

The influence of social media photo-sharing on social capital in mitigating loneliness in older consumers

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Abstract: This research responds to the fundamental societal challenges of increased loneliness and an ageing world population through investigating photo-sharing on social media as a means to enhance connectivity with others and thus social capital. The study adopts a two-stage qualitative approach in Italy and Great Britain with older consumers, first conducting four focus groups involving participatory visual research, followed by 16 in-depth interviews. The findings affirm the potential of image-based social media in increasing both bridging and bonding social capital. A further nuanced understanding of social capital includes that social capital bonds can be broken when vulnerability is exposed, and trust is lost. Photo-sharing emerges as transformative in turning an individual experience into a collective one, and through doing so connects older consumers thereby lessening feelings of loneliness. This study extends the scholarship regarding social capital and anchors its relevance to the contemporary phenomena of social media use and older consumers.

Keywords: *Social capital, loneliness, social media photo-sharing.*

Track: *consumer behaviour*

1. Introduction

The ageing population (World Health Organization, 2018) presents both challenges and opportunities for society as does the increasingly digitalised environment in which consumers of all ages inhabit. Whilst real time connectivity between consumers on different continents, through social media, is now commonplace there is also an increase in family fragmentation and feelings of increased isolation and loneliness by consumers of all ages but particularly the elderly (Wilson, 2018).

One way to reduce loneliness is to improve connections between older adults and their social network, despite geographical distance and or health obstacles (Drennan et al., 2008). While literature suggests that the Internet use can alleviate loneliness, further research is needed to explore the specific types of technologies able to reduce loneliness in older people (Khosravi, 2016). The use of digital technologies can positively impact older consumers' feelings of loneliness by improving a sense of belonging and wellbeing through connecting with others, which leads to the enhancement of social capital (Kim and Shen, 2020). Social capital is based upon the synergistic effect of trust, voluntary affiliations, reciprocity and productive interactions with others (Putnam, 1995). Social media can enhance social capital (Sinclair and Grieve, 2017), including bonding social capital (Phua, 2017) and the benefits of engaging with directed activities between a smaller number of closer connections have been demonstrated (Kim and Shen, 2020). Considering the relative ease of sharing photographs in mediated communication practices, the intimacy and the ability of photographs to sustain relationships with others (Zappavigna, 2016), this study focuses on this specific form of digital visual communication, photographs.

This research aims to develop understanding of the characteristics of social capital within the context of social media photo-sharing and loneliness in older consumers. By doing so, the paper responds to a fundamental societal challenge concerning the use of digital technologies to address loneliness and enhance social capital in an ageing world population. A multi-method qualitative approach is adopted, with data generated through 2 stages. Firstly, focus groups which involved participatory visual activities, followed by in-depth interviews. The findings affirm the potential of image-based social media in increasing both bridging and bonding social capital, lessening feelings of loneliness. A further nuanced understanding of social capital includes that social capital bonds can be broken when vulnerability is exposed, and trust is lost.

2. Conceptual underpinning

2.1 Social capital

Social capital is widely regarded as intangible capital generated collectively with synergistic outcomes for both the individual and the group (see Ferragina, 2010). Reciprocity, fellowship, mutual empathy, shared identity, a sense of belonging, and support are all outcomes of social capital. Social capital comprises both bonding and bridging components. Bonding social capital tends to produce social cohesion and reinforces closeness with high levels of intimacy illustrated through frequent meaningful contact with a limited group of others. Bridging aspects of social capital involve a more detached set of linkages between people and groups, with lower levels of emotional closeness (Putnam, 1995). Social connectedness, through social capital, is an integral element of basic human behavior, the ‘need to belong’. Indeed, Mellor et al (2008) found that people with a lower sense of belonging had a higher feeling of loneliness. Moreover, as people age social networks and connectedness diminish as their situations in life change (Czaja, 2017). Reduced social connection, therefore, leads to social isolation and subsequently often loneliness.

2.2 Social media, loneliness and older people

Extant research on the role of social media in loneliness remains divided. On one hand, Song et al. (2014) suggests that taking refuge in social media can exacerbate loneliness. On the other hand, Ryan and Xenos, (2011) posited that Facebook non-users were more lonely than users and receiving support from others on social media platforms has brought reassurance to those expressing loneliness. More specifically, Pittman and Reich (2016) affirm that people are more satisfied with life, happier and less lonely if they use image-based social media platforms. Social media can assist in relieving loneliness in older people through building and continuing social relationships (Khosravi et al., 2016), and boosting self-esteem through interaction (Shaw and Gant, 2004). Furthermore, social media can enhance connection among less socially skilled elderly (Burke et al., 2011) and online communication may be positive for mental wellbeing particularly for certain groups who, for psychological or physical reasons, may not be able to interact face-to-face with others as has been demonstrated during the recent pandemic.

2.3 Social media and photography

The ease of sharing images through mobile devices makes photographs the “preferred idiom in mediated communication practices” (Van Dijck, 2008:3). Indeed, social media platforms provide an opportunity to experience a creative space for multimodal message production

(Adami and Jewitt, 2016). The digital era has now facilitated the private act of taking a photo to become a group practice to communicate the immediate (Belk, 2013). Photography has become more intimate through the use of smartphones as social media enacts a form of visual co-presence (Zappavigna, 2016). Social media platforms offer activities which facilitate both bonding and bridging components of social capital (Burke et al., 2011).

Following a review of the extant literature, the two interwoven research questions are,

- 1) *What are the characteristics of social capital within social media photo-sharing,* and 2) *What is the influence of social media photo-sharing on mitigating loneliness in older people?*

3. Method

The research comprised a qualitative 2-stage study with 60-88 year olds, living independently in Italy and Great Britain, who use social media and who have shared photographs. The countries selected were comparable as both have similarly ageing populations. 4 focus groups (2 in Italy and 2 in Great Britain) were held involving two participative visual data collection techniques where participants were asked to create collages able to represent their relationship with photo-sharing on social media and, in addition, provide a digital show and tell which was used to elicit actual photo-sharing behaviors. This was followed by 16 in-depth interviews (8 in Italy and 8 in Great Britain).

3.1 Analysis

Coherent with the purpose of the study, an interpretive analysis of the data was adopted Following Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2013), textual and graphic data (collages and video of digital show and tell) were revisited to search for relationships between the shared themes and the different concepts that had emerged.

4. Findings

4.1 Social capital bonding

4.1.1 The intimacy of sharing of everyday emotions

Challenges such as distance from family often exacerbated the feeling of being alone in older people. Bonds were enhanced through the visual intimacy afforded by the social media photo-sharing which brought people closer together as illustrated by Pino's (Focus Group, 71, Italy) comment "*Many friends live abroad, receiving photos of their celebrations, holidays, is a way to feel still close*".

Through photos people expressed their feelings, moods and attitudes towards life, as illustrated by a participant in one of the focus groups "*Happiness needs to be shared, and a*

photograph is a great way to do it!” (Rita, 71, Focus Group, Italy). By capturing fleeting moments, sharing the immediacy of an everyday life emotion is proposed by a participant in one in-depth interview *‘You can share and feel the excitement of that moment in life with others’* (Hilary, 70, Interview, GB).

4.1.2 Social media photo-sharing as empathy

Photo-sharing was seen as helpful to both the person who shared but also those who received the photograph. *‘During the last two months of my husband’s life he was in a local hospice, I took quite a few photographs of him there and posted them [on social media] so that people knew how he was. It made a difficult time much more bearable by being able to share these images, I felt less isolated’.* (Anna, 79, Interview, GB).

As such, photo-sharing during life crises is a means to combat feelings of loneliness during and after a traumatic event. Older consumers use social sharing during a difficult moment as a “cathartic” release of emotions. The taking care of a loved one, or coping with the death of a partner, communicated through social media photo-sharing, becomes more communal and is therefore a less isolating experience.

4.2 Social capital bridging

4.2.1 Social Media photo-sharing as creatively connecting with others

New information and new ideas were communicated by participants to others, *“to get out a bit more I volunteer in the country park and sometimes I find plants that I do not recognize so I take photos and share them – people reply with the names of the plants, it is so helpful and I have really improved my botanical knowledge”* (Thomas, 71, Interview, GB).

4.2.2 Social Media photo-sharing as belonging to the wider world

A connection to the wider world is important as a statement of belonging. The sense of belonging that is provided by connections to people, communities, and the wider world can provide enrichment for older individuals.

Furthermore, our results suggest that older people share photos to give something to the world, to help others which in turn makes them feel *“world citizens”*, part of a larger community and therefore less alone.

4.2.3 Social media photo-sharing for self-affirmation ‘I am still here’

The findings illustrated photos were shared as a type of self-affirmation for having done something, as emerged in the following quotes: *“It's just the gratification of having done a certain thing, of being there, of having climbed a mountain”* (Ileana, 60, Interview, Italy). Indeed, self-confidence was enhanced by the interactions with others across social media platforms: *“I made a video about me going to the gym as an old lady and posted it on Whatsapp. There were some lovely comments back like ‘you are so strong’ and I felt really pleased by the comments and it gave me a confidence boost, like I still mattered”* (Anna, 79, GB, Interview).

The bridging of the individual to others, to communities and across geographic boundaries and the sense of self-confidence that brings, is enabled by social media photo-sharing.

4.3 Social media photo-sharing as an enabler of developing bridging into bonding

Not all digital acquaintances necessarily transform into close relationships. However, creating new bonds from previously weaker connections was also facilitated through photo-sharing. New relationships between people were established in online environments often coalescing around a common interest and then developed further in offline interactions, and this was facilitated through social media photo-sharing.

This additional closeness was felt to be accelerated through sharing images rather than other forms of communication exchange such as telephone calls. The acceleration of the relationship development was also noted as being important as one became older.

4.4 Social media photo-sharing as a facilitator of social capital bond breaking.

Findings also suggested that there were occasions when existing bonds of social capital were broken as a result of sharing photographs. As such, photo-sharing intimate aspects of one's life emotionally exposes participants who then become highly sensitive in regard to the social response. As such a sense of “vulnerability” and inconsiderate comments or sharing images without permission were illustrated as actions which could damage relationships and break social capital bonds.

5. Discussion

This research confirms and extends previous studies of older consumers that demonstrated the potential of digital technology to reduce loneliness (Khosravi et al., 2016; Kim and Shen, 2020) and in particular mobile social media for enhancing bridging and bonding social capital (Sinclair and Grieve, 2017; Phua, 2017) and reducing loneliness through enhanced

connectivity (Chen and Li, 2017). The characteristics of immediacy, empathy, intimacy, within bonding social capital and the characteristics of creativity, being a world citizen and self-affirmation within bridging social capital are now elaborated.

The study acknowledges that while not all digital acquaintances necessarily transform into close relationships, social media can act as an enabler of developing bridging into bonding social capital and the creation of stronger links between older people. Occasionally however, existing bonds were broken as a result of social media photo-sharing. As proposed by Putnam (1995) social capital is based upon trust and when trust is lost existing social bonds are put at risk. Making oneself vulnerable to others through social media photo-sharing can result in a loss of trust. So, whilst our findings suggest overwhelming positive aspects of photo-sharing for developing both bridging and bonding social capital as an approach to mitigate loneliness, a cautionary note should be recognised.

Our framework in Figure 1 identifies both bridging and bonding characteristics of social media photo-sharing but also outlines the potential for the breaking of social capital.

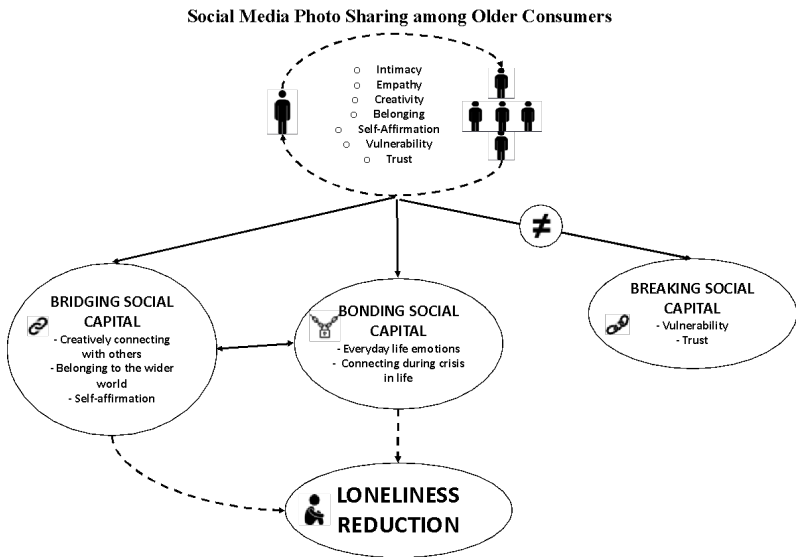


Figure 1. Framework of social capital characteristics in social media photo-sharing in older people.

6. Conclusions

This study extends the existing scholarship on social capital within the social media photo-sharing environment. Social media photo-sharing emerges as transformative in turning an individual experience into a collective one (Belk, 2013), and through doing so connects older

people with others which lessens feelings of loneliness. Overall, photo-sharing was found to strengthen existing bonds, create new bonds with other people or even break existing bonds. Bridging social capital was found to play a role in developing connections based on the receiving of new information and ideas from others and the new information provided value to the receiver, thus enhancing their sense of purpose and place in the world, which in turn diminished perception of loneliness.

The framework provided identifies not only the characteristics of bridging and bonding social capital but also the potential for photo-sharing to diminish and break social capital.

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