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Facebook as a source of social connectedness in older adults



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ABSTRACT

This study examines for the first time whether—and subsequently the extent to which—social connectedness can be derived from Facebook in a population of older Facebook users. Participants ($N = 280$) were aged between 55 and 81 years ($M_{age} = 61.28$ years). Exploratory factor analysis (maximum likelihood with direct oblimin rotation) revealed that Facebook social connectedness emerged as a separate factor to offline social connectedness, with correlations between the factors indicating that they were distinct constructs. In addition, participants reported levels of Facebook-derived social connectedness similar to those seen in younger samples in previous research. Future directions for research include identifying the mechanisms by which Facebook social connectedness might be associated with positive outcomes in older populations. Given the global rate of population ageing, these findings have important implications in terms of the delivery of social capital in older adults.

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As the global population rapidly ages, it is necessary for researchers and policy makers to identify ways to support older adults. One concern is how to keep older adults connected (Cornwell, Laumann, & Schumm, 2008). Previously, traditional face-to-face social connections have shown protection against negative wellbeing outcomes (Cattan, White, Bond, & Learmouth, 2005). More recently, the emergence of online social networks, such as Facebook, have been found to show similar benefits (Grieve, Indian, Witteveen, Tolan, & Marrington, 2013). Of note, the number of older adults online is increasing. Specifically, 56% of U.S. adults over the age of 65 are using Facebook (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015), and it has been suggested that online social networks may serve as a potential alternative means by which older adults can stay socially connected (Nimrod, 2014). The aim of this research was to examine for the first time whether, and the extent to which, older adults can derive feelings of social connectedness online.

1. The need to belong

Social capital can be conceptualised as comprising both social

networks and the resources that are embedded within a network (Putnam, 1995). The maintenance of meaningful relationships with others has been argued to be a timeless human goal (McClelland, 1987). Belongingness theory proposes that people are motivated to experience social membership in order to obtain optimal functioning—those with lower levels of belonging suffer higher levels of psychological and physical illness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In support of belongingness theory, Mellor, Stokes, Firth, Hayashi, and Cummins (2008) found those who lacked a sense of belonging had higher levels of loneliness, and in turn reported lower levels of wellbeing.

Stemming from belongingness theory, the construct of social connectedness refers to the feelings of affiliation associated with engagement within a social network (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Lee, Draper, & Lee, 2001). Social connectedness reflects a form of bonding social capital (Grieve & Kemp, 2015). Social connection can be measured objectively relative to the number of social ties one has (Goswami, Kobler, Leimeister, & Krcmar, 2010), or by the frequency of contact and participation in activities (Rafnsson, Shankar, & Steptoe, 2015). Importantly however, belongingness theory suggests that it is not just the company of others that satisfies belongingness needs, but the *quality* and *meaning* of the contact that matters (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Social connectedness therefore reflects the perceived feelings of meaningful connection with others at an interpersonal level (Lee et al., 2001).

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Aligning with belongingness theory, there is evidence that social connectedness is a key determinant of positive psychological outcomes in a number of contexts. For example, Cockshaw, Shochet, and Obst (2014) found that individuals with higher levels of social connectedness experienced less depression in a workplace setting. Other studies show positive relationships between social connectedness and subjective wellbeing (Jose, Ryan, & Pryor, 2012; Yoon, Hacker, Hewitt, Abrams, & Cleary, 2012), post-traumatic growth (Armstrong, Shakespeare-Finch, & Shochet, 2016) and self-esteem (Lee & Robbins, 1998).

While a majority of adults are socially connected, as people age, many are faced with substantial changes to their social networks, whereby close ties are hard to replace, and decreased frequency of contact can exacerbate the loss of connections (Cornwell et al., 2008). Of course, the loss of social connections can happen at any stage of the life course (e.g. Margain et al., 2015); however older adults are more likely than younger adults to experience circumstances that directly challenge their capacity to connect. These include lifestyle changes (for example, retirement or bereavement) and mobility constraints (for example, as a result of debilitating arthritis) (Machielse, 2015); declining physical health (Chesley & Johnson, 2014); and increased comorbidities (Chapman & Perry, 2008). Further, due to cultural changes in some societies, older adults are often less able to rely on family or neighbours (Machielse, 2015; Stanley et al., 2010).

1.1. Staying connected: the emergence of online social networks

Recently, online social networks have emerged as a means to maintain and enhance social ties (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Goswami et al., 2010). Facebook is the most commonly used social media site, with more than one billion active monthly users (Facebook Newsroom, 2016). Facebook users can create a profile, share information, and engage with people in their social network (Boyd & Ellison, 2008).

Importantly, it has been established that Facebook users can derive social connectedness from their use of the site (Grieve & Kemp, 2015; Grieve et al., 2013; Lin & Utz, 2015; Park & Lee, 2014). Grieve et al. found that the benefits of traditional face-to-face social connectedness translated online, with Facebook-derived social connectedness related to better subjective wellbeing, and less depression and anxiety in a sample of Australian adults ($M_{age} = 25.87$ years, $SD = 9.90$). Grieve et al. (see also Indian & Grieve, 2014) further argued for the potential utility of online social networks for people who are unable to connect in person. These isolated populations might include those with diminished accessibility, or older adults.

Although the Internet is commonly considered a domain of the young (e.g. Spies-Shapiro & Margolin, 2014), there is emerging evidence that the Internet provides effective access to social capital in older adults. For the first time since their inception, social media sites are being used by an increasing number of older adults (Duggan et al., 2015).

Specifically in regards to social capital in older adults, Morris et al. (2014) conducted a systematic review of articles published between 2000 and 2013. Of the 18 articles identified as evaluating the effect of technology on quantity and quality of social relationships, 14 reported positive effects on aspects such as isolation, loneliness, and support. Enhanced relationships were predominantly derived from chat rooms, support groups, and discussion forums, rather than from other smart technologies, highlighting the utility of interactive online social networks. Qualitative research indicates that older adults identify technology as a potential means of reducing loneliness (Ballantyne, Trenwith, Zubrinich, & Corlis, 2010), and that they see Facebook as a useful way to stay in touch

with family members who may be geographically distant (Doyle & Goldingay, 2012).

In line with this, in a recent study, Grieve and Kemp (2015) assessed the predictors of social connectedness derived from Facebook in a sample of Australian Facebook users aged between 18 and 78 years ($M_{age} = 28.00$ years, $SD = 10.96$), and found that older age, and people with more positive attitudes towards Facebook, higher extraversion and greater emotional stability experienced more online social connectedness. Grieve and Kemp (2015) suggested that Facebook may therefore be a place where adults of all ages might derive feelings of social connectedness.

1.2. The current study

In summary, with the emergence of online social networks and the increase in older adults online in Western societies (Chang, McAllister, & McCaslin, 2015; Zickuhr & Madden, 2012), researchers have suggested the potential utility of online networks to enhance social inclusion in older adults (Goswami et al., 2010; Nimrod, 2014). Preliminary evidence indicates that social network site use may allow older adults to maintain social connection. However, previous research has used qualitative approaches with extremely small sample sizes (e.g. Ballantyne et al., 2010: $N = 6$; Doyle & Goldingay, 2012: $N = 5$). Despite the rapid emergence of online social networks (Livingstone & Brake, 2010) and increasing adoption of technology by older adults (Chang et al., 2015), to date no research has directly examined whether—and if so, the extent to which—older adults can derive social connectedness from online social networking sites. This lack of evidence represents a substantial gap in our understanding of what might constitute effective ageing in an electronically connected world: more than half (56%) of older adults in the U.S. aged 65 and over use Facebook—up from 45% of older adults using Facebook in 2012 (Duggan et al., 2015).

To address the broad goal of this research, this study had two novel aims. The first aim was to identify whether older adults can derive social connectedness from Facebook in a similar way to their younger counterparts. The second aim was to examine the extent to which social connectedness can be experienced within the older age group. Definitions of “older adult” vary within the literature. It was deemed prudent to draw on recent research into technology adoption in older adults (e.g. Chan, 2015; Nef, Ganea, Muri, & Mosimann, 2013), in order to more effectively ground the current study within the most relevant literature, and defined “older adult” as being aged 55 or more years.

As research using younger samples indicates that online social networking sites can facilitate perceptions of social connectedness that are related to, but distinct from offline social connectedness (e.g. Grieve et al., 2013), and as older adults are increasingly using the social networking site Facebook (Duggan et al., 2015), it was predicted that online and offline social connectedness would emerge as distinct, but related, constructs, in older adults. Further, it was anticipated that older adults would report similar levels of Facebook-derived social connectedness as has been seen in younger samples.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

This study was conducted in Australia. Participants were 280 Facebook users (male = 55, female = 225), aged between 55 and 81 ($M_{age} = 61.28$ years, $SD = 5.01$). The only inclusion criteria were that participants be aged 55 or over and members of Facebook. Participants were predominantly from Australia, followed by Britain and then Europe.

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