How does Social Networking Reduce Loneliness for Older Adults?

Abstract

The use of social networking sites (SNS) is widespread. Older adults, who are more likely to be lonely in comparison with the rest of the population, lag in their SNS adoption compared with others. We hypothesize that SNS can be used to reduce loneliness as these increase an individual’s social connections. This work-in-progress research uses Social Capital to bridge the knowledge gap of how the use of SNS may reduce loneliness for older adults.

Keywords

Older Adults, loneliness, social capital, social networking sites (SNS).

Introduction

Loneliness is felt by many in society; it is the emotional pain individuals perceive who are lacking social connections (Bekhet, Zauszniewski & Nakhla 2008). In a society that feels every individual can be a contributing member, the loneliness of individuals is a large societal failing. Finding ways to reduce loneliness is crucial in a society that sees each member is valued and that their wellbeing is important.

Older adults register a rate of loneliness higher than others. 24% of Canadian seniors aged 65 and over reportedly feel a need to participate more in social activities while 19% felt they were socially isolated (Gilmour, 2012). Owing to changes that are experienced in the later stages of one’s lives, such as retirement, death of relatives and friends, and/or being the main caretaker of a loved one, older adults are more likely to suffer from social isolation (SI) and loneliness than others in the population (Cotten, et al., 2013).

Social networking sites (SNS) are online sites that allow for the collaboration, communication and interaction among members. Such sites allow users to create a profile of themselves that they wish to share publicly or semi-publicly (Boyd and Ellison 2008). SNS give the individual the ability to view profiles of, and connect, like-minded individuals (Boyd and Ellison 2008). SNS adoption has been shown to enable individuals to increase their social connections (Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe 2007).

SNS have the capability of building and supporting social relationships; yet, many older adults have not realized their value. By 2012, 80% of Canadian households have access to the internet as use of electronic devices prevailed incrementally (Statistics Canada 2013). Increased internet use also further popularize SNS. All age groups participate in SNS, although those aged 65 and older have been slow to adopt this technology (Pew Research Center 2017). SNS provide a convenient way to augment social connections, even more so for older adults who are at increased risk of losing social connections due to rapid changes in their life circumstances (International Federation of Aging, 2012).

To date, various computer-mediated interventions have been applied to varying effectiveness (Khosravi, Rezvani and Wiewiora 2016). These interventions have shown how the use of computers and their different functions such as e-mail can affect loneliness for older adults. The research shows promise that SNS may help, but lack the clarity of how the medium can be used to increase an individual's social capital (SC) which will, in turn, reduce the feelings of loneliness (Damant, et al. 2016).
To address this gap, we propose investigating how social media, in the form of SNS, increase an individual’s social capital. Specifically, our research questions include: (1) Can SNS strengthen ties for older adults? (2) Can SNS reduce loneliness by increasing social ties? (3) What characteristics of SNS use have the most influence to reduce loneliness and strengthen social ties? To address these questions, a model that reflects the older adults’ use of SNS is developed, as shown in Figure 1.

We organize the rest of the paper as follows: We first review the extant literature on loneliness, its causes and outcomes from loneliness and the loneliness interventions. Next, we advance the research model to analyze how the use of SNS may lead to improve social capital and thus reduce the loneliness of older adults. We then conclude with potential key contributions and limitations of the proposed study.

**Loneliness & loneliness interventions for older adults**

Loneliness and SI are similar, but not one and the same. Although some studies tend to view them as very similar, SI is an objective observation, which has two different outcomes for individuals, that is, either loneliness or solitude. Loneliness is a subjective measure; it is difficult to measure as each person tends to feel loneliness to varying degrees. The definitions for each are also different. SI is defined as the absence “of companionship, social supports or social connections” (p521) (Hawthorne 2006) whereas loneliness may be defined as the painful feeling of SI that accompanies the perceived deficiency in the number or quality of an individual’s social connections (Hawkley, et al. 2008). By the very definitions of SI and loneliness, SI is the antecedent to loneliness, but the person needs to feel there is an issue.

Loneliness in older adults is more prevalent as their life circumstances change to reduce the number and quality of their social connections. These life changes include retirement, death of a spouse or friends, being the main caregiver for a family member, as well as relocation of themselves or friends and family members (Savikko, et al. 2005; Cotten, Anderson & McCullough 2013). The health and aging process of individuals increase the incidence of loneliness for older adults. This is due to reduced mobility and functional abilities that limit participation in many socializing activities (Savikko, et al. 2005).

Loneliness is linked to lower levels of wellbeing, increases in disability, depression, functional decline and premature death (Hawkley & Cacioppo 2010; Perissinotto, et al. 2012; Pinquart & Sorensen 2001). Loneliness in older adults causes psychological distress, and has been found to impact negatively on health and reduce their life expectancy.

As the issue of loneliness for older adults has become known, many different types of interventions to alleviate loneliness have been studied. Some of the methods have been shown to reduce loneliness while others have been unsuccessful or found to be inconclusive.

Studies have examined both prevention and reduction methods for SI and loneliness (Andersson 1998;). Both non-computerized and computer-related interventions have emerged. Of the non-computerized interventions, these have included the use of volunteers, professionals and support groups (Cotten, Anderson and McCullough 2013), for example, interventions that were done in the individual’s home, community centers and by telephone (Andersson, 1998). As Andersson (1998) points out, many of these interventions have not been developed specifically to deal with the different types of loneliness.

Others have examined the effectiveness of computers and information and communication technology (ICT) in reducing loneliness for older adults (Khosravi, Rezvani and Wiewiora 2016). The interventions examined have been internet use, training programs for the computer and/ or the internet, and the use of SNS. Khosravi et al. (2016) compared several different studies using SNS and found inconclusive evidence, with some studies showing reduced, while others showing increased, loneliness. It was suggested that further research is needed to understand the specific contextual characteristics that may explain some of the perceived value in SNS mitigating loneliness.

**Research Model**

The underlying theory used for our model is Social Capital Theory (SCT), which has previously been used to study loneliness of older adults. SC may be defined as an asset that individuals create via increases (decreases) to their social network in either quality or quantity. SC comprised both strong and weak ties (Granovetter 1973). These strong ties are the connections between family and close friends, also referred
SNS allow for individuals to interact with others online (Boyd & Ellison 2008). Two functions of SNS exist: the first is to maintain and enhance communication with established social networks (Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe 2007) while the second is to facilitate connections that would not be made under other circumstances (Ellison, et al., 2007). As SNS enables individuals to maintain, enhance and form new relationships it will positively influence SC.

**H1**: The use of SNS will positively influence BRISC.

**H2**: The use of SNS will positively influence BOSC.

As the focus is on studying how SNS impact on loneliness of older adults, understanding the way in which older adults interact with SNS is important. As Quinn (2016) suggested, the way in which SNS is utilized will influence SC levels. Thus use of SNS has been broken down into subcomponents, consisting of,

(a) Intensity of Use or the amount of use, including time and number of connections;
(b) Active/Passive Use or the way in which SNS are used as either interactive use or passive consumption/use,
(c) Contact Profile or the range and variety of individual that an individual is connected to through SNS;
(d) Content Type or the type of message exchanged as being either public versus private, or non-personal versus personal; and
(e) Type of Media Used such as text, video conferencing and voice communication.

Sub-hypotheses proposed for the model include:

H1a: Intensity of use of SNS will positively influence BRISC
H2a: Intensity of use of SNS will positively influence BOSC
H1b.1: Active use of SNS in the form of broadcasting will positively influence BRISC.
H1b.2: Passive use of SNS in the form consuming posted material will positively influence BRISC.
H2b.1: Active use of SNS in the form of direct contact will positively influence BOSC.
H2b.2: Passive use of SNS in the form of consuming posted material will positively influence BOSC.
H1c: A broad contract profile positively influences BRISC.
H2c: A narrow contact profile positively influences BOSC.
H1d: Non-personal content in communication using SNS positively influences BRISC.
H2d: Personal content in communication using SNS positively influences BOSC.
H1e: The poorer the media used on SNS will positively influence BRISC.
H2e: The richer the media used on SNS will positively influence BOSC.

Loneliness

Loneliness is defined as the perceived lack of social contacts, being either close friends and family or acquaintances that causes individuals psychological distress.

H3: An increase in BRISC will negatively influence loneliness.
H4: An increase in BOSC will negatively influence loneliness.

Health and Wellbeing

Health and wellbeing are defined as the individuals perceived financial and health status. This is a subjective construct as both perceived wealth and health influence individuals’ loneliness. Individuals that are unable to afford social activities or are unable to participate socially due to poor health are more likely to be lonely (de Jong Gierveld, Keating and Fast 2015). Furthermore, poor health and financial wellbeing of individuals may reduce their ability to use SNS.

H5: Perceived poor health and wellbeing will negatively influence loneliness.
H6: Perceived poor health and wellbeing will negatively impact on the use of SNS.

Satisfaction of Relationship (SOR)

Satisfaction with social relations has been found to reduce loneliness, even so the quality of those relationships is more important than the quantity (Hawkley, et al. 2008). Furthermore individuals that were satified with their relationships tend to use SNS as a substitute form of communication. As SNS is used as substitute communication media it will not create nor increase social capital for the individual.

H7: Satisfaction of relationship will negatively influence loneliness.
H8: Satisfaction of relationships will negatively moderate the relationship between use of SNS and bonding.
H9: Satisfaction of relationships will negatively moderate the relationship between use of SNS and bridging.

Concluding Remarks

In this work-in-progress study, a model is developed to investigate how SNS is used and its subsequent influences on both social relationships, in the form of SC, and loneliness. The research differs from previous ones as it extends the use of SNS into a formative construct by breaking it down into various components. This will give understanding of how SNS is used and how the individual interacts with the medium. Additionally, the different forms of interaction with the medium will also have differing influences on SC and loneliness. The proposed research also has both practical and theoretical implications. Theoretically this study combines social science theories and knowledge with IS considerations as to the use of social media. It gives a broader understanding of how the medium usage impacts on social relationships and psychological issues. From the practical perspective it will also give a better understanding of how the use of SNS influences the extension and enhancement of social connections. While, also give comprehension as to how SNS is used to reduce loneliness.
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References


