically, activities that separate seniors from society become a cure for loneliness: "The most important cultural activity is TV. It replaces going out and makes us forget about loneliness at home" or "Nowadays we have [economic] crisis but in a TV [series'] world everything is fine, everything is going to be OK".

During in-depth interviews, the research team noticed that the most valued events are the ones that

promote the integration of elderly people – singing folk songs together and band meetings. Seniors tend to dislike activities that lead to social separation (e.g. watching TV) and increase their passiveness. The results of qualitative research clearly show that the key to cultural activity in elderly people is providing them with organised classes. Groups of seniors rarely tend to initiate activities themselves so they look to cultural institutions for help and guidance. One of the respondents noted that there is a lack of complex solutions to support the organisation of seniors' groups:

> There are (…) some local, small initiatives that you can read about – for instance some senior club organised an exhibition. But there is no legal facilitation or mechanisms that would motivate seniors to start such activities and that would also promote it.

Seniors as Internet users

According to Eurostat, seniors in Poland are reluctant to use the Internet. In 2009 only 9% of people aged 65-74 used the Internet at least once a week, while the average for the 28 EU countries was 20%. In 2014 the percentage rose to 19%, while for the EU as a whole it reached 38%. In Europe the highest shares of elderly people using the Internet were in Iceland (83%), Luxembourg (79%), Denmark (76%), Sweden (76%), Norway (74%), the Netherlands (70%) and Great Britain (66%). Even in comparison with its neighbours, Poland falls short: Germany (47%), Czech Republic (33%), Slovakia (27%). Fewer seniors active online were found in Croatia (15%), Cyprus (15%), Greece (12%), Bulgaria (9%) and Romania (8%). The Eurostat research project took all seniors into consideration. In the research project undertaken by the Regional Observatory of Culture in 2012, culturally active seniors were surveyed and among them 24% use the Internet almost every day and 16.8% a few times a week. The results are clear − elderly people that are culturally active are also active in other areas (in this case in the digital circulation of content).

What features characterise seniors that use the Internet in Poland? According to the research project "Mobile Internet 50+ – new media and older

users", for elderly people, new technologies are a chance not to get old and to keeping up with modern reality. There is also a list of complex characteristics and motivations for using the Internet. On the one hand they are way more enthusiastic about being on the Internet than young people, but on the other they are very suspicious of it. They value privacy, so the scale and openness of the web frightens them. They pursue their passions online but they do it in isolation, without sharing with one another. Their online contacts are limited to family and a close circle of friends unlike young people who like to share their life using social networks and build big social public spheres (measured by the number of friends and likes on Facebook). Seniors use the Internet not only for fun, but in the majority for more serious things: to look for information, keep in touch with family and fulfil their passions. The research team noticed that discourses about elderly people on the Internet are disrupted by negative comparisons to young Internet users. Comparing young people to seniors will always favour the young. This type of approach ignores different attitudes and needs determined by the age of Internet users (Krzyżanowska & Danielewicz, 2012). It is important to keep in mind that different social and age groups have different motivations for exploring web resources.

According to the research project from 2012, the main barriers to seniors using new technologies are mental. Usually, without support from others, elderly people tend to exclude themselves from Internet presence.

In these cases seniors are reluctant to use new technologies because they are scared of a new, unknown and foreign world that nobody wants to introduce them to. What is more, the rapidly changing reality that is unfamiliar to elderly people contributes to this negative phenomenon.

> (…) the ability to use new technology – it's a big obstacle in everyday life, for instance, mobile phones and how to use them. Despite the fact that there are mobiles designed especially for seniors, the big ones, in our [senior] club only two people have them (…). Digital TV (…) is also a problem: "I won't buy one, because nobody would teach me how

"THE MAIN BARRIERS TO SENIORS USING NEW TECHNOLOGIES ARE MENTAL. USUALLY, WITHOUT SUPPORT FROM OTHERS, ELDERLY PEOPLE TEND TO EXCLUDE THEMSELVES FROM INTERNET PRESENCE".

to use it". (…) Technology entered our life very aggressively and seniors can't deal with it.

(…) a lot of elderly people, just like us, use the Internet, PC. But most of them are still afraid. We have an opportunity here to teach them how to do it, but it's very hard for some of them.

(…) if we had a new model of society that was dominated by modern technologies, people above a certain age would be excluded from it.

Some elderly people lack the motivation or necessity to use information and communication technologies. In the research projects many seniors stated: "I would not like to learn anything new" or "I'm not interested at all". This kind of approach may be caused by lack of knowledge about the possibilities new technologies might give them.

I have a problem because I try to force some people to have the Internet at home, to have an e-mail address because it's easier and cheaper to communicate this way, but they don't want to.

(…) there is a group of the ones that try. But when I watch people the same age as me, part of them thinks: "I don't want to".

Nevertheless, more and more seniors are using modern technologies and new media. Some elderly people are very proud that they have learnt to do so.

I also talk via the Internet with my friends. It enriches our life. People that don't learn how to do this should regret it. It is very trendy now and a lot of people want to possess that skill.

(…) when I come to the [senior] club and I have some new ideas, others ask: "how do you know that?" And I tell them: "I found it online". And they are surprised and they are in awe.

(…) for many [seniors] it's confusing, but I think that the group of old people that uses the Internet is getting bigger. They are learning how to do that and they are able to do so. (…) I think that people who learnt how to use the Internet are very proud of themselves.

Respondents also noticed a lot of benefits that come from using the Internet in their everyday life. A significant part of seniors want to learn how to use the Internet to keep in touch with family and friends. It is also a cheaper way of communicating. Using new technologies is also a way to overcome the barriers to participating in culture associated with health and physical issues.

There is a possibility to rent an audiobook from a library. Some people have too weak eyesight to read normal books. (…) Our group is very advanced in age and they should read books with big letters and we don't have such books here. Thanks to those audiobooks we can keep on reading.

(…) one of my friends bought an e-book reader (…), he purchases books online and reads on this box. I told him: "how can you read a book and not hear the sound of turning pages?" (…) I can't imagine reading like that. (…) And he's trying to convince me (…): "your eyes don't get tired, you can enlarge letters and pages turn themselves, because the e-reader knows how fast you read a page".

I think that people use it [the Internet] mostly to get to know people, to keep in touch with family that lives far away. It's very useful to them and very important.

Seniors as creators

Old people are not only an audience for cultural events, but also creators of them. About 40% of seniors stated that they "create culture". What is interesting is that more women (42.8%) than men (35.8%) perceive themselves as creators. The research team wanted to find out in what fields seniors fulfil themselves creatively. Most of the respondents mentioned embroidery and needlework (38 responses), painting and drawing (32), singing (29), writing poetry and prose (21), playing an instrument (18), design (8), photography (5) and cabaret (5). Those interests differ depending on gender – women lean more towards handicrafts, singing and painting, while men prefer playing musical instruments, design and photography. These results also emphasise the way women prefer collective forms of participation, while men chose more individualistic ones. According to cultural animateurs and seniors themselves, the main focus of the older generation's cultural creation is its integrative aspect. It allows them to meet other members of society, encourages them to leave the house and prevents their isolation. As a result, seniors' artwork is less likely to be judged by aesthetic criteria.

Seniors can actively fulfil their passions in places such as the University of the Third Age, clubs and cultural institutions that bring them together and organise various activities with and for old people. Every fourth respondent stated that he or she takes part in organised activities. In this area women also seem to

be more active (29.3%) than men (20.8%). The most popular classes among seniors are singing lessons – usually singing in a choir (38 responses). Others include dance classes (24), playing musical instruments in a band (17) and painting (10). There is a visible link between the activity of seniors and the transformation of their image. Above 60% of them agreed with the thesis that "taking part in cultural activities is changing their social perception". So seniors themselves notice that there is huge potential in this area and it raises the visibility of this social group.

Many respondents do not limit themselves to just one area of creativity. Usually they combine different activities, e.g. writing poems and playing instruments or painting and writing. Most of the activities are the ones usually associated with elderly people (embroidery, handicrafts, singing in a choir), but there are also some that require professional equipment (photography, design). Some of the cultural activities of seniors motivate them to take part in cultural animation. For instance, seniors that like to write are also the organisers of meetings with authors.

As with reading books (62.8% of seniors do this at least once a week or everyday) and newspapers (90%), elderly people may be the biggest social group that still writes letters. As one of the respondents stated:

> (…) of the people I know, a lot of them like to write. They like to write letters, they love it. So this activity is not dead, but who among young people write letters? They text each other and that's it. Those old people, every time I talk with them, say that they love to write letters. They didn't stop doing that, they also send postcards. They write poems. We have this woman in our band. You can just tell her that we need something and she already has a poem about us. It's very cool.

Answers to the question "Are you a creator of culture?" emphasised another problem. One of the seniors said: "I used to paint; now my hands are shaking". For some elderly people, age and health may be a significant barrier to cultural activity. However, during in-depth interviews, a significant part of seniors stated that they started to create culture and be more active in this area after they retired or after they reached "old age". In a survey, there were a lot of answers similar to: "I have a friend who started to paint when she became old. And she paints beautifully. (…) I have a neighbour that started to sing. He started to sing recently and he performs in different senior clubs". In a lot of cases, cultural activity started after coming to cultural institutions, societies or seniors clubs. According to the research, these types of organisations are and should be initiators of cultural activity for seniors and their mentors.

During the Nationwide Art Preview of Senior Movement (ARS) the research team was able to see the whole spectrum of activities performed by seniors. Among performers, there were some exceptional personalities and what they were doing exceeded what is traditionally perceived as amateur senior art. Seniors' performances were not only subjects of sociological analysis, their quality was good enough to be judged on aesthetic criteria as well. Another interesting example of the cultural activity of seniors was a play prepared during the project "The Greater Poland: Revolutions". The play "The Time is Now" was created by choreographer and animateur Mikołaj Mikołajczyk together with seniors from the music group "Wrzos" from Zakrzewo. In the play artists were talking about their lives, dreams, joys, problems, as well as their youth. The message of "The Time is Now" is very simple: old age does not begin with age, but with starting to disappear from society and being forgotten. While taking part in other events during ARS, one may have noticed that other senior groups share that belief.

"THE MODEL OF ACTIVELY AGING AND SPENDING FREE TIME ON CULTURAL ACTIVITIES IS A CONSEQUENCE OF PATTERNS OF BEHAVIOURS DEVELOPED FROM A YOUNG AGE".

Recommendations

The beginning of the "autumn of life" and feeling old is not arbitrary and is influenced by cultural and mental factors. Defining oneself as a senior citizen varies depending on gender, age, education and state of health. The study showed that cultural activity makes elderly people feel younger. Through social engagement, seniors have a feeling of purpose and usefulness. It is a myth that older generations have unlimited free time – active seniors state that they have "just enough" of it, only the passive

ones complain that they do not know what to do with themselves. Among the "bored" ones are men, people with low levels of education and residents of small towns. There is a strong feminisation of elderly people – men live shorter and are less active participants in socio-cultural life. Cultural provision should be adjusted to that – there should be more activities targeted at men to make them get out of the house. Another barrier to cultural participation is the loneliness of seniors – after retiring they close themselves within four walls, are reluctant to go outside, sometimes becoming depressed. There is a need to continue research studies with these types of seniors to get to know the reasons for their lack of activity and fight their isolation.

In this context it is very important to educate people about old age. It is necessary to teach how to plan one's time after retirement – too often this period of transition becomes a source of frustration. For some people work is the main activity in their life and after retiring they do not know what to do with themselves. Attitudes towards old age should be changed, not only among seniors themselves, but also among other age groups, especially children. The model of actively aging and spending free time on cultural activities is a consequence of patterns of behaviours developed from a young age. It has to be built over the years by solid cultural education. Seniors' time is not only the time for grandchildren, but also time to fulfil their own passions, needs and pursue dreams. The role of grandparents (and transmitters of culture) is still very important to most seniors but nowadays some of them consciously resign from it or apply some rules to being a grandparent.

The education of elderly people should be focused intensively on the use of new technologies. Lack of knowledge of technological innovations is a barrier to a more active life for many seniors. Therefore computer workshops should be organised to prevent digital exclusion. Another interesting idea would be to implement intergenerational projects that may not only help seniors to learn how to use new technologies but also minimise the generation gap. Preparing the provision of courses adjusted to seniors' needs would lead to increased quality of life.

Seniors' lives in Poland are rapidly changing. They are now becoming active, engaged, well-groomed, open-minded, curious and well-educated. Existing barriers to participation in social and cultural life may be overcome by creating new policies – e.g. a system of discounts for seniors can be created to help them with money issues. This would protect them from being excluded from some kinds of cultural activities. Moreover, the image of seniors is transforming. The media has a huge impact on the way people perceive elderly people. They should avoid treating seniors only as a consumer group and focus their attention on the social and cultural initiatives created by seniors and targeted at them.

There is great potential in senior volunteering. This social group often has a need to be noticed and appreciated and this may be fulfilled by helping others.

They are also invaluable as transmitters of culture and animateurs in their local societies. Active and inspiring seniors can encourage even the most stubborn person to leave their sofa and go out into the world. Local cultural leaders also play significant roles in convincing seniors to participate in culture. They need to help elderly people overcome mental barriers, to motivate and appreciate their involvement in social activities.

Conclusion

The aging of European society is a complex issue. The process itself is inevitable and we should be able to prepare for old age. Retiring is a big transition and sometimes results in seniors' lack of activity. The outcome of the nationwide project "Why Do Seniors Need Culture?" clearly shows that through cultural participation seniors can be brought back to life. Their engagement in social and cultural activities makes them feel needed and integrates them with the rest of the society. Still, there are a few barriers that need to be overcome – not only the physical obstacles, but also mental reservations.

Another problem is the way seniors are perceived. The research project concludes that there are 17 different factor groups that influence the perception of old individuals. This image is gradually transforming – old age is starting to be associated with a time of fulfilment, cultural activity and happiness. Seniors and other social groups change their view on aging through examples of active elderly people, the media and social campaigns. A better media image also influences the lifestyles of elderly people.

The realisation of the fact that European society is changing comes with obligations. Elderly people are becoming a large group of participants and creators of social and cultural life. Even though there are many initiatives targeted at seniors and places dedicated to them, it is still not enough. Decision-makers ought to prepare for this demographic change by supporting social campaigns, promoting active aging and adjusting social policies. There is a lot of untapped potential in seniors that can be put to good use. They are irreplaceable as transmitters of culture and the knowledge that comes from life experience. The aging process is perceived as a threat to European society, but it should rather be seen as an opportunity to be explored.

REFERENCES

ANTONUCCI, T.C.; AJROUCH, K.J. (2007) Social Resources. In: Mollenkop, H.; Walker, A. (eds.). *Quality of life in old age. International and Multi-Disciplinary Perspective* (pp. 49-64). Springer.

DRAGAN, A. (2011) *Starzenie się społeczeństwa polskiego i jego skutki*. Warszawa: Kancelaria Senatu, Biuro Analiz i Dokumentacji.

GLOBAL AGEWATCH. *Index 2014. Insight report*. Available at:http://helpage.org/global-agewatch/reports/global-agewatch-index-2014-insight-report-summary-and-methodology/ (accessed 20 March 2015).

KOROPETSKA, O. (2014) Self-Realization of Seniors as a Way of Overcoming Social Exclusion. In: Stawiak-Osińska, M.; Chrost, S. (eds.). *Situation, Education and Activation of Elderly People in Europe* (pp. 283-290). Kielce: Agencja Reklamowa TOP- Drukarnia Cyfrowa.

KOWALCZUK, K. (2012) *Rola dziadków w naszym życiu*. Warszawa: CBOS.

KRZYŻANOWSKA, Ł.; DANIELEWICZ, M. (2012). *Mobilny internet 50+. Nowe media w rękach starszych użytkowników. Raport badawczy*.

MAMZER, H.; ISAŃSKI, J.; BEŁKOT, A. (2013). *New Social Relations: Seniors in Postmodern Societies*. Bydgoszcz: Epigram.

PAWLINA, A. (2010) Sposoby prezentowania osób starszych w reklamie. Analiza wybranych zagadnień. *Folia Oeconomica Bochniensia. Zeszyty Naukowe Wyższej Szkoły Ekonomicznej w Bochni*, 8, 99-115.

SHARE (2012) *Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe*. Available at: www.share-project.org

SÓJKA, J.; LANDSBERG, P.; POPRAWSKI, M.; KIELISZEWSKI, P.; MĘKARSKI, M.; GOJLIK, A.; KUCHTA, J.; BRODNIEWICZ, M. (2012) *Po co seniorom kultura? Raport*. Poznań: AMU. Available at: http://www.zmp.poznan.pl/strona-82-seniorzy_a_kultura_raport_z_badan.html (accessed 20 March 2015).

SZUKALSKI, P. (2008) *To idzie starość – polityka społeczna a przygotowanie do starzenia się ludności Polski*. Warszawa: Instytut Spraw Publicznych.

WOŹNIAK, Z. (2012). Skutki globalizacji starzenia się populacji. Paper presented at the scientific seminar "Why Do Seniors Need Culture?" (9 March 2012, Poznań).

ZOOM NA UTW (2012). *Raport z badania*. Warszawa: Centrum Inicjatyw Twórczych "ę".

Internet sources

[accessed 20 March 2015]

http://advancedstyle.blogspot.com

http://adventure.nationalgeographic.com/adventure/adventurers-of-the-year/2015/aleksander-doba/

http://centrumis.pl/targi-aktywni-503.html

http://dpskalisz.pl/aktualnosci.htm

http://e-teatr.pl/pl/artykuly/164981.html

http://europa.eu/ey2012/ey2012main.jsp?catId=971&langId=pl

http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/refreshTableAction.do?tab=table&plugin=1&pcode=tin00091&language=en

http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/population-demography-migration-projections/population-data/database

http://facebook.com/ZycieToPasja

http://mkidn.gov.pl/pages/strona-glowna/kultura-i-dziedzictwo/weekend-seniora/informacje.php

http://rok.amu.edu.pl

http://sektor3.szczecin.pl/pora-seniora-jestes-potrzebny

http://seniorzywakcji.pl

http://wosp.org.pl/final/o_finale/finaly_w_liczbach#21