

Elderly People's Choice of Media and their Perceived State of Loneliness

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Abstract

This study aims at finding the relationship between elderly people's perceived state of loneliness and their choice of (old and/or new) media instruments. The sample of the study consists of randomly selected 300 elderly people over 60 who reside in rest homes in two different cities, Hatay and İstanbul in Turkey. Participants were given a questionnaire with three sections. The first section included questions related to the participants' demographic characteristics. Adapted from Russell's (1996) "Loneliness Scale (Version 3)", the second part was related to participants' perceived state of loneliness. Final section was about their choice of media and related details such as aim and time spent on them. Analyzed by statistical methods, study findings show that elderly people from two different social settings and with changing demographic features display differing degrees of loneliness with a significant relationship between the forms of media they used, their related choices, aims and perceived state of loneliness.

Keywords: elderly people, loneliness, rest homes, media, traditional media, new media

Introduction

Social interaction is an innermost human need at any age. A lack of social contact results in social isolation and relatively loneliness. However, especially elderly people often have to suffer from isolation since family and relatives do not have enough time to care or the number of close friends decrease. Due to global demographic changes, it seems that the situation will increasingly affect more and more older people. Older people are heterogeneous and some are likely to be more at risk of loneliness than others, A recent study shows that ‘severe loneliness’ among people who state that they are always or often lonely affects about 7% of the older population. This rate shows little change over the past five decades. The extent of severe loneliness amongst older people can be an underestimate of this as stigma attaches to admitting loneliness as a continuous experience. This experience can also be ‘old age onset’, as a response to losses occurring later in life such as bereavement or declining health. Why people become increasingly isolated in later life has a multitude of reasons. The transition to living alone many people is often made through being widowed and/or scattering of children. Health factors also play a part. As people become older, the deaths of their trustworthy relationships they had with people in the past made them feel even lonelier. In brief, there is an increasing recognition that social isolation and the loneliness can adversely affect older people’s long-term mental and physical health.

Old age is a lifetime of risks, especially “risk of dying”. This idea becomes undeniably distinct by aging. However, this should not show that old people are confined to thinking about death all the time. This idea is refuted by several studies. When suitable living conditions provided, people of old age do make future plans and try to realize their plans. Witnessing old people going to university and getting excited in their start-ups is quite acceptable nowadays as long as we can make radical shifts in our thoughts about them and avoid false construction of senectitude (Tufan, 2011).

The Elderly and Media as a Choice

Today’s elderly people definitely witnessed a complicated process of formations of ‘older’ media instruments. It did not take long for radio and television to be replaced by their contemporary and interactive counterparts. The transition was so rapid and abrupt that newly emerging media forms apparently slowed down the adaptation for the elderly and it made it even more difficult for them how to catch up and handle these new forms such as social

media applications and networking sites. However, older people are more enabled to renew or develop social contacts and actively engage in their communities. Technology not only helps prevent older people from becoming socially isolated and lonely because of life changes including retirement, bereavement, a deterioration in health but it also helps those who are socially isolated escape their situation.

Building meaningful social relationships is widely regarded as one of the key elements of aging well. Geographical distance, impaired mobility or time-consuming obligations may hinder older adults from satisfying the need for social contact, with the risk that these adults feel lonely, but have little opportunity to engage in social contact. Social media may overcome these barriers as online social networks and online discussion forums can be used to engage in social contact regardless of geographical location or time (Leist, 2013:378).

Abad (2014:176) believes that the key to bridging the digital divide for older people is not asking what the best way is to bring information communication technologies (ICT) to this population group, but rather what is the optimal way for older people to benefit from ICT to enhance their personal and social situation. Most people in productive age like young people take use of new media – especially of the Internet – for granted nowadays. However, for older adults, the use of the Internet is not so common. Computers and other information and communication technologies (ICTs) are known as the domain of younger generations in public eye. But the rapid and widespread acceptance of especially the Internet with its new communication and information possibilities and still increasing accessibility represents a great opportunity for the elderly to remain an active part of the society. Not long ago, cell phones have extended their communication capabilities and have enriched the daily lives of older adults who could easily communicate with friends and relatives through them have started to have a more enriched life. By overcoming the “risk of loneliness” cell phones aid them particularly for those who live alone in a single household. In the same way, if they use new media the Internet could contribute to the quality of older adults’ lives more than cell phones do. However, the absence of computer literacy bans the older generation to get the benefit of the new technologies. Due to that technophobia, most of them feel themselves as too old to learn new things on the computer and similarly the Internet is regarded as a technology for young people because it is too complex and “not for them”. Although they need the Internet and other new media, those negative attitudes of older people towards new

media worsen the situation. Their lack of desire to use new media does not necessarily mean that older generation do not need them (Reifova, & Fiserova, 2012). However, the situation can change its face as today's technology addicted generation gets the age to be called as "older" and they will change the unique profile of older people. People naturally have different level of tastes when they get older. In this context, Rosenmayr (1998:17) proposes new definitions for these new older generations in terms of the polarization of interests of ages related to age. Gerd and Stegnauer (2005) draws attention to the fact that the older the generation are, -especially 60 and over 60, the less likely they use the Internet.

Alaoui and Lewkowicz (2012) try to reach a new definition of ICT (information communication technologies) and their benefits to diminish older people's isolation from the society and feel lonely. These two negative feelings are now conceived as a vital health-related topic. Older people cut their communications from their beloved ones sharply when they retire, when they lose their partners or close friends and when their children moves or live far away from them. All these losses along with their physical inabilities such as the gradual reduction of their mobility and autonomy worsen the situation. They feel isolated and depressed and eventually these cause negative impacts on their health. A recent study has even showed that the risk of mortality of ageing people was deeply affected by the lack of social relationships.

Television is the main delivery mechanism because around 50% of the older populations watch it as their main form of company. Therefore, television has an important role in the lives of many older people. Nowadays, older people are not in the main making the most of the potential of new technology. A survey by Help the Aged in the UK showed that more than 3 million older people (36 per cent) feel out of touch with the fast pace of modern life. Similarly, the UK Office of National Statistics reveals that seven in ten over 65s have never used the Internet. In helping older people engage with society and better access public and private services, new technologies can play a major part in which a number of significant potential benefits for older people are possible (Borges, 2008). Similarly, a study conducted by Trabucchi (2011), as the chairman of the Italian Association of Psychogeriatric, revealed that 'Social networks and IT technology keep the cultural curiosity of the elderly alive by improving their cognitive performance and keeping their brains young. Social networks stimulate their attention span, memory and perception as it keeps them young at heart

(Trabucchi, 2011). As for the telephone, it was also accepted as a significant channel of communication for maintaining involvement in familial and social networks. In general, through telephone people can operate over wider geographical areas and make contacts beyond the immediate local area, and as greater mobility disperses both friends and relatives. Television, as the example of a mass medium, was more problematic in respect to arguments about ‘participation’ as a dimension of social inclusion. In his study Haddon (2000:399) witnessed that some of the interviewees in these two studies would indeed acknowledge that TV offered them a different level at which to engage, enabling many of them to feel part of the social world. Whereas, the phone was usually a privileged ICT, these interviewees generally regarded TV more ambiguously. On the other hand, few would consider being without it; such was television’s established place in everyday life.. As Meyrowitz cited in Haddon (2000:299) noted some years ago, this could be especially important in terms of providing those who are home centered, or homebound, with a form of company to help them feel less isolated.

There is also a clear link between social exclusion and digital exclusion. The Oxford Internet Institute found that those most deprived socially are also most likely to lack access to digital resources such as the Internet. Three out of four of those ‘broadly’ socially excluded lack a meaningful engagement with the Internet. In addition to this, those deeply socially excluded, with no meaningful Internet engagement, account for 10% of the total UK population (Independent Age, 2008:12).

Turkish Case for the Elderly

Like her neighboring European countries, all demographical indicators agree that Turkey has begun being affected by aging. Thus, it may be concluded that an emerging demand for construction of processes of aging is as inevitable as it is urgent. According to data obtained from a ten year research (2000-2012) conducted by Tufan (2007) from Gerontology Department of Akdeniz University, Antalya, Turkey and supported by the scientific and technological research council of Turkey (TUBITAK) on lifestyle, problems and needs of 35,236 participants over 60, elderly people prefer to spend most of their time by watching TV (93%), chatting (55%) and listening to radio (48%). Furthermore, percentage of those who would not prefer to stay at a rest home is 81% and 76 % of them want a rest insurance. In addition, the number of widows among elderly women in Turkey is on the increase. About

52% of women between 70 and 74 have lost their husbands. In other words, 8 out of 10 women over 80 are widows. This creates a profile in which elderly Turkish women are becoming lonelier and lonelier.

A report by the state planning organization of Turkey (a.k.a. DPT) states that there is no comprehensive research available on the psychological health of people over 65 in Turkey. In addition, they often experience psychological problems such as dementia that is characteristic of this group of people. Those who have no one around are more likely to develop feelings of loneliness and isolation, which is a major factor in changing their quality of life (DPT, 2007:73). In brief, as a country with considerable economic and demographic potentials, the issue of aging needs to be studied thoroughly and due importance should be attached.

Method

The reason why rest homes were integrated into our study is that they constitute an institutional and social setting in which elderly people are accommodated and cared by state or private institutions so that they can spend the rest of their lives in comfort and peace. The word for rest home in Turkish is “Huzurevi” literally meaning “home of peace”, where the elderly are supposed to spend their last years in peace. However, sending one’s relative to a rest home is often considered to be an unethical and immoral attitude by Turkish society whose members would rather avoid doing so. Having to stay there is also regarded as something to be ashamed of for the elderly due to social pressure, which pushes them deeper in loneliness and abandonment. As a result, for both parts, there is a stigma attached to it. Probably to de-stigmatize and alleviate this dramatic and tragic, such a term was coined.

The study was conducted in two rest homes in two different locations in Turkey, southern city of Hatay-population of about 1, 5 million- bordering Syria and metropolitan city of Istanbul-population of about 14 million. They display differing geographical and demographical features. The questionnaire was given to 300 elderly people, 138 (46%) of which were from Hatay city and 162 (54%) from Istanbul. It should be noted that among hundreds of rest homes in Istanbul, the one chosen for this research “*Darulaceze*”, both historically and currently, has an importance place in country’s history. *Darulaceze* (Almshouse) used to be one of many religious affiliated rest homes during the Ottoman Empire. Built by Sultan Abdulhamid II (1842-1918), it was the first social institution

representing central state attention to the public services for older adults from both Muslim and other religious and ethnic communities in Ottoman-Turkish society (Esendemir and Ingman, 2011:19). The questionnaire based on voluntary contribution has three sections. First section includes questions related to demographic information. Second part adapted from Russell’s loneliness scale (version 3) with 20 statements. These statements were categorized according to their frequency ranging from 1 (often), 2 (sometimes), and 3 (rarely) to 4 (never). Frequencies of “often” and “sometimes” determined the threshold level for “the state of loneliness” and such participants were identified as “lonelier” compared to the rest of the answers to the questions. Third section questions are related to elderly people’s choice of media types and related aims and time spent on them.

Results

Overall demographic findings in total show that 62% of participants are male and 38% are female. Average age for participants is 70. Regarding participants’ education level, 20% of them have no primary school diploma but they are literate. 54% are primary school graduates and 26% are secondary school graduates or upper. Occupational status for women is mostly found as housewife, and for men worker and self-employee.

Table 1. Mann-Whitney U Test Between Demographic Variables (Place, Gender, Age, Education) And State Of Loneliness

Demographic Variable	Groups	N	Median	Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	Asymp.Sig (2-tailed)
Place	İstanbul	129	63,00	5778,00	12333,00	-2882	0,004
	Hatay	114	54,00				
Gender	Male	156	55,00	5355,00	17601,00	-2335	0,020
	Female	84	59,50				
Age	<70	96	64,50	5130,00	15570,00	-3384	0,001
	>=70	144	54,00				
Education Level	Primary School or none	171	56,00	4932,00	19638,00	-0,990	0,322
	Higher Education	63	58,00				

When data related to loneliness perceptions are assessed in both cities, a significant difference ($p=0,004$) was found between the loneliness averages of the participants from the cities of Hatay and Istanbul. According to this, participants from Hatay feel lonelier than those from Istanbul.

As for gender, a significant difference ($p=0,020$) was found between participants' gender and averages of their state of loneliness. According to this, male participants felt lonelier (2, 77) than their women counterparts (2, 96) when loneliness averages of both male and female participants in both rest homes were compared. To note, as there is a reverse relationship in the total number of frequencies-ranging from 1 (often), 2 (sometimes), and 3 (rarely) to 4 (never) - on the loneliness scale regarding the state of loneliness, the lower the total is, the lonelier the participant is.

As for age, the average age for all participants was found 70. When the ages over 70 and under 70 was compared with loneliness averages, a significant difference was found ($p=0,001$). In that case, those who are 70 or over 70 were found lonelier compared to those who are under 70.

No significant difference was found when those with no school diploma were compared with the ones with primary or upper school graduates ($p=0,322$).

Table 2. Correlations between “mostly used media instrument” state of loneliness

		TV	Radio	Mobile phone	Computer	Newspaper / Magazine
State of Loneliness	Spearman's rho	0,117	0,093	0,427**	0,378**	0,053
	Coefficient					
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,087	0,217	0,000	0,002	0,508
	N	216	177	171	66	156

When the relationship between the frequency of the use of traditional media instruments (radio, television, newspaper, magazine, computer and mobile phone) and state of loneliness were assessed, a significant relationship was found between computer ($s=0,002$) and mobile phone ($s=0,000$) frequency use and state of loneliness. It was also found that as the use of computer and phone increased, participants felt less lonely.

Table 3. Crosstabs between demographic variables and aims of use of traditional media instruments

Crosstabs	Pearson Chi-Square		
	Value	df	Asymp.Sig (2-sided)
Age and TV for Entertainment	5604	1	0,018
Gender and TV for News and Information	6531	1	0,011
Gender and Newspaper/Magazine for News/Information	10107	1	0,001

When participants were asked whether they use television as source of entertainment, a significant relationship was found between those who have 70 age average and over and those who are under 70 ($p=0,018$). It was found that those who are 70 and over used television mostly for entertainment.

When participants were asked whether they use television as a news and information source, a significant relationship was found between males and females ($P=0,011$). Males, compared to females, consume television more as a means of news and information.

Similarly, when participants were asked whether they use newspaper and magazine as news and information source, a significant relationship was found between males and females ($P=0,001$). Men compared to women benefit more from newspapers and magazines for the purpose of getting informed.

Table 4. Correlations between time spent on social media instruments and state of loneliness

		Facebook	WhatsApp
State of Loneliness	Spearman's rho Correlation Coefficient	-0,754	-0,886
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,000	0,003
	N	30	9

A significant relationship was found between the time spent on social media tools such as Facebook ($s=0,000$) and Whatsapp ($s=0,003$) and their state of loneliness. This relationship being a negative relationship, those who use Facebook and Whatsapp more have a lower rate of loneliness.

Discussion and Conclusion

The aging of a population as a serious global concern has moved to the forefront among world issues. Although it is considered that Turkey still has a comparatively young population, statistics show that elderly people are gaining more and more attention. Both historical and current records show that the aged were and are still of some concerns today and in the past. This study is meant to expand on this issue from national to a global perspective in which the relationship between the state of loneliness and the role of old and new media forms were questioned in light of demographic criteria.

Although there is a little improvement observed, there is no wonder that the digital divide between the young and the old still persists as much as newly emerging media forms are concerned. Our study is also supportive of this fact. Non-interactive media forms such as print media, radio, television and computer still befriend the old. In the context of our study, computer and mobile phone acted as a critical and transitive medium in which elderly people resort to as far as their loneliness is concerned. Television is a source of information and entertainment at large. Social media finds it hard to locate itself among these media forms in this regard. Facebook and whatsapp are the only two of them that can make their way through the tunnel of aging.

The most prominent conclusion that can be extracted from this pioneering research study from both national and global point of view is that it encourages us to continue working on the subject to establish new frontiers and horizons regarding aging and loneliness as psychological and psycho-analytic problem and levels of media use and competencies. However, some essential issues such as lack of technical infrastructure, media literacy and related assistance and training are the ones that were observed, recorded but not reflected in this paper as they could make the concern of another study. However, it should be noted that these paradigms have catalytic influences on the results of this research.

In conclusion, media technologies and related forms are therefore also the objects of emotions, feelings and experiences that relate to how the media can be integrated and used in social lives of senior citizens. To serve this purpose, further studies need to project hands on training programs in order to improve media literacy of senior citizens so that they can still build an interactive and strong connection with their peers, relatives, friends, children and grandchildren in order to alleviate expected isolation and loneliness. Reaching older people in rest houses due to bureaucratic and confidential reasons was not easy for the researchers of this study. Media instruments whether old or new are no doubt essential to remedy loneliness, not to mention shake of a hand and a lovely chat as the most humane and basic source of communication. They are what remained in the memories of the researchers of this study to remember.

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