

Relationship Between Social Media Engagement, Region, Social Support, and Loneliness among the Elderly

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The present study aims to examine the interrelationships between social media, region, social support, and loneliness among the elderly. The participants included 200 elderly individuals (50 from rural areas, 50 from urban areas, 50 non-users of social media, and 50 social media users) aged between 60 and 75 years from Jaipur, Rajasthan. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics and correlational analysis. The findings revealed significant differences between groups regarding social support and loneliness, both between rural and urban elderly and between social media users and non-users. A significant difference was observed in social support, with rural elderly individuals receiving more support than their urban counterparts. Social media users experienced greater social support than non-users. Additionally, urban and non-social media-using elderly individuals experienced more loneliness than their rural and social media-using counterparts. A negative correlation was found between social support and loneliness. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the interaction between social media, region, social support, and loneliness among the elderly.

Keywords: Social Media (User and Non-user), Region (Rural and Urban), Social Support, Loneliness, Elderly People.

Old age is the last stage of human development. In this stage, elderly people face shrinking circles of relations and a decline in human interactions and opportunities. People have fewer chances to maintain relationships, leading to a shrinking social circle (Cornwell, Laumann, Schumm, 2008). Loneliness is the most serious concern among the elderly. It is a subjective feeling and is considered equivalent to social isolation (Victor, Scambler, Bond, & Bowling, 2000). Loneliness causes various unpleasant emotional experiences, which tend to increase with age in later life (Perissinotto, Cenzer, & Covinsky, 2012). Loneliness does not mean being alone; it refers to the experience of loneliness even when living with others (Dykstra et al., 2005). Weiss, (1973) proposed a distinction between social and emotional loneliness, describing loneliness as a multidimensional experience. Even if family members are

geographically close, they may be busy with other activities, causing older adults to feel alone (Cornwell and Waite, 2009). Additionally, a communication gap between children and elders can lead to loneliness (Troll, 1982). In India, society is in a transition phase, which has worsened these problems in both urban and rural areas.

Social support is a critical factor affecting loneliness in the elderly. Social support is defined as presence of instrumental, informational, and emotional resources which enables a person to cope up with different stressors of life (Coper, 2004) which relates to social community. 'Perceived social support' is an umbrella term (Thoits, 1983) that describes the extent of care, love, attention, help, recognition, understanding, and communication people receive through belongingness and cohesion with different groups and communities (Dean and Lin,

1977), as well as accessory coping resources gained from others (Brehm and Kassin, 1993). House (1981) identified four different kind of social support: informational, emotional, appraisal, and instrumental. According to Beigel (1985), people within our family, community and peers are important members who provide social support to the elderly. One of the models of social support is the convoy model, which posits that a person always has some people around them who act as a convoy with whom they have emotional relationships that are reciprocal in nature (Antonucci & Akiyama, (1987).). Social support is vital when it comes to psychological well-being of older adults. Those experiencing less social support are more isolated and are detached from society, which can lead to loneliness. Chen and Feeley (2014) found that reduced instrumental and emotional support are significant predictors of loneliness among the elderly. Gerontology researchers have focused on the diversity of lifestyles among older adults and the various uses of technological devices and services provided by social media (Seifert, 2020).

One key buffer against loneliness among the elderly is social media. Use of technology to access the internet and social media has become an essential part of life (Freeman, S., 2020), which plays a vital role in maintaining positive social interactions. Social media broadly refers to multiple social networking services, that constitutes of social networking sites, virtual communities such as "Reddit", vlogs and blogs, gaming platforms, video sharing apps, etc., which enables users to share different contents and interact with other online users (Aichner, 2021). Despite geographical distance, digital social networks are appropriate to share social support (Leist, 2013).

When social media is exclusively used for entertainment and information collection purposes, social media leads to a higher level

of loneliness (Shakya & Christakis, 2017), whereas social media for the purpose of direct communication may increase social relationships and reduce loneliness (Szabo et al., 2019).

Bu et al. (2020) explained that the level of loneliness in the population was low, with few signs of worrying, whereas some revealed increasing levels of loneliness in various populations during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lampsaki et al., 2022). The study data of USA health retirees depicted a greater frequency of social media use, which leads to a lower level of loneliness and a higher frequency of social engagement (Byrne et al., 2021). Research on Chinese older adults which are living in long-term care found that online social support mediates between the relationship of WeChat use and loneliness (Yang S, 2021). Several studies also show that online communication helps older adults connect with people who provide emotional support, such as friends and family, which eventually reduces loneliness (Szabo et al., 2019). Studies show that social media helps in maintaining social relations, which is one way of coping with loneliness and distress (Cauberghe et al., 2021), while other studies show that more social media use is associated with increased loneliness (Helm et al., 2022).

Compared with rural areas, older adults in urban areas have less structural social support (Li, Wang, et al., 2021). According to a study conducted by Byrne et al. (2021), higher social media users reported higher levels of social contact, and rural elderly people who do not frequently use social media feel lonelier than urban people. Apart from family- and friend-related social networks, people residing in rural areas receive support from their neighbors (Evans, et al., 2018). Social participation and social support are both significant factors in mitigating loneliness among elderly people (Courtin and Knapp, 2017). A meta-analysis

by Pinqart and Sorensen (2001) found that elderly people reported significantly lower loneliness when they had a strong social support network.

It is evident from the review that elderly people are vulnerable and at risk due to a lack of social support and loneliness. This study focuses on the role of social media use in mitigating loneliness, providing social support, and enhancing their quality of life. The present study aims to bridge this gap by investigating the relationship between social support, loneliness, rural-urban background, and social media use among the elderly. Drawing upon existing literature, the following objectives and hypotheses were formulated:

Objectives

1. To assess group differences in social support and loneliness among elderly social media users and elderly non-social media users.
2. To assess group differences in social support and loneliness among urban and rural elderly people.
3. To investigate the relationship between social support and loneliness among elderly people.

Hypotheses

1. There would be a significant group difference in social support and loneliness between elderly non-social

media users and elderly social media users.

2. There would be a significant group difference in social support and loneliness among urban and rural elderly people.
3. There would be a significant negative relation between social support and loneliness among elderly people.

Method

Sample:

The present study sample was constituted with 200 elderly people (50 mobile users and 50 non-mobile users) and (50 urban and 50 rural). Data was collected from the Jaipur district of Rajasthan; the age range was between 60 and 75, and the average age was 64.6 years.

Measures

The Perceived Loneliness scale was developed by Praveen Kumar Jha (2019), and it consists of 36 items; 28 are positive and 8 negative. Test-retest reliability is .87, and the test have adequate content and predictive validity. Concurrent validity is .56.

The Social Support Scale, developed by Asthana and Verma (2009), consists of 35 items; 25 items are positive, and 10 items are negative. Reliability of the test is .81, and validity is .59

Results

Table 1. t value of social support and perceived loneliness among social media users and non-user elderly people.

Variables	Social Media Users (N=50) Mean SD	Social Media Non-Users (N=50) Mean SD	t-value	Significance(2-tailed)
Emotional support	49.64(5.81)	45.10(5.43)	4.03	.000**
Informational support	18.46(3.01)	14.94(3.67)	5.23	.000**
Instrumental support	25.44(3.20)	24.66(4.25)	2.36	.020*
Social Support	94.54(7.95)	85.60(8.16)	6.10	.000**
Loneliness	129.76(13.12)	138.42(11.83)	3.46	.001*

Table 1: Results reveal that elderly social media users had a higher mean on emotional, informational, and instrumental support on various dimensions of social support and overall social support than elderly people. Significant differences were

found on all dimensions of social support between the groups. Elderly social media users had a lower mean than elderly people on loneliness, and a significant difference was found between the groups.

Table 2: t value of social support and perceived loneliness among rural and urban elderly people.

Variables	Region Rural Mean, SD	Region Urban Mean SD	t-value	Significance(2-tailed)
Emotional support	53.14(6.58)	45.32(5.77)	6.31	.000**
Informational support	17.04(2.87)	16.28(3.23)	1.24	.217
Instrumental support	25.04(3.43)	23.20(4.02)	2.45	.016*
Social Support	95.22(7.97)	84.80(8.26)	6.41	.000**
Loneliness	136.94(14.95)	143.56(13.28)	2.34	.021*

Table no. 2 results reveal that rural elderly people had a higher mean on emotional, informational, and instrumental support on different dimensions of social support and overall social support than urban elderly people. Significant differences were found on

emotional and instrumental support dimensions and overall social support between the groups. Rural elderly people had a lower mean than urban elderly people on loneliness, and a significant difference was found between the groups.

Table 3: Pearson correlation among the studied variables among elderly people

	Loneliness	Emotional Support	Informational Support	Instrumental Support	Social Support
A. Loneliness	1	-.311**	-.111	-.306**	-.387**

*Correlation significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**The difference significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Perusal of Table -3 reveals that loneliness is significantly and negatively related with emotional support ($r = -.311$, $p < 0.01$), informational support ($r = -.111$, $p < 0.01$), instrumental support ($r = -.306$, $p < 0.01$), and overall social support ($r = -.387$, $p < 0.01$).

Discussion

This study explored the interrelationships among social media, region, social support, and loneliness among the elder people. The findings offer meaningful insight into the impact of e-culture on the social support and loneliness among elderly people within the

Jaipur district of Rajasthan Social media users experienced significantly higher emotional support than social media nonusers, which is consistent with the findings of Szabo et al. (2019), which links online communication among elderly people to connecting with people who provide emotional support, such as friends and family, which eventually reduces loneliness.

Social media users experienced significantly higher informational support than social media non-users; as a result, they update themselves regularly through social

media platforms, which aligns with the study of Hampton et al. (2011), that social media have significantly higher emotional and informational support than other internet non-users of similar demographical characteristics.

Social media users experienced significantly higher instrumental support than social media nonusers and can avail themselves of facilities like online shopping, banking, and help from their friends, which is consistent with the research of Ihm J et al. (2015) that instrumental support was positively associated with internet facility. It had been reported that the more affluent the elderly adults are, the more they access information and communication technology for financial issues, shopping, and social activities.

Social media users experienced significantly higher overall social support than non-users because they had different types of emotional, informational, and instrumental support through social media networking, while social media non-users were deprived of this support, which is consistent with the Best et al. (2014) research that depicted the progress of interpersonal networks through social media services, but how much a person values and respects other people in their social networks remains a vital cause of the obtainment of social support. Nolan et al. (2017) revealed that people with great-quality social networks receive more social support. Tang et al. (2016) through their findings claimed that exchange of personal messaging through Facebook leads to social support among close ties.

Findings further revealed that loneliness among social media nonusers was significantly higher than social media users, which is in line with the study of Chopik et al. (2016) that prolonged use of social media reduces feelings of loneliness among older adults because interaction with others

through technology can enhance social support for elderly people. Byrne et al. (2021) depicted that a higher frequency of social media use lowers the level of loneliness among the elderly. Similarly, Tsoj et al. (2010, 2020) found that video conferences with friends and family can reduce loneliness for nursing home residents, and Cotton, Anderson, and McCullough (2013) also depicted that internet users experience reduced loneliness.

Rural elderly people experienced significantly higher emotional support than urban elderly people because rural people are more gregarious and cooperative due to kin relationships with each other in India, while the urban people are professionals, reserved, and belong to different kin relations, and there is a decline in the social infrastructure in urban regions (Findley et al., 2019). These findings resonate with the study of Saey and Foss (2016), which revealed that the social infrastructure of rural people plays a vital role in providing a platform for social and emotional support as compared to urban people. Rural elderly people experience significantly higher emotional support than urban elderly people because of the decline in the social infrastructure in urban regions, which is consistent with the study of Findley et al. (2019).

No significant group difference was found in the informational support of rural and urban elderly people because there are a lot of informational resources, such as television, newspapers, mobile phones, etc., available in rural regions also.

Rural elderly people experienced significantly higher instrumental support than urban region elderly people because of the availability of government programs, social systems, and social exchange in rural areas and the collective society in India. These findings complement the findings of Tiwari et al. (2019), which indicate that rural older

adults have higher levels of social capital, resulting in richer and more satisfying social engagement and support from neighbours and the broader community.

Rural elderly people experienced significantly higher overall social support than urban older people. This finding is in line with findings of Heenan et al. (2010) that rural people benefit from a greater level of cohesion activities as compared to urban people. Similarly, Walter et al. (2020) found that in rural communities, grassroots initiatives that constitutes of multiple partners are vital because they build on the existing resources to increase collaboration, share different things and address local concerns.

Urban elderly people experienced significantly higher loneliness than rural elderly people. This finding is in line with findings of Henning-Smith et al. (2019), which revealed that people in rural areas feel closer to more relatives and live with their children and grandchildren and have more friends than urban people; consequently, they participate in social and cultural activities and have stronger and larger social networks (Vogelsang, 2016). Such strong social connections and a sense of community reduce loneliness among rural people (Eriksson et al., 2010). Fuller et al. (2022) also revealed that elderly people in rural areas had a lower prevalence of loneliness as compared to urban elderly people.

A significant negative correlation between social support and loneliness, reflecting that older adults with greater social support experience significantly less loneliness and better health outcomes, which is in line with the research of Hawkey & Cacioppo (2010).

Conclusion

Loneliness and lack of social support have emerged as a growing concern globally, particularly impacting elderly people. The current study revealed the interplay of social

media use, regional background, social support, and loneliness among elderly people.

Findings revealed significant differences in loneliness and social support among social media users and social media nonusers. Social media users experienced a significantly higher level of social support and reduced loneliness. Similarly, a significant difference was observed in social support and loneliness among rural and urban elderly people. Rural elderly people experienced significantly greater social support and a lower level of loneliness. Social support was found to be significantly negatively related to loneliness among the elderly. Taken together, these findings suggest social support interventions for urban elderly people, particularly. Geriatric clubs can cultivate meaningful relations and engagement, and can help to minimize loneliness among urban elderly people. The holistic intervention and programs can be initiated that integrate online platform use and social networking for countering loneliness among the elderly and promoting psychological well-being.

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