Encounters Between Kindness and Digitalization: Stories of Older People in Latvia

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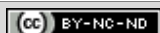
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Abstract

The current drive towards digitalization means that more services in Latvia are becoming centralized and moving online. This changes the relationship between the state and its older citizens as the accessibility of services shifts towards those who can engage with these digital tools or live close to centers of local or state government. Using participatory action research (PAR) with older people as co-researchers, we explore how challenges arising from the digitalization of services are encountered by older adults living alone in Latvia, through the conceptual lens of kindness. The central research question is, how does kindness shape the experience of digitalization of state and municipal services among Latvian older people? Our research participants experienced digitalization as a series of (un)kind encounters at local and national levels, which made them feel excluded, vulnerable, and distressed. Challenges such as poverty, age-related health changes and, in cases of rural participants, remoteness, made it difficult for older people living alone to use digital services. We found that the kindness of others (relatives, neighbors, friends, and civil servants) was important for older people to overcome these difficulties and access government services; but this kindness alone cannot fully remedy the structural causes of these issues. State services need to incorporate kindness on a structural level through the design and implementation of services.

Keywords: *Aging; Kindness; Unkindness; Digitalization*

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Introduction: Digitalization and Aging

Latvia is a democratic European country located on the Baltic Sea with a population of 1.8 million, of which 21% are 65+ years old (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia [CSB] 2024). In 2021, 40.5% of people over the age of 65 in Latvia were at risk of poverty, the percentage increasing to 68.4% for those of this age group who live alone (CSB 2021). In 2024, the average pension in Latvia was €615.55, which is only 36% of the average salary in the country (CSB 2024).

In Latvia, care for older people is a responsibility of the Ministry of Welfare, shared with the Ministry of Health. However, in practice, the obligation falls onto local governments in providing social support either in the form of financial benefits or services. While most benefits are defined by the state, services can vary between municipalities. For example, social work and assistance for older people living alone is organized by municipalities. However, the guidelines that determine what kind of support is required and how it should be delivered are determined on a national level (Putniņa et al. 2022).

In the last few years, ways of accessing this support have become increasingly digitalized. Following the work of Schou and Hjelholt (2019, 8) in Denmark, we define digitalization as "a major political push toward the implementation of a number of new digital technologies within and across the public sector." The expectation is that the digitalization of services will increase accessibility (for example, tax payments, communication with social services, medical professionals, utility services etc.), but this is not the case for everyone.

Digitalization is a strategic goal of Latvian national policy, included in the National Development Plan (NAP) 2021-27 (NAP 2027; Cross-sectoral Coordination Centre 2020) and other policy documents used for planning future development trajectories (Linkov et al. 2018; Seyedghorban et al. 2020). Digitalization is envisioned as a solution that improves the quality of life for citizens, ensures sustainable development, secures governance, and promotes the international competitiveness of the nation, as well as offers better access to services (Cross-sectoral Coordination Centre 2020, 8). Digitalization is positioned both as a "new reality" and an opportunity (Putniņa et al. 2022, 14-15). In NAP 2027 and documents produced by the Cross-sectoral Coordination Centre,[1] older people are described as a threat because they are generally considered a group with limited digital skills (Cross-sectoral Coordination Centre 2020, 19-20). Yet government services are being digitalized with little understanding of how this will impact older people's lives.

In this article, we aim to explore how the digitalization of state and municipal services affects the everyday lives of older people in Latvia who live alone.

Digital Access and Theorizing Kindness

Putniņa and colleagues (2022, 15) argue that the Latvian state expects that their citizens will accept the digitalization of services. However, as argued by Biniok and Menke (2015), the introduction of new technologies does not automatically create participation or engagement. Age itself is not a determinant of whether someone will be able to engage with digital technologies. For this to happen, certain preconditions must be met, such as older people being able to access devices and services, support mechanisms being established and maintained, and new communities being created in the digital sphere (Biniok and Menke 2015, 176). Robinson et al. (2015) remark that older people risk losing effective digital engagement, especially when they have spent fewer years in education and face economic challenges. At the same time, there is evidence that, with certain levels of privilege and access leading to higher education and economic resources, part of the older generation can benefit from digitalization in later life (Cotten et al. 2014). This shows that there is evidence of limitations that some older people may face when trying to participate in digital engagement. To solve this, as illustrated by Pirhonen et al. (2020), older people often rely on their family members for assistance in overcoming difficulties connected to digitalization.

To explore the ways in which digitalization affects older people living alone, we turn towards the concept of kindness. Kindness becomes a central component for older people living alone, especially when engaging with state and municipal institutions where sensitivity and compassion towards them determines the potential success of the encounter and digitalization itself. From this we arrive at our central research question: how does kindness impact the experience of digitalization of state and municipal services among Latvian older people?

Kindness has historically been conceptualized in three trends. Firstly, inspired by the work of Phillips and Taylor (2010), the concept of kindness is explored through its etymological relationship to the concept of kinship. This trend of aligning 'kin' with kindness assumes that kind relationships are established between relatives that can be members of either a biological or social family (e.g. Ballatt and Campling 2012; Szafran and Cwojdzińska 2024). Yet, this notion of kindness has been criticized for its limitations as it implies not only relatedness but also sameness. Here, the relatedness is imagined as existing only between those who are perceived to be of the same kinship group, therefore potentially serving as a tool for exclusion where kindness is only awarded to those who are seen as being similar to oneself.

The second trend is characterized by works that avoid defining kindness directly, instead opting for exploring different phenomena that can be counted as kindness. For example, Gherghel and Hashimoto (2020) analyzed the ways kindness is understood as social support among young adults in Japan. Brownlie and Anderson (2017, 1224-25) insist on the importance of noticing as constitutive of kindness. Kindness has also been explored through other related concepts, such as care, solidarity, or altruism, from moral philosophy and similar fields (Brownlie and Anderson 2017; Gilbert et al. 2019; Hall and Smith 2015; Malti 2021). Gilbert et al. (2019, 2261) focus on the motives that produce kindness. Therefore, the attempt here is to define kindness as phenomena but, unlike the previous approaches, our definition of kindness emerges from our research field, making kindness a rather incomparable phenomena between different contexts.

Although these approaches have served well to expand the concept of kindness, we believe that the third trend, a relational approach, forms the most appropriate way of looking at the concept. Curry et al. (2018, 321) describe kindness as something that "refers to actions intended to benefit others." It is the broadness

of this definition that we find useful, as it allows us to account for actions between people only loosely or temporally connected, such as civil servants and citizens. Similarly, Brownlie and Anderson (2017) look at kindness as acts and relationships that are considered low-level – those that often go unnoticed in everyday life (1225) but have direct practical and affective consequences that transform the relationship within which they occur (7).

We use an ordinary kindness approach as the starting point as it is the closest to what we observed in our field and allows us to explore the impact of digitalization on the relationship between state, older people, and community. We build our approach by combining the ideas of Brownlie and Anderson with the works of Bourdieu, and Phillips and Taylor. Bourdieu (1999) notes that the right hand of the state corresponds to the state security apparatus, while the left hand of the state corresponds to caring and support. In line with this, Phillips and Taylor (2010, 12) argue that "the value and pertinence of kindness was edged into […] [the] periphery by a spirit of 'manly' rugged individualism and competitive enterprise." This is paralleled by a similar process within the domain of academia, where kindness is overlooked not only as a research topic but also gets excluded from the academic environment itself (Burton and Turbine 2019). State institutions are therefore being constructed around the notion of security and economic well-being, which prevents state and municipal officials from considering kindness in relation to their actions.

We argue that digitalization highlights the changing nature of the contemporary state, where the proverbial right hand simply overtakes the left; where care is realized through control and becomes dependent on capacities, such as the ability to use digital tools. Here, care by the state is subordinate, and kindness potentially dissipates as the distance introduced by digitalization further estranges service providers from those who receive them, a process that our research participants describe as unkindness.
Unkindness allows us to analyze how state institutions have indirectly created a need for kindness to be a necessary component in successful digitalization. Therefore, we propose to also develop the concepts of kindness and unkindness in our paper as these currently lack sufficient discussion in academic discourse. The concepts of kindness and unkindness allow us to critically evaluate the oft-repeated claims that state and municipal officials lack the training and skills necessary to treat their clients appropriately.

Methodology

This article was produced as part of a larger international project called EQualCare[2], which explored inequalities connected to age and gender within the context of digitalization in Germany, Latvia, Finland, and Sweden. According to the project methodology, in each country, fieldwork was conducted in two places. In this article, we focus on data gathered over a period of ten months between 2022 and 2023, from two towns in Latvia (populations between 8,000 and 10,000) located at different distances from Latvia's capital, Riga. The town farthest from Riga, which we refer to as our rural field site, is located approximately 100 kilometers away from the state capital. One of the challenges for this community is the availability of public transport to the capital and other larger population centers. The town closer to Riga, which we consider our urban field site, is located only 30 kilometers from the state capital and, unlike the rural field site, has a well-developed transport network, including trains.

This article includes the analysis of data obtained from (1) recorded discussions with co-researchers during the workshops in which they were trained in research methods and held discussions on the research process (as co-researchers were themselves older people, they were both researchers and research participants within the context of this research); (2) interviews conducted by the co-researchers with older people living alone; and (3) interviews with key professionals in local municipalities conducted by the academic researchers. We describe each of these methods below as well as give context for these interviews.

The discussions with co-researchers and the interviews conducted by the co-researchers with older people living alone were acquired using a participatory action research (PAR) approach, inspired by Buffel's (2018) framework for creating age-friendly communities. The aim of this approach is to help older people become agents of change by including them not only as research participants but by developing partnerships between researchers and research participants, and between participants themselves. Therefore, during all stages of the research project, we actively involved older people in the research process. Working with us and our colleagues from the University of Latvia, co-researchers defined the research focus (which varied in each locality), created interview guidelines, conducted interviews, and were involved in data analysis and presentation. We recruited our co-researchers during the spring of 2022 by advertising the research project through posters in the chosen towns and providing the relevant information to local newspapers and local government officials. We also collaborated with local NGOs that serve older people. Altogether, 26 older people took part as co-researchers, although not everyone carried out interviewing; the rural co-researcher group consisted of six women and one man, while the urban co-researcher group consisted of seventeen women and two men. The age of co-researchers ranged from 60 to 86 years; some of them lived alone, while others lived with their families, however, the overarching research focus was to understand the existing and imagined digitalization and care policy regarding older people who live alone, to cooperatively work towards mitigating the current inequalities that arise from digitalization.

Most of our co-researchers had no previous experience in research, therefore the project also included four training workshops on research methods in each location. The dataset includes data collected during these workshops with co-researchers, as well as eight workshops during which our co-researchers shared about their experiences during fieldwork. This contributed to the collaborative nature of our research and provided space for a more involved role in knowledge production.[3]

Our main dataset includes 42 interviews with older people living alone. The co-researchers carried out the recruitment for interviews, following the criteria that interview participants should be at least 60 years old and living alone. The rural co-researcher group interviewed 24 older adults (20 women, 4 men), while the urban co-researcher group interviewed 18 (13 women, 5 men). The ages of interviewees were between 60 and 85 years and the mean length of these interviews was 21 minutes. The interview guidelines included questions on older people's lives about living alone, digitalization, and their systems of support. Data about interviews, discussions, participants and co-researchers can be found in the appendix.

The dataset also includes interviews conducted by academic researchers from the University of Latvia. These interviews were conducted with key professionals in local communities (library and client support center employees; people working as social workers or support workers for older people; NGOs working in areas related to the care of older adults). Interview guidelines in this case included questions about older people living alone, quality of life, systems of support, and digitalization. The mean length of these interviews was 57 minutes. Interview guidelines for these interviews as well as co-research interviews can be found in the appendix.

All interviews and workshop meetings were audio-recorded and transcribed. We conducted thematic analysis in Atlas.ti and used an open coding approach in three stages. First, we identified the main strands within the dataset (we established 44 codes), then organized these into six groups as follows: "barriers to digitalization," "support persons," "benefits of digitalization," "benefits of independent life," "disadvantages of independent life," and "barriers created by digitalization." Finally, the coded material was interpreted according to the two main themes pertaining to this article: "challenges of digitalization" and "kindness."

The research design was approved by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics committee at the University of Latvia. Written informed consent was obtained from all research participants and co-researchers. All interviews were anonymized during transcription to protect research participants' identities by assigning pseudonyms and omitting other identifying personal information such as precise age or location.

Digital Exclusion in the Context of Aging in Latvia

Our research participants[4] simultaneously experienced aging and digitalization. Each of these experiences came with its own challenges which amplified dependency on others, especially state and municipal services. To better understand their experiences of digitalization, we first explore the challenges our participants faced in accessing digital technology.

Age-Related Needs and Digitalization Adaptations

According to our research participants, health issues were one of the main reasons older people struggle to adopt new digital technologies. During discussions with our co-researchers, the topic of aging was often connected to changes related to the body and to different health conditions. Limited vision, hearing, and memory loss were most frequently mentioned. Our research participants talked about the intensification of their chronic illness and ever-increasing number of medical procedures, and how their health conditions affected their mobility, ability to participate in social life, and maintain personal autonomy. They also drew a connection between illness and aging itself, as their health-related issues developed and intensified over time, although individual differences were recognized.

The link between health complications in later life and reluctance to use digital technologies has been well documented (Iancu and Iancu 2020; LeRouge et al. 2013). Our research participants, both older people themselves and key professionals, believed that cognitive abilities change with age and could impact the ability of older adults to make decisions or learn new skills necessary to engage with digital technologies. One of the co-researchers (Inese, rural field site) reflected on her experience with her parents, who she described as being of "very sharp mind" but who still ended up "paying some 70 Euros for TV" with their limited pensions.

Aging, from the viewpoints of key professionals, was also connected to a general lack of activity, reluctance to engage or learn, and changes in the general disposition of older people:

> Adele (key professional, urban field site): Our clients are mostly very socially inactive, they no longer go anywhere and there are fewer and fewer of them. […] I suppose that most are simply unable to go [to municipal institutions].

This perspective was also shared by older people themselves and appeared in interviews and co-researcher discussions:

> Lita (co-researcher, urban field site): I think that maybe they are not afraid but simply they are… not so receptive to learning. It is work, you have to concentrate, you have to try to understand. As soon as they don't understand something, "oh, I won't, I don't want to," something like that.

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Ilze (co-researcher): For you, as a senior citizen, about digitalization - or maybe I haven't asked something that should be changed?

Sibilla (key professional, rural field site): I think a lot of people are afraid to work with both a computer and a smartphone, but there are a lot of options. Too bad they don't. It pains me that they could learn it, but there is no interest, indifference. They could send beautiful photos, write something, but they don't use it. [...]

Ilze: How would you explain it?

Sibilla: Whether it is some kind of laziness or fear, I don't know, they are not interested.

It is interesting that, although changes in aging are perceived as individual experiences that differ from person to person, they are also described as inevitable. The inevitability of health complications is connected to the local stigmatized image of the pensioner in which they are imagined as feeble, confused, and living in poverty (Kalēja and Mileiko 2016; Wilińska and Cedersund 2010). Within this context, they may be perceived as one deserving of pity, but this is often predicated on them still fulfilling certain preconditions as their families and wider society expect them to be productive and contribute to local economies, such as through unpaid childcare (Wilińska and Cedersund 2010).

Despite our participants recognizing their limitations regarding digital technologies, they still wanted to meet their responsibilities, and demonstrated determination in the face of digitalization, in contrast to perceptions held by co-researchers and key professionals. Some older people learned how to use their devices through memorization and used the same approach when navigating websites to pay their rent or electricity bills. However, as the design of websites and applications is always in flux, this approach was often rendered temporary. Difficulties in receiving services or performing digital duties when interface designs are changed were discussed in the interviews. Experiences like these convinced our research participants that state institutions do not consider the changes that occur in their bodies and minds, when creating digital services and adopting digitalization strategies.
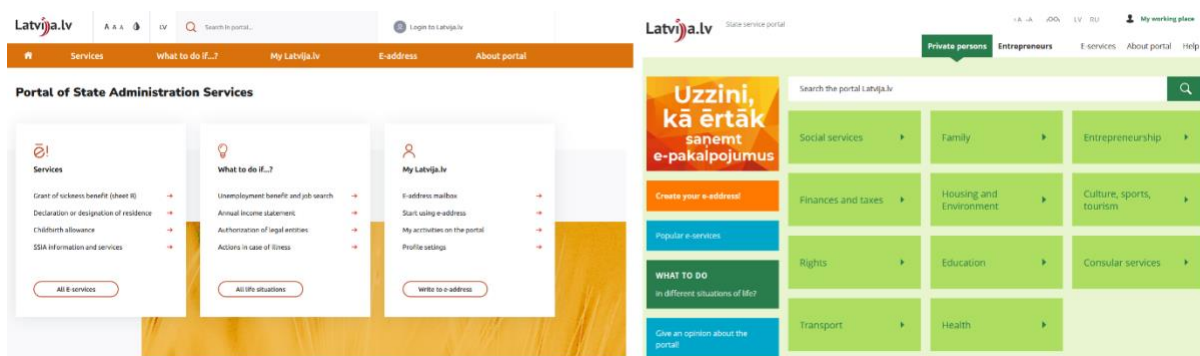

Figure 1: Design differences between versions of latvija.lv

To illustrate this point, our participants referred to the latvija.lv web page. This is a centralized portal which aims to provide access to state and municipal digital services. However, throughout its existence it has gone through several significant design changes which severely impacted our participants (Figure 1). For users who became accustomed to the previous website, design changes posed significant challenges to their ability to access services, requiring them to seek help which reinforced their impression of digitalization as an unkind process. The stress and additional confusion caused by such changes heighten a sense of failure and inadequacy in older people, which contributes to the ways in which aging can be experienced as

deterioration. Demonstrated through such experiences, digitalization fails to achieve its goals as it does not contribute to greater service accessibility and instead creates yet another barrier that the user must overcome.

Poverty and the Accessibility of Technologies

Poverty is another determinant of whether older adults can engage with the digital environment. Lack of legal employment opportunities in rural areas leads people to eventually receive lower state pensions due to lower social security contributions. As a result, the monthly income of rural pensioners is so low that they cannot afford to buy everyday items. This then leads to them not being able to afford digital technologies either, with survey data showing that one in five older people in Latvia consider costs as the main barrier to improve their digital skills (Brants 2023, 65).

However, while health issues were discussed in detail with our participants and always in relation to individualized bodies, the situation was reversed in terms of their financial issues. Here, our participants were often willing to discuss finances generally but were reluctant to discuss their personal experiences. For example, co-researchers quite often avoided asking questions about income and related topics, which they said was something they were not comfortable discussing.

Although some research participants felt that they were financially secure, a large proportion faced difficulties providing for their everyday needs. This interview excerpt illustrates how our co-researchers came face to face with the extreme poverty in which some older people live:

> Estere (co-researcher, rural field site): Now let's talk about your other problems - about water, a very important thing. You have huge problems.
>
> Ralfs (interview participant): There is no water. I find a way to wash myself. I dig a hole near the culvert, so it is a bit cleaner, but still kind of cloudy. I have to wash my clothes with it. I have to walk to get drinking water. In winter, I carry water in a bucket.
>
> Estere: Where do you go to get drinking water?
>
> Ralfs: To the forest, across the big paddock. There is a spring in the forest. I've known it as long as I've lived here. A powerful spring. [located a few kilometres from Ralfs' home]
>
> Estere: And in winter?
>
> Ralfs: Same in winter.

Our data shows that there are also cases where people have no access to television, radio, a refrigerator, or even a bed. To manage living costs, some older people in the rural field site grew their own food and kept livestock, though these activities pose their own challenges in terms of the significant physical labor required, which many of our participants found physically challenging. Given the conditions in which some of our participants lived, they emphasized that smart devices and an internet connection are both considered luxuries.

Staying stoic in the face of hardship held significant value among our research participants in both field sites, while discussing poverty was shameful and therefore avoided. This made the issues of financial hardship simultaneously ever present and invisible in the discussions and interviews.

Remoteness as a Result of Digitalization

Throughout our fieldwork, older people frequently referred to the ways that physical distance, as well as social isolation, contribute to the challenges they experience living alone. This is evidenced in the following quote from a co-researcher discussing a conversation she had with a potential interviewee in a meeting of a local NGO:

> Jautrīte (co-researcher, rural field site): For people in the deep countryside, it's very hard. She told me – I'd love to go to the senior ball, let's say we have a ball on Saturday, [..], but who's going to come pick me up? I'm not going to go to the ball to the other village, though. We had a meeting yesterday and the issue was raised, "there's just no money," everyone says, "there's no money." But on the other hand, it makes sense, who's going to come after one or two people to our village, that's a long way off. It's not so close, to send the bus.

The important part, however, is that the distance between where the ball takes place and where this interviewee lives is less than 20 kilometers, or 20 minutes by car. We propose to view these claims of distance through the concept of remoteness as it is defined by Gohain (2019, 206), who argues that a place is constructed as remote not because of geographical distance but rather as a result of state policies. In the case of Jautrīte's interviewee, remoteness was created through lack of transportation. We argue that remoteness can be considered when exploring how social isolation is connected to digitalization and the way that aging is experienced by older people in Latvia. As more resources are invested into building and maintaining the necessary infrastructure for digital services while roads and pavements are crumbling, accessibility becomes predicated on being able to take advantage of the digital environment. This extended both to rural and urban areas as places became remote, both due to lack of accessible transportation and crumbling infrastructure in the towns:

> Lita (co-researcher, urban field site): Well, let's say some kind of walkway is in poor condition or something [...]
>
> Marlēna (interview participant): I didn't complain, […] I concluded afterwards, I was wondering why I fell down in that specific place. Turns out, I later went to check, that there were three tiles broken. And I didn't notice, because I had two bags and bang! I found myself on the ground.
>
> Lita: And where was it?
>
> Marlēna: It was across from [the local shop]. But I now know I should be careful there.

Earlier in the interview, the older person, when discussing this event, had mentioned that she ended up with a broken finger afterwards. However, she did not see this as something that could be improved or changed. Within the context of poor or missing infrastructure, the promises of improved services via digitalization are seen as impossible for older people who are aware that there is no mobile data network coverage in certain parts of their municipality, which further complicates access to digital services. Remoteness emerges as a clear result of state policies in the stories of our participants where the attempt to establish digital highways has left local roads and pathways in ruin, as Jautrīte's co-researcher explained to her:

> Jautrīte (co-researcher, rural field site): Then she said that she went and saw the local roads. Those rural roads are really in terrible condition, there are people living on that road, even a

winemaker lives there, and when all these people drive, the road was so uneven that you felt like your insides were having a wild party. [...] and she says that "if it would be like before, in a meeting of the local region, a meeting with the local government, I would gladly go to the meeting and express my complaints, but who am I going to tell now"?

In the case described above, the older person is aware of how both local infrastructure and her voice regarding this issue are neglected. As interest and focus shift toward the digital space regarding both the infrastructure and citizen participation, digitalization ends up reinforcing the remoteness it claims to be combating. This extends remoteness even beyond the rural field site, as it was through talking about the crumbling pavement that our participants in the urban field site most often voiced their concerns about social exclusion and lack of accessibility. Remoteness is not solved by digitalization but rather worsened by it, further contributing to the reformulation of the state as unkind and individualistic. This not only changes policies but also leaves a very real impact on the lives of our participants for whom access to various services is mostly out of reach.

State, Municipal, and Public Services as Unkind Places

Sibilla (co-researcher, rural field site): Most financial services used to be closer to us. If something was unclear, one could go to accounting and the accountant explained. Now I call an accountant I know, he says, "I am now only responsible for salaries [...]." I call the next one, "I'm only responsible for transport, I don't know anything." Half of the accountants are in one town, half in other, where should I go?

Ramona (co-researcher, rural field site): I am very angry by the fourth [state official], because I have been sent to the fourth, who will immediately answer me that he does not know anything about this issue. At the fifth I am already cursing [...]

The situation that is described by Ramona and Sibilla is one that is deeply familiar for anyone dealing with state services in Latvia today. Due to remote work and cooperation made possible across distance by digital technologies, state and municipal services have become increasingly dispersed, remote, and hard to reach. Relocating information and services online claims to increase accessibility but has led to closures of physical agencies and increasing waiting times for reaching support staff over the phone. Older people did attempt to engage with state and municipal services; however, according to our participants, this rarely led to positive outcomes, as these interactions were often fraught with a lack of attentiveness and care. Throughout their stories, older people emphasized the often-unkind forms of these interactions, such as the delay in receiving support or even a response:

Jautrīte (co-researcher, rural field site): Yes, the [digital] consultant is already there. I write to that consultant to ask him to help me with what I have there, but he only calls me after several days, saying, "Yes, we can already see that you have filled in the necessary information." If I need that consultant, then I need him now, not that I need him days later.

In these situations, people described how services, and particularly a lack of physical services, were experienced as unkind, confusing, and hurtful. This is similar to the way in which the state is experienced by indigenous groups in Vincent's (2021) exploration of support systems among older people in Peru. In both Latvian and Peruvian cases, official support is provided, however, receiving it in reality becomes a significant challenge. Our research participants did not dispute the reasoning or logic of state/municipal actors. Rather, they emphasized that when stakeholders make decisions in accordance with local budgets,

development plans, and similar planning documents, the perspective and experience of those who are supposedly benefiting from the changes, such as older people, are absent or possibly ignored.

In interviews, older people also emphasized the impact COVID-19 left on the interaction with physical services, as the pandemic accelerated processes of remote registration which sometimes made the experience more difficult for the older people:

> Estere (co-researcher, rural field site): What do you think the life of older people in Latvia is like now?
>
> Zita (interview participant): Currently, it is difficult for me, because I have had many surgeries, heart surgeries, I need to go to check-ups with doctors, I need to go to many places […] and with all the COVID, it already slowed down the processes and I can't get to the doctors and check-ups. It's complicated, extremely complicated, calling when you have to apply in the queues, when I need a heart visit in the hospital, then apply, then for a general practitioner's referral. I should have gone for tests a long time ago, but I can't.
>
> Estere: What helps to deal with it?
>
> Zita: I try myself, who has time […] everyone is at work. During the working day, there is no one who can [help], I have to call myself and then all day, calls and calls and logging it is impossible, because you can't reach them.

In another interview, a key professional, Ingrīda, explained that state support systems are experienced as arcane, complex, and confusing, but – even more importantly – degrading. We argue that this is part of what we define as unkindness – experiencing an interaction as hurtful, maladapted, and harmful to one's agency. This again shows how the evaluation of current relations between older people and state/municipality is dissimilar when perceived from two very different perspectives. While, from the perspective of the state/municipality, older people are unmotivated, confused, and unable to follow instructions, for our research participants, the problem lies with the unkindness and understanding in the process itself:

> Ingrīda (key professional, rural field site): People are used to physical services and all that […] because at one time you had to reserve a timeslot, then the service was done remotely, then some documents needed to be mailed, then you have to wait for something to happen, when it will happen. It is not the same as when a person talks to a person. […] It was very difficult for older people to accept this.

Our research participants recognized that the objections that come from older people arise not because of their unwillingness or inability to learn or adapt to the changing support systems, but rather from perceived injustice and resentment. This was discussed by two co-researchers, Sibilla and Ramona, during a group meeting:

> Sibilla (co-researcher, rural field site): [My grandson] showed me two to three years ago that he was shopping at a self-service checkout. And when these appeared in our town, I was ridiculed for not knowing how to use them. Then I learned.
>
> Ramona (co-researcher, rural field site): I know how to do it, but as a disabled person I can't. What is happening to this group, what is happening to the disabled? With all the canes and bags?

One of the counterstrategies previously employed against the unkindness of the state or municipality was to combat it through visiting the relevant institution and explaining the issue face-to-face, which is precluded in the case of digital services. Similarly, in Galkin's (2020) study on the lives of older people in Karelia during the COVID-19 pandemic, older people insisted on the presence of their body when interacting with state institutions, as it is not only a tool of power but their presence forces state officials to experience them as embodied, restricted, and controlled. In the following quote, Marita emphasizes a similar sentiment, arguing that her presence allows her to transform from a case to a person. This is achieved not through skillful argumentation or use of technology but through her physical presence with another:

> Marita (interview participant, rural field site): I actually like looking people in the eye. I spoke on the phone, of course, but in any case it is a very distant contact. Most of the time, I am nothing to the officials who are sitting on the other side - the thousand and fifth inhabitant of some huge county. In fact, I cannot say that it is any rudeness or unkindness,[1] but I cannot handle it. I need direct contact, to meet, but I can't go and meet at the center of municipality 30 kilometers away.

Additionally, during Latvia's socialist period, personal and strong relationships with officials were crucial in ensuring adequate access to state services (Ledeneva 2013, 273). As such, older people today place greater significance on personal relationships and conversations with state officials. The current shift towards impersonal communication through digital tools simultaneously removes the body from the conversation and the establishment of close personal relationship with officials. Remote communication, and by extension remote state and municipal services, were experienced as cold and unkind, as they do not include the sense of presence and care which may be present with a visit from a social worker:

> Ilvija (key professional, urban field site): The computer is not going to ask, "how are you feeling today? Did you take your medicine? Did you use that ointment for your leg?"

In this section, we have discussed how the increased digitalization of municipal and state services may be experienced as unkind, as they prohibit face-to-face interactions. In the following section we turn towards an analysis of how local communities in both of our Latvian field sites help older adults overcome challenges introduced by digitalization.

Mending Unkindness

As we have outlined in the previous sections, digitalization is an obstacle in older people's relationship with state and municipal structures. In this section, we turn towards how the actions of different state and municipal actors contribute towards mitigating the challenges experienced by older people. While working within the confines of an unkind state structure, state officials, social workers, librarians, and others chose to show kindness and support to older people, recognizing their vulnerability. This was especially widespread in the countryside, where the social ties experienced by our research participants within the community were stronger than those in the city. In this chapter we list what forms of support are available for the older people and how they help make kinder interactions.

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[1] It is important to note here, the reluctance of Marita to admit that she has experienced unkindness or rudeness. This is characteristic of the way older people sometimes discussed their experiences, downplaying their experiences in order to maintain a sense of dignity.

Access to a computer, the Internet, and digital support is available in local libraries which were recognized as supportive spaces by the older people in both urban and rural contexts of our study. In this way, libraries served to both assist and encourage older people to use digital technologies:

> Teika (key professional, rural field site): In the library, we help out through our own good will. We no longer take [payment] […] at least for the basic [needs]. To say that it is very many [people who need it], it is not. They [older people] are the ones who are afraid of the computer. It's true. They will come to read the newspapers. But one day I said: "Try your hand at the computer, too." 'No, no! Anything but that!' [they say].

It is important to note that kindness here emerges as a conscious choice on the side of employees, as in this excerpt, who were regarded highly in local communities. These employees often grumbled about older people in interviews, somewhat hypocritically pointing out their proneness to complaining and the different kinds of special attention they required. Still, theychose to act with kindness towards older people, rather than express annoyance while interacting with them.

Assistance with digital technologies was also 'unofficially' provided by individual social workers and library employees, who acknowledged the gaps in the officially provided care system for older people and sought to help, going beyond their job responsibilities. In some cases, these actions even violated professional standards on how support is supposed to be provided, meaning that the employees providing support could theoretically be reprimanded. For example, a social worker used her own bank account to pay bills for older people (her clients) who then paid her back in cash. This was done because the bills had to be paid using online banking that the older people could not use due to limited knowledge and skills about digital services or lack of access to the necessary devices. This, however, could not continue as the constant activity in her account drew attention from the State Revenue Service. This situation is an example of how digital services can be perceived as unkind not only by older people, but also potentially by those kind actors who are at risk of being sanctioned through filling in for the kindness the very same system lacks.

A separate type of support mechanism was provided by the local NGOs. These organizations are often tasked with functions that, on paper, should be the responsibility of state institutions. For example, National and Local Government Unified Customer Service Centers (VPVKACs) are envisioned as supporting those with limited skills so they may use digital services. Among our research participants, only one person was aware of their existence, but nobody knew of their purpose. One of the explanations for this might be that information about their purpose and location(s) is, ironically, provided online. Here, digitalization policy is realized in a top-down way: the need to provide a unified service to all citizens is recognized, however, when imagining who will use VPVKAC services, policymakers only consider citizens with digital skills and access to digital technology.

In contrast, the local NGOs (involved in the study) that served older people were much more aware of the challenges this population face. These groups incorporated communication technology used by the older people rather than forcing them to adopt a particular technology:

> Ilvija (key professional, urban field site): Let's start with the fact that some older people have feature phones. Of course, for those who have smartphones, to whom something can be sent, then it is done. This information is sent through WhatsApp or by e-mail, so we also communicate with the group that can communicate in this way. But most of them have feature

phones here, and this communication takes place by direct calling, talking, asking how each of them are.

The example above indicates that our participants, far from being digitally illiterate, actively used digital tools such as smartphones in maintaining and creating relationships: for recreation and entertainment; actively participating and posting information in social networks; sending greetings and sharing photographs to friends and relatives. Digital space can be enjoyed by older adults, which contrasts with how they experience digital communication with state and municipal institutions. The inability to learn how to pay utility bills online could easily coexist with the knowledge of how to post pictures on Facebook:

> Sigita (interview participant, rural field site): Well, I have a phone, I have TV and a computer. I use the phone to call friends, relatives, children, grandchildren. I also take pictures with it in my garden or if I go somewhere.
>
> Ruta (co-researcher, rural field site): How do you learn about new services, how do you use online banking? […] Generally, how do you manage payments?
>
> Sigita: Well, I have not learned how to do those payments. It is easier for me when it is all managed by my daughter. […] So I have no issues there.

Digitalization sometimes requires that older person try to expand or maintain a new set of relationships to 'survive' in the digital environment, and the data shows how different people (neighbors, friends, ex-colleagues, social workers, library employees) support older people without strong digital skills. The immediate circle around older people – relatives, neighbors and friends, so called "warm experts" (Bakardjieva 2005, quoted in Duque and Otaegui 2023, 28) – provides various types of assistance in the digital environment. Research participants often emphasized the importance of children and grandchildren in ensuring that they could access digital services. In these relationships, the suggestion that kindness arises as a consequence of kinship was often implicit, illustrating that kindness was present in kinship relationships even if it is not exclusively located there:

> Lita (co-researcher, urban field site): I know a lot. I can do a lot with pictures and everything, but there are things I don't really know. My son helps me. […] Let's say the electronic signature, I'm not quite sure about that either... […] If you don't have such a young person right next to you, it's very difficult.

Not all older people wish to ask for support from relatives. The reasons can differ, with some emphasizing their independence and not wanting to be a burden on their children. Others preferred not to ask for help as they felt their relatives were too busy, relationships with them were not good, or they lived far away. In these cases, some older people asked for support from neighbors or friends who lived nearby:

> Sibilla (co-researcher, rural field site): My neighbor shows up with all her bills, she has her e-banking and she says, "I have to pay now" and I pay her bills for her.

This example highlights that kindness is not predicated on biological kinship or a recognition of sameness but rather good relationships in which another is acknowledged as someone who needs help.
The motivation to provide support to older adults should be recognized both as a political deed and as kindness toward others in the local community. Here, co-researchers describe similar activism to that found in Wentzell's (2020) case study of a couple in Mexico who not only strived to age well by themselves but also attempted to be a positive impact in their local community. Such examples illustrate that kindness is

not unidirectional, but rather reciprocated between different members of the community. Here, kindness arguably serves as a tool that extends and reaffirms relationships between individuals who are in similar circumstances, whether they are aware of the inequalities and are attempting to lessen them through their own action, or whether they feel obligated to help through neighborly requests. In summary, kindness can arise as soft opposition to efficiency; it takes time and care to explain things and to remember to ask how someone else is doing. Consequently, a kind state employee has become an exception, as this effort is not always present amongst officials working within a state system that has a prevailing efficiency discourse.

Conclusion: An Unkind State Creates Kind Communities

Throughout our research, we repeatedly witnessed how older adults' descriptions of the changes implemented in state and municipal systems differed from the intentions of these systems as stated in policy documents. While the state frames digitalization as an indicator of efficiency, safety, and self-sufficiency, for older people these changes decreased accessibility of services and increased social isolation. In other words, the introduction of digital services paradoxically increased the dependence of older people as they now needed support for tasks they previously were able to carry out themselves.

The persistent push toward digitalization in Latvia leads to care and kindness being disregarded in government services, which disproportionately affects some of the most vulnerable people in society, such as older people living alone. The forced implementation of digital solutions has made older people increasingly reliant on support networks of relatives and friends. However, this is only possible for those who have established such support networks. In the case of people without strong social networks, digitalization appears not as a solution or improvement, but rather as a challenge that may be difficult to overcome. Furthermore, living in the post-pandemic era, where even arranging a face-to-face meeting with a doctor or state official has been moved online, the ability to voice concerns diminishes and isolation deepens.

As portrayed in the data, kindness is no longer dependent on kinship relationships as described by Ballatt and Campling (2012). This can be explained by the rise in younger relatives leaving rural areas, who subsequently become unable to support older people still living in the countryside. In these situations, relatives are replaced by those who are still around, such as friends and neighbors. Regardless of who plays the role offering assistance, the closeness between them and the older person helps to maintain autonomy and independence over a longer period.

Support for older adults from individuals working in the state system (regardless of state requirements and sometimes even in opposition to them) serves as another source of kindness. Their actions could serve as the basis for a different digitalization policy, one based on the needs of the older people rather than economic costs to the state. The inaccessibility of the Internet among older people in Latvia is often the result of state actions rather than their own capabilities, or lack thereof. State policy based on notions of kindness, instead of efficiency and competitiveness, would allow older people to be recognized as socially important within local communities. The established support networks observed in our research already exemplify the care and kindness present in Latvian towns and villages, in the face of digitalization. Nevertheless, we argue that this should be promoted at the state level, where kind communities become the basis of state policy rather than its antithesis.

Our research was unable to obtain the views of several significant groups of older people in Latvia. First, our article does not consider the experiences of the Russian-speaking minority. This group is significant as they potentially experience additional challenges as the services are not only digitalized but often times

only available in Latvian. Second, we were unable to reach the most impoverished older people. This was a limitation of our methodological approach as our co-researchers were unwilling to engage with this part of the community due to the stigmatization of this group. This leaves us with a gap in our knowledge, as this group most acutely experiences both social isolation and lack of access to necessary digital devices. Finally, our research only considers the experience of mostly non-disabled participants. For example, older adults who experience loss of sight or hearing face particular challenges when dealing with digitalization and accessing state services. Further research may consider how to create kind and supportive digital services for these groups.

Building a conceptual framework of kindness, our research illustrates how the basis for enacting kindness is related to otherness as well as sameness. The kindness that an older person receives from their relatives or strangers is not only based on a feeling of commonality, but sometimes on the attempt to alleviate the suffering of the 'other'. This is especially visible in cases where a kind attitude and kind gestures are exhibited by state officials who may not have personally identified with the older person's circumstances. Hence, resistance to large-scale changes in society is often maintained by offering small acts of aid to others, as opposed to major active resistance toward the right hand of the state (Bourdieu 1999). Additionally, our research demonstrates the importance of considering contextual factors in kindness frameworks; namely, where kindness is present, how it is practiced, and by whom.

A primary contribution of this article has been the exploration of the notion of unkindness. This concept was evident in the experiences of our research participants, but it is, however, rarely considered in the scientific literature. In our research, we propose to view unkindness as interactions that are experienced as hurtful, maladapted, and harmful to one's agency. Although we have explored the concept of unkindness in digital services, we believe that this might also be a useful tool to explore face-to-face interactions between the state and its citizens. What we can observe from our research is that older people are often confident in their interactions with the state through the mechanisms that are familiar to them. Kindness and unkindness are part of the daily interaction with state mechanisms, existing in an uneasy interrelation where an increase in unkind digital interactions create demand for more kindness in the physical environment. This creates additional strain on both older people and state officials, as (un)kindness is often implicit rather than acknowledged in their relationship. By acknowledging the need for kindness, we might move beyond the efficiency discourse and ask what other dimensions are present in the state-citizen relationship.

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Notes

1. The Cross-Sectoral Coordination Centre was a national level institution, the purpose of which was to ensure mutual coherence of national level development planning documents in sectors where responsibilities of several ministries overlap.

2. EQualCare project homepage. https://jp-demographic.eu/projects/equalcare/

3. In the article, we use the term 'participants' to refer both to co-researchers and interviewees unless stated otherwise.

4. During analysis it became clear that the themes from our co-researchers and older adults interviewed by them overlapped to a significant degree. Therefore, in further text we refer to them all as 'research participants' unless differences need to be emphasized.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Guidelines Created by Co-Researchers

Introduction
How would you describe the life of older people in Latvia?
What is your experience of living alone/alone?
Did you use any tools to alleviate self-isolation during Covid-19?

Support
What problems do you face on a daily basis?
Who are the people you ask for help?
What support do neighbors/relatives/friends/workplace/church provide? (ask as separate questions)
Who are the people you help?
What support do you get from the municipality/state?
Have you ever received a gift card from the municipality for an anniversary? How did you find out about this?
How has county reform affected receiving support (from municipality)?
Do you experience any problems to buy food?
How do you communicate with loved ones?

Digitalization
What digital devices do you have at home and how do you use them?
What difficulties have you encountered when using your phone/computer? What helps to eliminate these difficulties?
What happens if a familiar website "improves"/changes its appearance? What helps to deal with this?
How do you use online banking services?
What is the procedure for paying your monthly payments?
Is it possible to make payments remotely?
How do you find out about the news (benefits, opportunities) offered by the municipality for older people?
What do you think about digitalization?
How do you contact general practitioners for the purchase of medicines?
Has there been any service that you have failed to access because of digitalization (e.g. e-health?)

Conclusion
Is there anything I didn't ask?
Do you have any suggestions for improving municipal/state services?
What is it that you have managed to do while using your phone/computer? Are there any funny incidents?

Appendix 2: Interview Guidelines for Key Professionals

Introduction
Tell us about yourself! What do you do? Is your work related to older people?

Life of older people
How would you describe the life of older people in this municipality?
How is it possible to learn about what older people's lives are like in the municipality? Maybe you know someone who has researched this? Where can one access the results of this research?
At what events, at what moments can you feel the presence of older people in the community?
What is a good life as you age? Is a good life for older people possible in your municipality? What's the evidence for that? Examples? What influences the quality of life of older people? Do you think the quality of life for older people varies depending on gender/nationality/age, maybe other metrics?
What types of leisure activities are popular among older people in the municipality? (artisan groups, groups of like-minded people) How popular are older people organizations, do they manage to gather a wide range of people?

Older people living alone
How many older people living alone live in the municipality/town? Where? Do more of them live in the town or in rural areas?
How is an older person's life different when living alone? Is it influenced by gender/nationality, maybe other indicators? How? Examples?

Support
What are the most visible support measures for older people in the town/municipality? What support do older people living alone need? Why? Who is supporting them right now?
Have you noticed that older people living alone provide support to someone else? In what way?
How were older people's needs for support affected by the pandemic? How were older people's opportunities to receive support affected by the pandemic? How was it handled in your municipality?
Are there any municipal services for older people that you would like to highlight as particularly important in the care of older people? Is there any support available specifically for older people living alone? How do older people find out about them?
Is there a particularly successful service or initiative for caring about/involving older people in public life? Has there been one before? How long has it existed?

Intergenerational relationships
What is the role of family and relatives/neighbors/friends in supporting older people? Is this support different for older people living alone?
Do older people seek help? To what extent are their relatives involved in seeking support/providing care/applying for services? And what about neighbors, friends, peers?

Digitalization
How do digital technologies impact older people's opportunities to integrate into the life of their local community? Do older people use digital devices? What's the evidence for that? Why don't some older people use digital devices? Are there differences depending on gender, nationality, age?
In the pandemic, the digitization of state and municipal services increased. How does this affect access to services for older people?
What do you think older people's digital skills are in your municipality/town? What's the evidence for that?
Have you had any training or projects to train older people in how to use computers? Who organized it and how did it work out? Who used them?
Have you encountered a situation in your work or private life where older people have not been able to use or receive a service because they do not have sufficient digital skills or access to a computer? Can you tell us about the situation?
Is it necessary to develop support for this group in the use of digital services? Why? Who should do this? How is this done now?
Is it necessary to develop specific digital services for older people living alone, such as a support button or a remote social worker? Why yes/no? What services should there be? Would people use them?

Conclusion

Would any results from our study be relevant or interesting to you? Are there any questions I didn't ask, but that are important in the context of digitalization and/or older people?

Ask the participant about potential premises for PAR and other potential research participants.

Appendix 3: Researchers Involved in the Study (Latvian group)

Field site	Researcher	Position in the study
Both	Aivita Putniņa	Team leader in EQualCare project Latvia, Senior Researcher
Both	Līna Orste	Research assistant
Both	Artūrs Pokšāns	Researcher
Both	Māra Pinka	Researcher
Rural field site	Ilze Mileiko	Researcher
Urban field site	Kārlis Lakševics	Researcher

Appendix 4: Discussions with Co-Researchers

No.	Date	Field site	Participants	Length (min.)
1	June 20, 2022	Rural field site	5 co-researchers and 3 researchers	226
2	July 18, 2022	Rural field site	7 co-researchers and 3 researchers	76
3	August 2, 2022	Rural field site	7 co-researchers and 3 researchers	167
4	August 18, 2022	Rural field site	7 co-researchers and 4 researchers	107
5	February 17, 2023	Rural field site	6 co-researchers and 3 researchers	96
6	July 12, 2022	Urban field site	10 co-researchers and 3 researchers	103
7	July 25, 2022	Urban field site	8 co-researchers and 3 researchers	123
8	July 26, 2022	Urban field site	8 co-researchers and 3 researchers	81
9	August 8, 2022	Urban field site	9 co-researchers and 3 researchers	98
10	August 22, 2022	Urban field site	8 co-researchers and 3 researchers	98
11	August 23, 2022	Urban field site	3 co-researchers and 3 researchers	97

Appendix 5: Interviews with Key Professionals

No.	Date	Field site	Profile	Pseudonym	Length (min.)
1	May 18, 2022	Rural field site	Representative of the municipality	Inese	47
2	May 18, 2022	Rural field site	Representative of older people NGO	Sibilla	77
3	May 18, 2022	Rural field site	Librarian	Teika	36
4	June 6, 2022	Rural field site	Social worker	Ingrīda	47
5	June 6, 2022	Rural field site	Provide digital support for older people	Ingra	53
6	May 20, 2022	Urban field site	Representative of the municipality	Selva	57
7	May 20, 2022	Urban field site	Representative of older people NGO	Lita	63
8	May 24, 2022	Urban field site	Representative of older people NGO	Ilvija	68
9	July 8, 2022	Urban field site	Social worker	Adele	52

Appendix 6: Co-Researcher Interviews

No.	Field site	Participants	Gender	Length (min.)
1	Rural field site	Co-researcher: Estere Interviewee: Liepa	Woman	8
2	Rural field site	Co-researcher: Sibilla	Woman	11

		Interviewee: Hermīna		
3	Rural field site	Co-researcher: Jautrīte Interviewee: Ritma	Woman	8
4	Rural field site	Co-researcher: Ramona Interviewee: Marita	Woman	10
5	Rural field site	Co-researcher: Ramona Interviewee: Meldris	Man	13
6	Rural field site	Co-researcher: Ramona Interviewee: Marina	Woman	24
7	Rural field site	Co-researcher: Jautrīte Interviewee: Žaklīna	Woman	8
8	Rural field site	Co-researcher: Jēkabs Interviewee: Marta	Woman	16
9	Rural field site	Co-researcher: Sibilla Interviewee: Cilda	Woman	19
10	Rural field site	Co-researcher: Ruta Interviewee: Sigita	Woman	15
11	Rural field site	Co-researcher: Jēkabs Interviewee: Askolds	Woman	30
12	Rural field site	Co-researcher: Ruta Interviewee: Audra	Woman	13
13	Rural field site	Co-researcher: Interviewee: Genoveva	Woman	10
14	Rural field site	Co-researcher: Estere Interviewee: Zita	Woman	37
15	Rural field site	Co-researcher: Sibilla Interviewee: Olga	Woman	31
16	Rural field site	Co-researcher: Madara Interviewee: Liega	Woman	24
17	Rural field site	Co-researcher: Madara Interviewee: Vizma	Woman	13
18	Rural field site	Co-researcher: Jēkabs Interviewee: Klāra	Woman	28
19	Rural field site	Co-researcher: Jautrīte Interviewee: Zemgus	Man	20
20	Rural field site	Co-researcher: Jautrīte Interviewee: Zenta	Woman	32
21	Rural field site	Co-researcher: Ramona Interviewee: Astrīda	Woman	11
22	Rural field site	Co-researcher: Estere Interviewee: Ralfs	Man	49
23	Rural field site	Co-researcher: Sibilla Interviewee: Ilze	Woman	21
24	Rural field site	Co-researcher: Sibilla Interviewee: Modris	Woman	31
25	Urban field site	Co-researcher: Skaidrīte Interviewee: Laila	Woman	19
26	Urban field site	Co-researcher: Skaidrīte Interviewee: Andra	Woman	15
27	Urban field site	Co-researcher: Gerda Interviewee: Irbe	Woman	22
28	Urban field site	Co-researcher: Gerda	Woman	26

		Interviewee: Una		
29	Urban field site	Co-researcher: Ženija Interviewee: Gusts	Man	14
30	Urban field site	Co-researcher: Ženija Interviewee: Ginta	Woman	14
31	Urban field site	Co-researcher: Ženija Interviewee: Agija	Woman	25
32	Urban field site	Co-researcher: Emma Interviewee: Līva	Woman	9
33	Urban field site	Co-researcher: Lita Interviewee: Emīlija	Woman	24
34	Urban field site	Co-researcher: Lita Interviewee: Teika	Woman	9
35	Urban field site	Co-researcher: Lita Interviewee: Salvis	Man	20
36	Urban field site	Co-researcher: Lita Interviewee: Marlēna	Woman	23
37	Urban field site	Co-researcher: Lita Interviewee: Dzidra	Woman	23
38	Urban field site	Co-researcher: Lita Interviewee: Gunita	Woman	45
39	Urban field site	Co-researcher: Lauma Interviewee: Benita	Woman	16
40	Urban field site	Co-researcher: Kitija Interviewee: Paulis	Man	8
41	Urban field site	Co-researcher: Dace Interviewee: Rihards	Man	15
42	Urban field site	Co-researcher: Roze Interviewee: Alekss	Man	11