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FEATURE

Social Connectedness in the Digital Age: Senior Citizens' Experiences

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Abstract. *Connectedness through face-to-face interactions can be vital for all people. However, senior citizens have a distinct perspective as to what valuable social interaction is. By using the theory of connectedness, this study explored the experiences of senior citizens on social connectedness through face-to-face communication. This phenomenological study utilized the six steps of Van Manen in exploring and analyzing the experiences of the senior citizens. Twelve senior citizens served as participants and were selected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The study was conducted in the coastal or lowland barangays of Ozamiz City, Misamis Occidental, Philippines. The analysis of the data revealed five central themes: comfort in physical presence, strength in spirituality, sense of belonging, feeling of relief, and acceptance of old age.*

Keywords: connectedness, face-to-face interactions, gerontology, hermeneutic phenomenology, Ozamiz City, Misamis Occidental, Philippines, senior citizens, social network, Southeast Asia

Introduction

Connectedness occurs through social networking, a process of relating with other people, sharing ideas and interests, and interacting with families, friends, and community (Ashida & Heaney, 2008). This social connectedness has a wholesome effect on the ability of the senior citizens to remain in their abode since it makes them feel independent and good, and it contributes to their sense of independence and well-being (Neville, Russell, Adams, & Jackson, 2016). However, people's

quality of interaction is more essential than the number of social contacts they have (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014). Aging individuals need to keep in touch with people around them and those who are important to them.

Research reveals that a high level of connectedness lowers blood pressure and stress hormones, improves immunity, and prevents chronic diseases (Kelly et al., 2017; Yang, Boen, & Mullan-Harris, 2015; Yoo, Miyamoto, & Ryff, 2016). The involvement of the elderly in social networking helps them achieve successful aging, promotes positive physical health, and prevents mental decline (Segal, Qualls, & Smyer, 2018). Physical wellness requires connection and belonging with other people (Sinclair, 2015). Senior citizens need to feel that they remain an important part of society.

As the age of the senior citizens advance, they are expected to experience losses like the demise of a lifetime partner, migration of children, the distance of siblings, absence of colleagues (when retired), and being away from friends. These losses may make old people become socially disconnected, which can be detrimental to their mental and physical health (Courtin & Knapp, 2017; Wurm & Benyamini, 2014). When the elderly are alone, they tend to be depressed and socially disengaged, resulting in physical decline, morbidity, and even untimely demise (Neves, Franz, Munteanu, & Baecker, 2018). Thus, the feeling of isolation is a critical predictor of death (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, Baker, Harris, & Stephenson, 2015). Families and relatives have to make their presence felt by making the aging people feel valued and appreciated.

Social networks contribute to successful aging because they provide connectedness and relatedness that are crucial for well-being and social support (ten Bruggencate, Luijkx, & Sturm, 2018; Yu, Mccammon, Ellison, & Langa, 2016). Apart from physical means of interaction (face-to-face), social networking can come in the form of electronic and digital media like Facebook, Skype, chat, and email (Ashid & Heaney, 2008). Various strategies are adopted for communication between family members who determine how these digital and mobile technologies fit into their lives as individuals and as families (Clark, 2013). There are varied means of keeping social connections.

Aging is inevitable, and identifying ways to keep older adults in contact with other people around them is vital (Sinclair, 2015). Senior citizens generally perceive a disconnection between them and the younger individuals; however, they are beginning to embrace the varied kinds of information and technological means of communication to fit in the society (Wu, Damnée, Kerherve, Ware, & Rigaud, 2015). Digitally spending time together is significant in building a relationship (Orton-Johnson & Prior, 2013), and the social context seemingly serves as a compelling influence on the use of online resources (Friemel, 2016). Hence, the elderly need to stay abreast with the digital means of maintaining contact with other people.

Digital media can alter the essence of social connections (Baym, 2015). The advent of new technologies undermines the significance of face-to-face interaction between families and friends. People prefer virtual meetings such as Skype, Google Hangouts, Viber, Facetime, and others (Rowan, 2010). The rise in the use of electronic communication among students, such as text messaging and emails, contribute to the increase of absenteeism in schools and generally result in decreased face-to-face interaction like an interpersonal connection between parents and children (McDougle, Handy, Konrath, & Walk, 2014) and bonding among individuals (Konrath, O'Brien, & Hsing, 2011). People who allocate more time digitally communicating than face-to-face are lonelier and more socially anxious (Bonetti, Campbell, & Gilmore, 2010).

People differ in their experiences in the use of various media; yet, none can equate the intimacy and connection that face-to-face interaction provides (Baym, 2015). Digital forms of communication like Skype and video chat foster social connection, but they do not offer tangible physical presence (Baym, 2015). While communication can be made possible by technology, technology cannot replace what face-to-face interaction can offer (Orton-Johnson & Prior, 2013). More important than seeing and talking is the physical presence of the people with whom the elderly find comfort and attachment. This study explored senior citizens' experiences of connectedness in the digital age.

Review of Related Literature

The third level of the hierarchy of needs by Maslow (1943) states that people need to socialize because of their need for love and belongingness. Though this need is less basic compared to physiological and security needs, human relationship means companionship and acceptance by any social groups. An individual as a social being needs to relate with other people. One of the people's innate needs is the desire to have interpersonal relationships. Rarely do they want to be alone. In most cases, they need to be connected to their fellowmen. The desire to love and be loved in return is inherent in all human beings.

Concerning the need for belongingness, Murray's theory of affiliation (as cited in Chapman & Schwartz, 2010) emphasizes that human beings have a desire to live harmoniously with others. Though they have different levels of need for affiliation, humans want to have a satisfying social relationship. If this need is unfulfilled, they become susceptible to loneliness, which may adversely affect their well-being.

Humans, as social beings, need to connect with others (Levula, Harré, & Wilson, 2017). Social interaction is vital for the health and well-being of people since it allows them to express their feelings and problems as they gain support from others (Palmer, Newsom, & Rook, 2016). A good relationship with neighbors can give access to information support and can decrease the feeling of isolation. On the other hand, the involvement of people in community activities through joining

various civic or religious organizations brings health benefits to old adults (Choi, Lee, Shin, Kwon, & Park, 2017; Jeffries et al., 2015; McDougle et al., 2014).

When the need for connectedness is not met, health and well-being may be affected. Aging people are prone to experience social isolation or disconnectedness with the absence of loved ones (migration of children, death of spouses) and friends (migration, death, and disabilities; Palmer et al., 2016). As people grow older and retire from work, they have limited opportunities to socialize; yet, social engagement in later life is a crucial part of growing old to ensure healthy social well-being (Bourassa, Memel, Woolverton, & Sbarra, 2017; Paggi, Jopp, & Hertzog, 2016).

The digital age impacts the social network of the society because it has brought changes in the daily aspects of life (Rowan, 2010). Technological advancement and web-based resources encourage senior citizens to go online, enabling them to maintain physical and mental health, develop their social interaction, and lessen their dependence on other people (Choi & DiNitto, 2013). Advancements in technology create novel means to deliver information better to the elderly through digital *circles of support* (Godfrey & Johnson, 2009). Senior citizens are provided with an avenue to connect with people regardless of time and space.

Compared to younger individuals, senior citizens have less access and use of recent communication technologies (Wu et al., 2015). The absence of access to online resources may increase issues on the disparity between the young and the old (Neves, Amaro, & Fonseca, 2013). Despite their access to technology, the elderly recognize the limits of what they can avail online (Loges & Jung, 2001). Older adults often find it difficult to participate effectively in online activities, primarily due to their limited physical mobility and social network (Hill, Betts, & Gardner, 2015). Despite the virtual link that technology offers, the digital means of communication cannot cater altogether to the needs of the elderly.

Despite the advent of new technology, face-to-face interaction is still preferred. In this type of interaction, a sense of belonging, trust, and lasting or satisfying relationships are developed (Sacco & Ismail, 2014; Tsiotsou, 2015). Physically connecting with friends and families are more intimate and satisfying than communicating with them using modern technology (Emmers-Sommer, 2004). Communication through actual presence fosters physical and emotional closeness, self-confidence, persistence, and determination among old people (Guerrero, Andersen, & Afifi, 2017). Technology cannot replace what physical presence offers.

Undoubtedly, senior citizens have distinct needs as they go through the later stage of their lives. In this vein, the present study sought to delve into how the elderly live and regard social connectedness through face-to-face interactions in contrast to digital means of interaction. The study sought answers to the following questions:

1. How do senior citizens feel when with their family members, friends, relatives, and community?
2. How do they view aging?
3. How important is face-to-face social networking to the elderly?
4. How do they view the digital means of social connection?

Methodology

This part of the study reflects a detailed presentation of the research design. This section also includes the research setting, participants and sampling procedure, instruments, data gathering process, and methods of data analysis. The methodology utilized is designed to elicit valuable information and insights on the experiences of the senior citizens in establishing social connectedness through face-to-face interactions.

Research Design

This qualitative research employed phenomenology as a design. Qualitative studies aim to develop concepts aimed at understanding natural social phenomena, focusing on the participants' experiences and views (Denzin, 1994; Pope & Mays, 1995). Phenomenological research describes an individual's lived experiences as a way of understanding what the real world is and how a person lives (Van Manen, 1990). For this study, the phenomenological framework of Heidegger (1996) was used in describing the senior citizens' lived experiences on social connectedness in the digital age.

Research Setting

This research was done in Ozamiz City. The city is located in the province of Misamis Occidental, Mindanao, Philippines. There are 51 barangays in the city (Local Government Unit Ozamiz, 2017).

Research Participants and Sampling

The participants consisted of 12 senior citizens presently residing in the coastal or lowland barangays of Ozamiz City. The participants met the following criteria: (a) 65 years old and above; (b) no hearing or speaking problems; (c) no visual impairments; (d) no history of dementia, Alzheimer's, or Parkinson's disease; (e) engaged in frequent visits with neighbors and friends for leisure talk; (f) prefer face-to-face interaction than the use of modern technologies; and (g) willing to participate in this research study by giving their full consent. Purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques were used in identifying the participants. Using

the criteria, we identified several senior citizens for the initial interviews, and they led us to the other elderly participants of the study.

Research Instruments

Data gathering was done using a researcher-made interview guide. Scheduled interviews were conducted after the participants were identified. Consent of the participants was sought in the use of a recording device during the interviews held on separate schedules. The duration of the interview was about an hour each. Validation of the interview guide was done with two senior citizens who were not actual participants. Their comments on the questions were considered in the formulation of the final set of questions.

Data Collection

We first introduced ourselves to the selected participants before the interviews started. The instruction was important to establish rapport with the participants who gave the informed consent for the recording of conversations. Their answers were treated with confidentiality and their identities with anonymity. The participants were encouraged to freely share their experiences. After the demographic profiles of the participants were obtained, the conduct of interviews followed. The validation process ensued after the output of the research was put into writing.

Analysis

The six-step data analysis by Van Manen (1990) was employed in understanding the experiences of the senior citizens. The steps include (a) looking into the phenomenon as basis of the questions expected to draw out responses that would describe the face-to-face interaction, (b) investigating the actual experience through the conduct of interviews describing the participants' lived experiences pertaining to social connectedness in the digital age, (c) identifying the significant themes based on the participants' statements categorized as themes and sub-themes, (d) explaining the experiences through a number of written outputs describing the phenomenon concerning the senior citizens, (e) upholding a well-grounded description of the experiences through integration of prior observations and perceptions, and (f) observing a balance in the research by putting together all research findings to describe explicitly and holistically the phenomenon under study. These steps were duly observed in the research and the written manuscript.

Ethical Considerations

Prior approval was gained from the officials of the barangays where the participants reside. The participants were given information sheets and the

informed consent forms enumerating their rights and the responsibilities of the researchers, including the latter's contact numbers in case of clarifications or concerns. The participants were oriented that withdrawal from participation at any period of the study as they desired was acceptable. The participants were given the free will to respond only to the questions to which they wished to give answers, which were treated with the utmost confidentiality.

Results and Discussions

The participants were all residents of Ozamiz City. Their ages ranged from 65 to 84. Seven participants belonged to the young-old category (60-74 years old) and five in the middle-old category (75-84 years old). The data show that most participants belonged to the young-old category of senior citizens. Of the 3 male participants, 2 were single, and 1 was a widower. Of the 9 female participants, only 1 was still married while the rest were widows.

The participants attained different levels of education. Seven of them reached the secondary level while five completed college degrees. The latter received monthly pensions aside from the support they got from their children. The former, on the other hand, depended on the monthly pensions of their late spouses. One participant admitted not having his own source of income and therefore depended on his family and friends to meet his needs.

Although the 12 participants were senior citizens, they claimed to be healthy. They did not have major illnesses except the common signs of aging, such as hearing and walking difficulties as well as joint pains. As to the living conditions of the participants, three participants lived alone in their respective homes, one participant lived with her relatives, and the rest lived with their families.

Various works of literature describe what senior citizens go through as they age. The present study aimed to validate these assumptions through the actual conduct of interviews intended to gain a thorough understanding of the concept of social connectedness through the lens of the senior citizens. Five central themes emerged based on the interviews with the 12 participants who connected with their families and friends face-to-face and through digital means. The central themes are the following: (a) comfort in physical presence, (b) strength in spirituality, (c) sense of belonging, (d) feeling of relief, and (e) acceptance of old age.

The five central themes mentioned above were formulated based on the participants' responses, as reflected in the interview transcripts. They were analyzed and discussed according to the six steps by Van Manen (1990). The participants shared their personal experiences on their face-to-face interactions with family members, friends, and neighbors. In the succeeding pages, the themes identified are cited and discussed in-depth.

Comfort in Physical Presence

Comfort in physical presence pertains to the participants' perception of self-worth or value during face-to-face interactions. It draws attention to the participants' feelings while interacting with families and significant others in actual physical presence. The participants claimed that they had established a personal connection with people with whom they interact face-to-face. The 12 participants described different experiences. Melchora and Florentina expressed,

Although my daughter calls me every month, it cannot ease my longing for her. I feel very happy when my daughter visits me even once a year to allow me to embrace and kiss her. I laugh and cry whenever I talk with my daughter face-to-face. (Melchora)

I have one son and one grandson. I miss them whenever I cannot talk with them since they live far from Ozamiz City. If ever I feel lonely and sad, I visit them even if it is far away, and I travel alone. (Florentina)

The statements of the participants above exemplify their longing, which can only be soothed by the physical presence of their loved ones. The elderly emphasize the need for a personal connection. Though technology is readily available between and among family members to communicate constantly, it cannot replace the joy of seeing and talking to a loved one in person.

Several participants asserted that being with their families and friends physically fosters more intimate interactions. The following is an example of Mario's experience:

I feel that my longing for my siblings can be appeased only when I meet them in person. I like talking with them as I can hug them warmly. I ask them about the development in their lives. We often communicate over the phone, yet it cannot equate the experience I cherish when we talk in person.

Mario elaborated that face-to-face communication is more personalized and meaningful. Other participants expressed having similar feelings with other senior citizens who feel lonely when they cannot talk with and see their family members. In this regard, the extent of satisfaction of computer-mediated communication is less than face-to-face communication (Simon, 2006). In contrast, aging people living with siblings, especially with sisters, have high morale, a great sense of emotional security, and fewer depression symptoms (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2008). The digital means of interaction cannot substitute actual presence.

Strength in Spirituality

Murrays' (as cited by Chapman and Schwartz, 2010) theory on affiliation states that human beings have the desire to be with others and to establish a harmonious relationship with them. Nevertheless, a satisfying relationship is not

limited to family members, friends, and neighbors; it also refers to a relationship with God. Florentina, Catalina, and Artemia claimed,

I always pray early in the morning. I feel satisfied and fulfilled when I can talk and pray to God. (Florentina)

If I have problems, I go to church and talk to God. I feel relieved and in high spirit. (Catalina)

I attend church services every Sunday and every special church celebration. I ask guidance from God for every decision I make. (Artemia)

Since the elderly can be away from their loved ones, they find solace in spiritual engagements. They seek for divine presence amid their worries and loneliness. Having a close attachment to God makes them experience contentment, peace, and life satisfaction. The strong belief of the participants in God leads them to be satisfied and fulfilled despite their old age. For Florentina, Catalina, Artemia, and the other participants, prayer is a way of connecting and making God part of their lives. In relation to this, a sense of spiritual well-being has a positive effect on older adults' emotional wellness and adjustment to illness (Abdala, Kimura, Koenig, Reinert, & Horton, 2015; Aldwin, Park, Jeong, & Nath, 2014; Ferraro & Kim, 2014).

Sense of Belonging

For the elderly, family, friends, and neighbors provide them a good support system. Adequate social support is perceived by the elderly as a source of care and affection, developing in them a sense of belonging and self-esteem (Nazari et al., 2016). Participants Solidad and Catalina frequently talked about their families, children, personal problems, including their condition of being senior citizens. However, interacting with other people offered them belongingness and gladness. Solidad and Catalina said,

Talking and laughing with my neighbors and friends make me feel secure and better. When I am sad and lonely, I just go to my neighbors and talk with them. (Solidad)

I am pleased to see my loyal customers and sad when I cannot see them. (Catalina)

Aside from talking about domestic concerns, other participants talked about their health issues. Artemia, Melchora, Angel, Aida, and Catalina talk with their friends and neighbors about their physical frailties and the medicines they take. Though talking about physiological conditions may not always be comforting for senior citizens, the participants openly disclose the matter with their friends and neighbors. They testified,

My friends and I talk about family problems and the sickness we have, as well as the medicines we take. (Artemia)

During daytime, when I am left alone at home, I usually visit my neighbors and have a few minutes talking with them. We talk about our health and medication. (Melchora)

When I talk with my neighbors and friends, we discuss about the illnesses we have and the medications we take regularly. (Angel)

We share our ‘merienda’ and talk about our children and the signs and symptoms of our illnesses. (Aida)

When they (my customers) see me, they always ask how I feel and the illnesses I have. (Catalina)

The statements above exemplify the need of the senior citizens to talk about their health conditions as a gesture of showing care for one another. In this vein, social support helps reduce stress, thereby promoting the physical health and psychological well-being of senior citizens (Wang, 2016). Letting people know of their health conditions not only offers the senior citizens the means to lighten their physical burden but also serves as a means to establish rapport with fellow elderly individuals.

Feeling of Relief

The participants claimed that they feel happy whenever they communicate with their families, friends, and neighbors. Although leisure talk may not last long, the participants asserted that daily personal interactions, regardless of the time spent, provide a certain level of happiness and contentment. Sharing with friends during face-to-face communication eases the elderly’ emotions and relieves their stress. A simple yet genuine talk provides them relief from burden and worries. Three participants mentioned,

I enjoy being with my friends when I experience stress or have some problems. (Solidad)

When I experience stress at home, I walk away and talk to my customers. Doing it makes me forget about my worries and problems at home. (Angel)

My fellow motorcycle drivers and I usually talk about funny things for us to laugh and forget about physical exhaustion. I am also glad talking with my passengers, and I do not feel lonely as I enjoy talking with them. (Mario)

The statements given by the three participants convey that psychological relief can be achieved through interactions with anyone physically present. Also, the company of friends eases loneliness and distress among senior citizens. Artemia and Melchora stressed,

I feel delighted whenever my friends visit me. (Artemia)

I feel better after hearing some soothing words and funny jokes from my friends. (Melchora)

The jokes that the elderly share during their face-to-face interaction sets their mood in a positive direction. In this light, humor influences people's interactions, interpersonal bonds, and connectedness (Vettin & Todt, 2004). Senior citizens need to stay happy and to find reasons not to despair.

Senior citizens, like any other age group, experience stress in day-to-day living. Nevertheless, they maintain a positive disposition in life. Two participants had developed control of their emotions and kept composure in times of stress. As Melchora and Jose asserted,

I do not get angry easily. I do not get stressed immediately. (Melchora)

When I have problems, I talk them out with my friends and with God. (Jose)

Moreover, Solita and Aida pointed out that interaction with family members is special. They emphasized the relief from loneliness when they are with their families. Though their children live in separate abodes, they ensure that they stay in touch by meeting regularly and eating together, especially during Sundays. According to the two participants,

I make sure that we eat together during supper so that we can talk about issues and matters concerning the family. (Solita)

When I visit them or when they visit me, I feel happy that sometimes I can cry due to my happiness. (Aida)

Acceptance of Old Age

Happiness and contentment are what a number of participants experienced as senior citizens. They feel at peace even as they age, keeping them healthy emotionally, psychologically, and physiologically. They convey their acceptance of aging by expressing gratitude to God for the number of years they have been given to live. Solita, Florentina, and Melchora stated,

I have accepted that I now belong to the senior citizen group. I thank God that I have reached this age. (Solita)

I have accepted that I am a senior citizen now and I have no regrets about getting old. (Florentina)

I am happy with my age, and how I feel now is just the same as how I felt when I was young. I thank God for making me reach this age. (Melchora)

Furthermore, graceful aging is linked to meaningful activities. The more functional old people are, the lower their risk is of being socially isolated or disconnected. Performing daily tasks and engaging in physical activities help senior citizens feel better and happy about themselves. The participants confirmed that they could do household chores, take a shower, and clothe themselves without assistance from other people. Solita and Melchora claimed,

I can still perform household chores, take a bath, and dress myself without assistance. (Solita)

At my age, I can still go to the market without any companion. (Melchora)

Physical activities play an important function in preventing diseases as well as promoting health among senior citizens. The physically active old adults are less likely to experience physical limitations than those who are not (Yorston, Kolt, & Rosenkranz, 2012). The participants asserted that they feel excited to see and talk with their families, friends, and neighbors that they take care of themselves by dressing and grooming properly.

The elderly people in this study revealed varying experiences. Nevertheless, the essence of the face-to-face interaction of the senior citizens can be described in the poem entitled “As I Live for the Moment” by Cynthia S. Superable.

As I Live for the Moment

I live a life not entirely mine.
The thoughts of loved ones I keep in mind.
I may have wished to keep them all along;
yet, I know they have to go where they belong.
Technological gadgets may fill the space;
yet the feeling of loneliness they cannot erase.
We may talk and meet everyday,
but the digital means barely make me truly happy.

I long for the warm embrace of my family
that I think of them every second of the day.
There are times that life can really be sad;
I wake up with no one else to be had.

Other people let me feel their warmth and presence,
so I can be sound and healthy in my old existence
Neighbors and friends who constantly make me smile
remind me always that life is still worthwhile.

Being with a company gives me no reason to despair.
With them my thoughts and feelings I can share.
They show me how to live life in a joyful way
and make me wish for another blessed day.

So I go on with life as best as I may,
as I cherish every moment of the day
I know my life's journey is getting near;
yet, I thank God that my friends have been there.

Conclusion

Despite the mode of communication that the digital age offers, connectedness through face-to-face interactions remains of paramount importance to senior citizens. The actual physical presence of family and friends is more meaningful for the elderly who experience solitude and social seclusion in the absence of their loved ones and significant others. The elderly can cope with the realities of aging when they know they have people who care for them through communication beyond the digital form.

Recommendations

The findings of this study reveal the benefits of social connectedness to senior citizens through non-digital forms. It is recommended that the concepts of social connectedness be used by nurses in their nursing care management for the elderly. Likewise, researchers on gerontology or in the care of aging individuals should use these concepts of social connectedness to support their discussion on holistic care and management for the elderly population. Moreover, the families of aged people should be informed of the holistic benefits of social connectedness through the frequent communication and physical presence they can give to their aging family members.

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