AGING SOCIETY, LONELINESS AND SOCIAL SUPPORT: IS SOCIAL MEDIA MAKING THEM LESS LONELY?

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ABSTRACT

National Statistics Department (NSD) of Malaysia reported, by 2021 Malaysia's population aged 65 years and over will reach 7.1 % of the total population and based on United Nations (UN), Malaysia is an aging society in the same year. The steady increase in this aging population generates new challenges, resulting Malaysia to adopt active ageing policy framework to optimize opportunities for social and mental wellbeing, in order to promote good quality of life as people age (United Nations, 2007). Previous studies show that acute loneliness can impact gravely on wellbeing and quality of life, with demonstrable negative health effects (Greaves, 2006; Pitkala, 2009). Aging people are particularly vulnerable for social isolation and loneliness even though it can affect everyone. With advancing age, it is inevitable that people lose connection with their friendship networks and that they find it more difficult to initiate and belong to a new friendship networks. The development of new media, especially social media has made people connected or access information ubiquitously in order for them to be less lonely. The primary objective in this research is to examine the relationships between social media usage, social support, and loneliness among aging society in Malaysia. Second, to identify the socio-demographics difference with respect to social media usage, social support, and loneliness. In this research, we will incorporate mixed methods, for qualitative approach we will conduct focus group interviews with older adults in Malaysia in order to understand attitudes towards social media and how they communicate with members of their social network given the presence of social media. Meanwhile, for quantitative approach we will use UCLA Loneliness Scale and Perceived Social Support Questionnaire (Procidano, 1983) to measure the level of loneliness and social support for this research sample.

Keywords: Aging society, social media, loneliness, focus group, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Life expectancy has improved among world population due to medical advancement and economic development (Alavi, Sail, Idris, Samah, & Omar, 2011). This results in increase on population aged 65 years and over. National Statistics Department (NSD) of Malaysia reported, by 2021 Malaysia's population aged 65 years and over will reach 7.1 % of the total population and based on United Nations (UN), Malaysia is an aging society in the same year. Perception of aging involves cross- cultural variation, thus, it is multi-dimensional in nature and consists both positive

and negative characteristics (Hummert, 1990). The negative characteristics often related to physical, emotional and social faced by aged society.

Loss of contact or communication with their social network members is common among aging people due to retirement, death of friends and family, and people moving away (Havens, Hall, Sylvestre, & Jivan, 2004). This loss of contact often associated with loneliness and social isolation. The importance of tackling loneliness and social isolation is evident in international and national health policy. Malaysia has adopted active ageing policy framework to optimize opportunities for social and mental wellbeing, in order to promote good quality of life as people age (United Nations, 2007). Apart from that, the first policy put in place for older people in Malaysia was the National Social Welfare Policy (1990), which was later strengthened with National Policy for the Elderly (1995) (Ambigga, et al., 2011). Some action plans were carried out to fulfill government's commitment in National Policy for the Elderly by Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (2009). One of it is ICT trainings on learning how to use mobile phones and computers to allow the elderly stay physically healthy and mentally 'active' (Wong, 2011).

It has been reported that the aging people has become an important segment in computer and new media technology usage. They are now one of the fastest growing groups of new Web users since the Web is becoming more of a mass medium (J. K. Eastman and Iyer, 2004). According to Hisham (n.d.), the usage of Internet among elderly people in Malaysia is likely to increase in the next decade and email is the most popular online activity done by them in order to communicate with family and friends abroad. In another words, aging people are becoming familiar with technologies such as computers, mobile and Internet. A study done by Wong (2011), shows that senior citizens in Malaysia perceive and use mobile phone in their daily lives as social device, emotional tool, reminder aid and personal guide. She further argues that even though senior citizens are generally perceived as late majority and laggards; however, not all senior citizens resist to adopt new innovation.

The usage of social networking services (SNS) among elderly people has proven to strengthened their relationship building with family and friends and stay in contact with other users (Goswami, Köbler, Leimeister, & Krcmar, 2010). Koch (2005) added that social networking services has become a platform of sharing some interest, relationship, status and activities among the virtual community members. The primary motivation that lead older people to use SNS is to communicate with the family (Ji, et al., 2010), and according to Pinquart & Sorensen (2000), the older people feel more subjective well-being with the stronger social network. Moreover, Goswami, Köbler, Leimeister, & Krcmar (2010) proposed that by using online social networking, older people could have the feeling of social connected and support.

This study examines how social media could help Malaysia's aging society to reduce their loneliness level. Even though there are some similar studies conducted in other countries, but this study will examine the cultural differences and how this could affect the findings of the result.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social relationships form an important functions in people's everyday lives (Uchino, Uno, & Holt-Lunstad, 1999). It provides social support and Minhat & Amin (2012) claim that the social support received by older people plays a vital role in ensuring their well-being and quality of life. However,

when the network of communication in which they belong becomes lesser, they are much likely to be lonely and socially isolated. While there are many factors contribute to social isolation, communication has been linked as one of it (Russell & Schofield, 1999) (Boardman, 1999). Research has shown that loneliness and social isolation are related to negative health outcomes (Cassell, 1976) (Ernst & Cacioppo, 1999) (Gupta & Korte, 1994) (Uchino, Uno, & Holt-Lunstad, 1999).

According to studies by Cobb (1979), Cohen & Syme (1985), Ernst & Cacioppo (1999) on the issues of social support and health outcome, social support from various types and sources lead to positive health outcome. Marangoni & Ickes (1989) state that people need social contact to avoid loneliness. In order to be physiologically healthy which includes happiness and subjective well-being, a person needs to have a rewarding social relationships (Myers & Diener, 1995). Various studies in the past has shown that investment in social network tend to be a preventive action to avoid loneliness as this social network will be available when they are confronted with negative life events and to share deep emotional feelings (Schoenmakers, Van Tilburg, & Fokkema, 2014; Kahn & Antonucci, 1980).

One of the way the older people could maintain or enhance their social network is through social and leisure activities, volunteering, joining community clubs and etc. The relationship between social support and leisure activities is vice-versa, whereby older adults with higher social support tend to be active in leisure activities. Findings from Minhat & Amin, (2012); Yin, (2008) reported that social support from friends and family is an important factor for leisure participation of older people. Andersson (1985) studied on older women in Stockholm and found that their participation in leisure activities increases once they joined neighbourhood- based discussion group and a decline in loneliness is evident through this intervention.

A wealth of research has indicates that social relationship in any form helps older people to be active and ensure their well-being. Apart from regular face to face meet up, social relationship could be strengthened and enhanced through Internet. Various research has shown the positive relationship between social isolation, loneliness and Internet usage. Decreased loneliness and positive reactions were observed among older adults who used Internet and e-mail in a retirement community (White, et al., 1999). Cody, Dunn, Hoppin, & Wendt, (1999) studies reaffirm the relation that older adults who use Internet experienced increased feelings of social support and connectivity which results in longer friendship, positive self-esteem and reduced depression. However, Dickinson & Gregor, (2006) argues whether the internet usage among older adults has an independent effect on their well-being. They further add that positive effects on well-being is observed mainly when computer usage accompanied by training is conducted, thus, questioning the claim of this intervention.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to social needs model, human have universal, basic need for social contact (e.g. affiliation, companionship, intimacy and attachment). When this needs are not met, individuals experience loneliness. Thus, loneliness is the result of the level or closeness of social contacts an individual has.

Another theory linked with loneliness is the cognitive discrepancy model. From a cognitive discrepancy perspective, being alone is not the synonym of loneliness. Rather, loneliness is defined as the distress that occurs when one's social relationships are perceived as being less satisfying than what is desired (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009).

The social exchange theory introduced by George Homans in 1958 describes it as the exchange of activity, tangible or intangible, and more or less rewarding or costly, between at least two persons. In another word, individuals often engage in behaviors they find rewarding. Also, when the exchange becomes more valuable, the frequency of the interaction increases (Homans, 1958). It also explains how human beings communicate with each other, how they form relationships and bonds, and how communities are formed through communication exchange. People communicate and exchange with other communicating party for mutual rewards, tough it is often not monetary but social, such as acceptance, opportunity, prestige and conformity. Participation in social media is not compensated but it gives other benefits as altruism. Thus, if people receive more rewards from the interaction, they will more likely continue the interaction. In this case becoming less lonely by interacting through social media can be seen as reward simultaneously lead to repetition of this interaction.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The research questions are identified and listed below:

a. What is the relationship between social media usage of an elderly person with social support he\she have in the community and how lonely he/she feel?

b. What will be the socio-demographics (gender, educational background, marital status, ethnicity and living arrangement) difference with respect to social media usage, social support and loneliness among Malaysian aging society?

c. How social media usage, social support and loneliness will have an overall impact with well- being of an elderly person?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

Objectives are as follows:

- To identify the relationship between social support and loneliness,
- To identify the impact of social media usage on social support and loneliness, and
- To investigate the impact of social media usage, social support and loneliness with mental well-being of older person.

METHODOLOGY

In our research we intend to use this mixed approach because it offers a variety of design options utilizing strategies from the full methodological collection to answer practice-based research questions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2006). The quantitative approach will be used to measure loneliness, social support and social media usage. Loneliness and social support measures for this research is based on questionnaires adapted from UCLA loneliness scale and perceived

social support questionnaire by Prociano and Heller in 1983. On the other hand, social media measure will be done simply as frequency of logging into social media. The target population for this study will be focused among Malaysian older people who is living in Penang and ≥ 60 years old.

Quantitative Approach

Loneliness Measure We will use UCLA loneliness scale (Russell D. , 1996), a 20-item scale designed to measure the elderly people's subjective feelings of loneliness as well as feelings of social isolation. The items in this questionnaire works by probing the frequency and intensity of loneliness related experiences by requesting the participants to rate each item as either O ("I often feel this way"), S ("I sometimes feel this way"), R ("I rarely feel this way"), N ("I never feel this way").

Social Support Measure We will use Perceived Social Support Questionnaire by Prociano and Heller in 1983 (Procidano, 1983). The measure assesses perceived availability of social support and satisfaction with social support that has been received. It contains self-administered 27 items, with each item having two part response. In the first part, the respondent lists all of the people (up to nine people) who he or she believes would be available to provide support in the area to which the item refers. In the second part, the respondent rates his or her satisfaction with the social support received.

Social Media Usage For this purpose, the measurement will be done simply as frequency of logging into social media. Participants were asked how often they went online to use their social media: 0 (never), 1 (once every few months), 2 (about once a month), 3 (several times a month), 4 (about once a week), or 5 (several times a week).

Qualitative Approach

Focus group will be used for the qualitative approach in order to understand attitudes towards social media as well as how they communicate with members of their social network given the presence of social media. Focus group will be done in Penang with 3 groups consist of 8- 10 person for each group. The questions for the focus group as below:

a)   How do you think social media help you without feeling lonely?

b)   Do you attend/ participate in clubs, senior centres and leisure activity from the information found in social media?

c)   Do you think social media helps you to keep connected to your family and friends?

d)   Do you still prefer to have face to face conversation compared to online/ social media?

e)   Do you face any technology/ computer barriers that demotivate you from being active in social media?

f)   Do you feel happy using social media?

Data Analysis

Computer software (SPSS) will be used to analyses the quantitative approach. Triangulation will be used in qualitative approach in order to improve the validity and reliability of research or evaluation of findings.

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