Медийна и дигитална комуникация
Media and Digital Communication

Exploring AI Generational Challenges in Bulgaria

DOI 10.55206/DKXB7610

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Abstract: Artificial Intelligence (AI) is increasingly influencing various aspects of daily life, including education and digital services. However, disparities in AI literacy among different generational groups pose challenges to equitable technological adaptation. This study explores how preschool children and elderly individuals in Bulgaria perceive and engage with AI technologies, identifying key challenges and policy gaps affecting their AI literacy. Based on qualitative expert interviews, the research examines public awareness, accessibility, and the effectiveness of AI-related policies in fostering digital inclusion. The findings reveal that preschool children frequently interact with AI-driven educational tools but lack structured learning frameworks to develop critical AI literacy. Conversely, the elderly face significant barriers to AI adoption due to low digital literacy, technological anxiety, and usability constraints. Current Bulgarian policies emphasize on economic and industrial applications of AI while neglecting age-specific educational strategies. This research underscores the need for comprehensive AI literacy programs tailored to both children and the elderly to mitigate risks such as digital misinformation and social exclusion. The findings will be beneficial for policymakers, educators, and technology developers aiming to create inclusive AI education initiatives and to bridge generational digital divides. Future research should explore quantitative assessments of AI literacy levels and investigate best practices in AI education across Eastern Europe in order to compare more inclusive policy frameworks in the region.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence (AI), Digital Literacy, Media Education, Preschool Children, Elderly Individuals, Educational Technology, AI Governance.

Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) refers to the simulation of human intelligence processes by machines, particularly computer systems, encompassing learning, reasoning, and self-correction. [1] AI has become an integral part of modern society, influencing fields such as healthcare, business, governance, and education. In education, AI is leveraged for personalized learning, automated assessments, and adaptive learning platforms, enabling more tailored approaches to knowledge acquisition and skill development. However, the implementation of AI in education also raises concerns related to digital literacy, ethical considerations, and regulatory oversight, especially in regions where digital transformation is still evolving.

The European Union has been at the forefront of AI regulation, striving to balance innovation with ethical and legal considerations. The EU's ***Artificial Intelligence Act***, proposed in 2021, classifies AI applications into risk categories and seeks to ensure transparency, accountability, and safety in AI deployment, including in educational settings. [2] Additionally, the ***Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027)*** emphasizes the importance of digital skills, AI literacy, and the ethical use of AI tools at schools. [3] These frameworks aim to promote equitable AI integration while safeguarding vulnerable populations such as children and the elderly from digital exclusion. Similar initiatives have been explored in other European contexts, where AI governance and educational policies continue to evolve. [4] Sonia Livingstone (2018) also highlights the necessity of fostering digital literacy from an early age, emphasizing the role of media education in preparing children to navigate AI-driven environments. [5] AI is now embedded in a wide range of technologies and devices, each serving different functions. Recently developed tools, such as ChatGPT, explicitly state that they operate on artificial intelligence. [6]

In Bulgaria, AI regulation is still in its nascent stages, with limited policies directly addressing its use in education. The ***Bulgarian National AI Strategy***, aligned with EU directives, primarily focuses on fostering AI research, innovation, and industry applications but lacks specific provisions for educational institutions. [7]

While media education policies exist, as highlighted by Stoyanova (2022), they do not comprehensively address AI literacy among preschool children and elderly individuals. [8] As Mavrodieva (2019) discusses, the integration of digital literacy into formal curricula in Bulgaria is complex, affecting the effective adoption of emerging technologies such as AI in educational settings. [9] Danov (2019) emphasizes the importance of regulatory frameworks in shaping media literacy and highlights that "the development of comprehensive regulatory mechanisms is essential to address the rapid digitalization and the challenges posed by emerging technologies, including AI". [10] This aligns with global discussions on AI governance, where frameworks such as UNESCO's ***Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (2021)*** stress the importance of AI inclusion while protecting marginalized populations. [11]

Research on digital media education suggests that young learners are increasingly exposed to digital technologies; however, their critical understanding of AI remains limited. A study conducted at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" in 2023 aimed to gain in-depth insights into the extent to which Bulgarian students in tertiary education have developed comprehension of generative artificial intelligence (AI) models and algorithm literacy. The findings indicated an urgent need for enhanced AI literacy among students to better navigate the evolving digital landscape. [12]

Several studies have highlighted that older generations often face challenges in adopting artificial intelligence (AI) technologies due to factors such as technological anxiety, lack of digital literacy, and limited regulatory frameworks ensuring accessibility and ethical implementation. For instance, Odu and Van Wyk (2025) discuss how personal fears, unwillingness to use technologies, and lack of knowledge contribute to the ‘grey digital divide’, inhibiting older adults’ access to vital information. [13] Similarly, Neves, Waycott, and Malta (2018) argue that older adults are frequently portrayed as a homogeneous group characterized by technophobia and digital illiteracy, often overlooking the complex socio-economic factors influencing technology adoption in later life. [14] These insights underscore the necessity for targeted strategies to enhance AI literacy and address the unique challenges faced by older populations in the digital age. *The Bulgarian National AI Strategy* highlights the necessity of nurturing a solid knowledge and skills base in AI across all age groups, emphasizing education reforms and lifelong learning to enable individuals to acquire and improve their digital and AI-related competencies [15].

Mavrodieva (2019) underscores the role of media ecology in shaping digital literacy across different generations, noting that effective media education strategies should bridge generational gaps in technological adaptation [16]. She emphasizes the importance of fostering digital competencies not only in young learners but also in older populations to prevent digital exclusion.

Furthermore, research suggests that AI-driven educational reforms in Bulgaria must align with global trends to ensure long-term success in digital transformation. *The Bulgarian National AI Strategy* outlines objectives such as developing a strong research capacity for scientific excellence and supporting innovations to foster the implementation of AI in practice, which are crucial for the country’s digital advancement. [17]

Methodology

The aim of the conducted study is to explore AI generational challenges in Bulgaria. It poses two main research questions:

- How do preschool children and elderly individuals in Bulgaria perceive and engage with AI technologies?
- What are the key challenges and policy gaps affecting their AI literacy and adaptation?

For the purpose of answering this paper’s research questions a qualitative analysis approach was chosen. An in-depth interview with overall 10 questions was created - 5 covered demographics and 5 were open questions related to the current state, perception, regulation and future outlook for the development and usage of AI in Bulgaria. The participants in the survey were experts and specialists either in the technological area, or in pedagogy of preschool children, or members of a regulatory body dealing with AI and technology. Overall, 11 interviews have been conducted. All the responses were anonymized.

The demographic questions covered educational degree, gender, place of living, occupation, and age.

The queries measuring the attitude towards AI included a question regarding the current state of information among the population, and also a question asking how preschool children and elderly people perceive the emergence and implementation of AI in their lives. Another question was targeting the challenges preschool children and elderly people are facing in their usage of AI. The fourth question measured the presence and effectiveness of the current AI-related policies in Bulgaria among preschool children and elderly people. The final question explored the outlook and challenges of the development of AI technology in the next decade.

The interviews were conducted between October 1st and October 31st of 2024.

Results

1. Demographics: All 11 respondents live in the capital city of Bulgaria - Sofia. Ten of them hold a PhD or a DSc Degree and one has a university degree. Six are men and five are women. In terms of occupation, five are working as university professors, two are journalists, two are acting as members of management bodies for preschool teachers, one is a lawyer and one is a medical doctor. Four of the respondents are aged between 46 and 60 years, another four are between 60 and 74 years old. Two of the participants are between 31 and 45 years old and one stated to be over 75 years of age (Fig. 1).

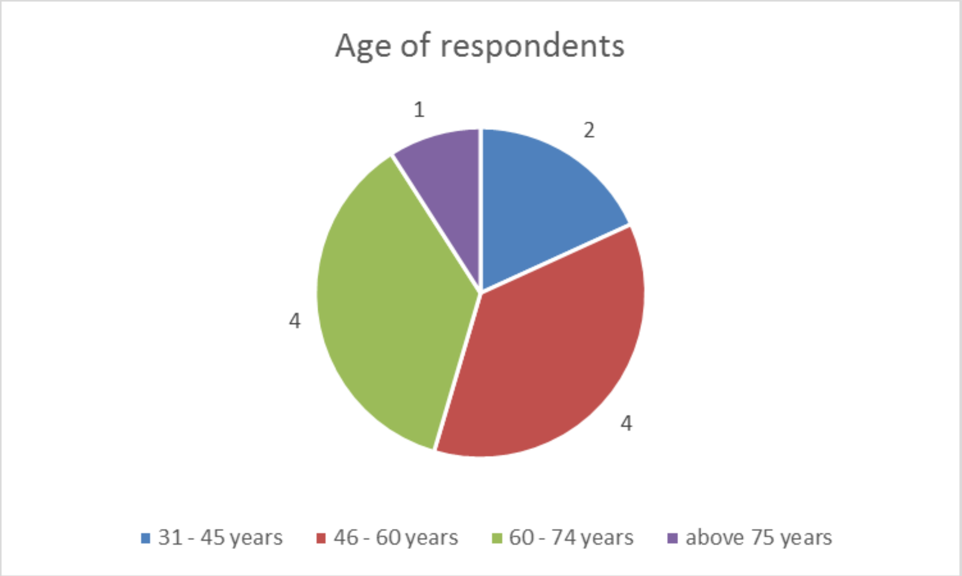

Figure 1. Age distribution of respondents

2. In-depth interview questions:

2.1. The first question aimed to reveal to what extent preschool children and elderly people are generally aware of the usage and implications of AI in daily life. Four specific trends were observed in the answers. The vast majority (five respondents) stated that the awareness is low, weak or insufficient. Two interviewees stated that children and elderly people are aware that AI exists, other two respondents differentiated between two generations in Bulgaria and stated that Gen Z is generally aware of the existence of AI, whereas the millennials have a dispersed perception. Only one participant stated that the current awareness degree in Bulgaria's population is high. One participant did not provide an answer to this question.

2.2. The second question measured the differences in the perception of AI among preschool children and elderly people. As the question refers to two distinct generations, we summarized the trends for the preschool children and elderly people generations respectively. When it comes to the trends in the generation of kids, three of the respondents stated that they have no observation or opinion, two interviewees mentioned that children are perceiving AI in a normal way, two mentioned that AI comes natural to children's development, two participants stated that children look into AI as an opportunity to develop, and two interviewees pointed out that children are rather uninformed regarding the usage and implication of AI. One participant mentioned that children have a certain degree of knowledge of and familiarity with AI, and one interviewee stated that children take AI for granted.

An interesting trend could be observed in the experts' opinions in how elderly people perceive AI. Four responses stated that elderly people are being afraid of AI, or refer to it as a disaster, or are simply rejecting it. Three participants pointed out that they have no observations, other three responses stated only basic knowledge of the concept of AI; two answers referred to the lack of interest among elderly people in AI and one participant stated that elderly people are stunned. Some participants mentioned more than one answer, hence we took those answers into consideration and the responses result is thirteen.

2.3. The third question asked participants to state the challenges that both age groups – preschool children and elderly people are facing in using AI-based tools. Participants were quite vocal as to preschool children's part stating various challenges both positive and negative varying from "opportunity" to "dumbing down". There were no specific trends found in the answers, however respondents often related to third parties in the learning process such as parents, educational system and regulation. Looking at the reaction of what the challenges for the elderly people were, only five responses have been received. All of them tended to be rather negative and revolved around terms such as "fear", "lack of understanding" and "impaired learning ability".

2.4. The fourth question explored the respondent's attitude towards the presence and efficacy of current AI-related policies in regards to preschool children and elderly people. The majority of the respondents – four experts stated that they are not aware of any policies which regulate AI usage in Bulgaria. Three of the interviewees stated clearly that there are no such policies in place, and another three of them stated that the current policies are insufficient to address the challenges that preschool children and elderly people are facing whilst using AI-based tools. Only two experts stated that there is a concept of creating a regulatory framework in place. As one of the responses included both that there is no policy but there is a concept, we took both answers into consideration and thus the number of responses is twelve.

2.5. The fifth question asked the participants to state their opinion on the challenges that AI usage and implementation will be facing in Bulgaria during the next decade. The responses were quite diverse and no trends could be observed. From a negative perspective, participants stated that AI will lead to redundancy and dumbing down of mankind. Some more moderate comments touched upon concerns about the correct implementation of technology in favor of people instead of an additional strain. The positively toned comments stated that AI will increasingly become part of our daily lives as well as that new professions and employment types will be created. Topics such as employment, ethical standards, media literacy, digital progress, enhancement of technological skills were also discussed in the respondent's comments.

As the only question where we could observe a clear trend was the fourth question – asking about participant's opinion about the existence and efficacy of policies, we decided to extend that question to 31 elderly people (aged 65 and above), 117 parents of preschool children (aged 3 – 6 years) and to 33 preschool teachers (Fig. 2).

The vast majority of the elderly people (48.4%) stated that the current policies are insufficient, 22.5% said that the current policies are bad, 19.4% could not determine and only 9.7% expressed positive attitude towards the current policies.

Most of the parents (45.3%) could not determine whether the current policies are effective or not, 25.7% said that they are insufficient, 22.2% stated that the current policies are bad, and only 6.8% stated that the current AI-related policies in Bulgaria are good.

The vast majority of the preschool teachers (45.5%) said that the current policies are insufficient, 36.4% could not determine, 15.1% stated that the current regulation is bad and only 3.0% expressed satisfaction with the current regulatory framework.

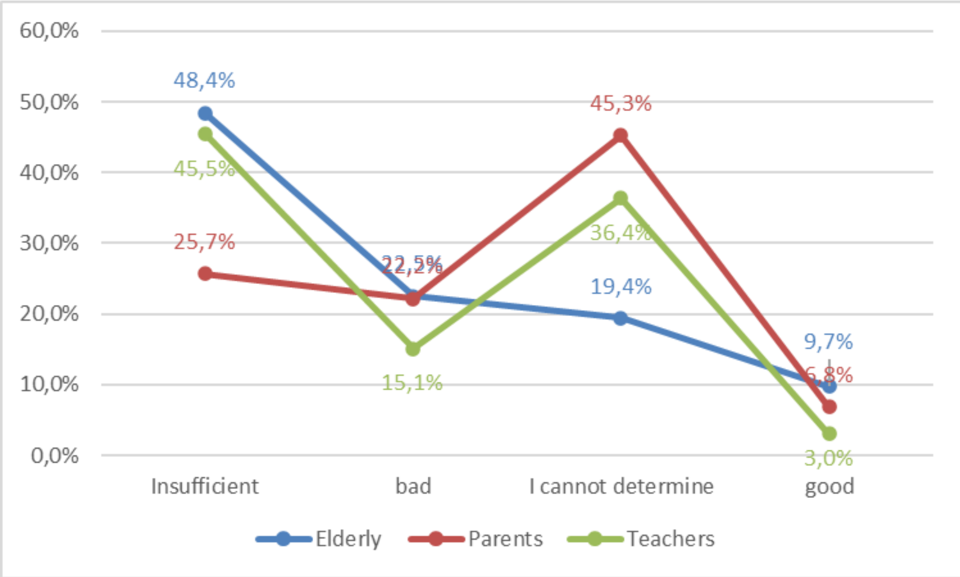

Figure 2. Opinions about the existence and efficacy of AI-related policy in education

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight significant disparities in AI literacy and engagement among preschool children and elderly individuals in Bulgaria. Preschool children, while highly exposed to AI-driven educational technologies, often lack structured learning frameworks that incorporate AI literacy. This results in a gap between passive interaction with AI (such as voice assistants and adaptive learning apps) and a critical understanding of its functions and implications. AI-driven learning tools can enhance cognitive development, but without proper media education, children may struggle to differentiate between human and AI-generated content, leading to issues in information credibility and digital dependency.

For elderly individuals, AI adoption is hindered by technological anxiety, low digital literacy, and infrastructural challenges. Many seniors express concerns regarding data privacy, AI biases, and usability barriers, which limit their willingness to engage with AI-based services such as e-government platforms, digital banking, and health applications. While the Bulgarian government has initiated some digital education programs for older citizens, they remain insufficient in addressing the complexities of AI technologies. Without targeted efforts to bridge the generational digital divide, elderly individuals risk increased social and informational exclusion in an AI-driven society.

Furthermore, the study identifies critical governance gaps in AI education for these demographics. Current Bulgarian policies primarily focus on AI's economic and industrial applications, with limited emphasis on educational frameworks that foster AI literacy across generations. Unlike other EU countries that have implemented comprehensive AI education strategies, Bulgaria lacks a structured approach to integrating AI ethics, critical thinking, and responsible AI use in both early childhood and lifelong learning curricula. As a result, both children and elderly individuals are left vulnerable to digital misinformation, algorithmic manipulation, and a lack of agency in AI interactions.

The broader societal implications of these gaps extend beyond education. A lack of AI literacy among preschool children may result in over-reliance on AI-generated content without developing essential critical thinking skills. For elderly individuals, technological exclusion may reinforce existing socio-economic inequalities, particularly in areas such as access to digital healthcare and online financial services. Addressing these challenges requires a multidimensional approach that involves policymakers, educators, and technology developers working collaboratively to create age-appropriate AI literacy programs. The inclusion of AI ethics and digital rights education is crucial to fostering responsible AI engagement across generations.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by its reliance on qualitative data, which, while rich in depth, may not capture the full statistical scope of AI adoption challenges. Future research should incorporate quantitative surveys to provide broader insights into public perceptions of AI across different social strata. Additionally, comparative studies between Bulgaria and other Eastern European countries could offer valuable perspectives on regional AI literacy trends and best practices in policy implementation. Further exploration into AI-driven pedagogical methodologies for preschool children and AI usability enhancements for elderly populations would also be beneficial. Lastly, interdisciplinary research combining education, psychology, and human-computer interaction could provide a holistic framework for designing inclusive AI literacy programs that cater to diverse generational needs.

Future research should also investigate the role of AI ethics in early childhood education and the potential psychological impact of AI interaction on young learners. Additionally, studies focusing on AI accessibility features for elderly individuals could provide critical insights into designing more user-friendly and inclusive AI applications. Addressing these research gaps will contribute to a more equitable and informed society, capable of navigating the complexities of AI-driven transformations.

Conclusion

This study reveals that preschool children in Bulgaria are increasingly exposed to AI technologies through educational platforms and smart devices, yet their engagement remains largely passive due to the absence of structured curricula that promote critical AI literacy. Conversely, elderly individuals often perceive AI with skepticism and experience difficulty adopting AI-based tools due to low digital literacy, technological anxiety, and limited accessibility. The study identifies significant policy gaps, particularly the lack of age-sensitive educational strategies within current Bulgarian AI and media literacy policies. These findings emphasize the urgent need for comprehensive, generationally inclusive AI literacy programs. By integrating AI education into both early childhood and lifelong learning systems, Bulgaria can help mitigate risks such as misinformation, digital exclusion, and lack of informed engagement with AI technologies.

The results of this study provide valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and technology developers who seek to foster inclusive AI literacy initiatives. By integrating structured AI education into both early childhood and lifelong learning curricula, stakeholders can mitigate the risks of misinformation, digital exclusion, and limited technological engagement. Additionally, regulatory bodies can use these findings to develop policies that ensure AI technologies remain accessible, ethical, and beneficial for all generations. Future research should further investigate the effectiveness of AI literacy programs and explore best practices across Eastern Europe to inform comprehensive and equitable policy frameworks.

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Manuscript was submitted: 20.04.2025.
Double Blind Peer Reviews: from 25.04.2025 till 26.05.2025.
Accepted: 27.05.2025.

Брой 64 на сп. „Реторика и комуникации“ (юли 2025 г.) се издава с финансовата помощ на Фонд научни изследвания, договор № КП-06-НП6/48 от 04 декември 2024 г.

Issue 64 of the Rhetoric and Communications Journal (July 2025) is published with the financial support of the Scientific Research Fund, Contract No. KP-06-NP6/48 of December 04, 2024.