

Member Spotlight

as featured on geron.org

Q&A with Yasemin Afacan, PhD from Bilkent University



Q: How long have you been a GSA member?

A: I have been a GSA member since 2020.

Q: How specifically has membership in GSA benefitted you?

A: My GSA membership has been a key factor in helping me achieve my personal and professional development goals, particularly in enhancing my communication and collaboration skills in age-friendly environments. One of the most significant benefits of this membership is the exclusive access to a wide range of scholarly articles and research in the social sciences, with a particular emphasis on aging. This access allows me to deepen my understanding of complex aging issues, broaden my perspectives, and stay informed on the latest

advancements and innovations in the field—key elements for my growth as a professional in this domain. Through the diverse opportunities that GSA provides, such as moderating and participating in panels and discussions, as well as engaging with Interest Groups (IGs), I have strengthened my gerontology knowledge further. These experiences enhance my understanding of aging and related fields and offer invaluable networking opportunities. Interacting with experts, researchers, and practitioners from diverse backgrounds allows me to exchange ideas, broaden my viewpoints, and build meaningful connections that foster collaboration and growth within my professional network. In addition, these opportunities will enable me to critically examine the aging process through the lens of diverse cultural studies and political and social practices. GSA's interdisciplinary research resources will allow me to explore aging from multiple perspectives, deepening my understanding of how cultural, political, and social factors shape the aging experience.

Q: How did you get interested in the field of aging?

A: My journey in architectural design education has allowed me to shape spaces that, in turn, shape the lives of older adults. My interest in aging began during my master's thesis, where I examined the concept of age-friendly neighborhoods. During my PhD, I delved into the parameters of inclusive kitchen design, recognizing that kitchens are spaces where older adults spend a significant amount of time. My focus has expanded to environmental gerontology, neuroarchitecture, and the interaction between older adults and robots. These topics are pivotal in shifting perspectives on aging, which is often viewed as a burden in many societies. While aging is inevitable, promoting healthy aging through thoughtful design and innovation is possible.

Q: What projects are you working on in your current position?

A: Under the Horizon Europe 2023 call, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, I, as the coordinator of the Bilkent University host organization, have been awarded a 2-year ERA European Research Executive Agency (REA) Fellowship to work with Meghann Catherine Ward (University of Cumbria, UK) as a postdoctoral fellow. The 2 years project explores the effects of everyday home and family environments on the health, well-being, and identity of older women who live with dementia in Ankara, Türkiye. It considers the complex relations between dementia, gender, design environment (natural, built, biophilic), socio-economic status, familial dynamics, and daily living in the context of Türkiye's capital city. The research has strong interdisciplinary links across architecture, human geography, anthropology, and gerontology. I have been a member of the International Society of Gerontechnology since 2014, where my colleagues and I are working towards establishing a Turkey Chapter. In addition, I have my research lab, Afacan Research Lab, where I teach graduate courses and serve as a thesis advisor, guiding students in various domains of age-inclusive

practices. Through this role, I inspire design students and early-career scholars to explore innovative horizons in gerontology and contribute to advancing the field.

Q: What do you love most about your line of work?

A: My work spans multiple disciplines, reflecting my commitment to innovative and holistic approaches. I serve as the Dean of the Faculty of Art, Design, and Architecture, where I oversee and contribute to integrating creative practices with emerging technologies. Additionally, I hold an affiliated position as a faculty member in the Neuroscience Department, enabling me to bridge the gap between design and science. My research focuses on critical areas such as older adult-robot interaction, exploring how assistive technologies can enhance the quality of life for aging populations. Furthermore, I investigate the neurological impact of architectural spaces, examining how thoughtful design can promote healthy aging and cognitive well-being. This interdisciplinary approach allows me to address complex challenges at the intersection of design, technology, and neuroscience.

Q: What was the best piece of advice you got early on in your career you'd like to pass on to emerging gerontologists?

A: Passion should always be the first priority. With passion, success will inevitably follow. I encourage emerging gerontologists to connect with older adults, listen to their challenges, and adopt an interdisciplinary approach to address these issues. One discipline alone is not enough. By combining insights from multiple fields to tackle contemporary aging problems, you unlock creativity and set yourself apart from others in healthy aging.