
Reducing the Experience of Loneliness among Older Consumers

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ABSTRACT

This study examined older people's experiences of loneliness and how these may be ameliorated through consumption practices. Interviews were conducted with 19 Australians aged 65 years and older. Most interviewees reported the use of a range of coping mechanisms to avoid experiencing distressing levels of loneliness. These included relying on regular contact with special others, engaging in extensive reading, and taking an active interest in gardening. Shopping was also identified as a means of alleviating loneliness. Several possible consumption-related strategies to reduce the experience of loneliness are suggested, such as using consumption rituals to structure social interactions and facilitating reading and gardening activities. The theoretical implications of the findings are also provided.

ARTICLE

Introduction

The market opportunities associated with world-wide demographic changes are reflected in the growing body of work relating to older consumers. Most of this work investigates the consumption decisions of older consumers (e.g., Gruca and Schewe 1992; Johnson 1996; Long 1998; Moschis 1992; 1996; Spotts and Schewe 1989; Yoon et al. 2005), although some studies have also explored how consumption is related to quality of life (e.g., Price et al. 2000). The present article focuses on how the experience of loneliness in older age may be ameliorated by specific forms of consumption. This approach has significant social value as it can yield an enhanced understanding of how various consumption activities can enable seniors to lead satisfying and fulfilling lives. Such information may directly benefit older consumers as well as those caregivers and public policy makers who are in a position to facilitate access to the goods and services that positively influence quality of life. This study meets the criteria for transformative consumer research as it examines the process of consumption in the light of a particular human condition for the purpose of improving the quality of individuals' lives (Mick 2006).

Background

The Senior Market

The World Health Organisation (WHO 2003) has estimated that there are around 600 million people over the age of 60 across the world and that this figure will rise to one billion by 2020 and two billion by 2050. The market-related significance of this increase is apparent in that in Australia, the context of this study, those over the age of 55 constitute approximately 21 per cent of the population but they earn about 25 per cent of national income and control around 39 per cent of the nation's wealth (Access Economics 2001).

Studies involving older consumers typically analyse the objects preferred and the processes of product selection and consumption. For example, when looking at the relationships between older consumers and their possessions, Rochberg-Halton (1984) noted that as people age they tend to prefer 'objects of contemplation' over 'objects of action'. This is opposite to the preferences of younger consumers who have been found to prefer objects of action (such as electronic items, musical equipment, and clothing) because they are instrumental in self-construction activities (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). Older consumers are considered to have more stable personal identities that make them less reliant on objects of action to obtain a satisfactory self definition (Levy 1986). Instead, they have been reported to place greatest importance on items such as photographs, silverware, paintings, and books (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). Items that are particularly cherished, such as jewellery and works of art, can provide a form of immortality and family bonding as they are passed down to younger generations (Price et al. 2000).

An alternative to this object-oriented approach is to focus on the life experiences of older consumers and the implications for their consumption behaviours. This more macro approach may offer a deeper understanding of the relationship between quality of life and consumption among members of this segment. For example, it could illuminate how they feel about their reduced ability to engage in some forms of consumption (such as those requiring physical agility) and the necessity of increasing consumption of other products (such as home cleaning services). The present study adopted this approach by exploring older people's experiences of loneliness and the role of consumption in these experiences. The primary research objectives were to articulate the experience of loneliness among older consumers, investigate the role of consumption practices in this experience, and suggest potential consumption-related strategies that may be effective in ameliorating the negative aspects of loneliness.

Loneliness

Reflecting the theoretical definition of loneliness which encompasses emotional and social isolation (Weiss 1973), gerontological models of loneliness focus primarily on levels of social interaction as antecedents of felt loneliness (Fees et al. 1999; DiTomasso and Spinner 1997). While loneliness is recognised as an emotion, the consequences of loneliness include both physical and psychological conditions such as actual and perceived ill-health, dietary inadequacies, depression, personality disorders, and suicide (Fees et al. 1999; Gold 1996; Gustafsson et al. 1996; Klinger 1999; Sugisawa et al. 1994; Prince et al. 1997; Stravynski and Boyer 2001; Tilvis et al. 2000; Walker and Beauchene 1991). As a result, it is recommended that loneliness among older adults is addressed to prevent the premature onset of adverse health conditions (Killeen 1998; Prince et al. 1997).

The more recent emphasis on emotions in the consumer behaviour literature suggests a strong link between the experience of particular emotions and the enactment of various consumption behaviours (Luce et al. 2001; Pham et al. 2001). What remains is to investigate specific emotions for their consumption relevance. For example, while it is acknowledged that shopping trips can constitute an important source of social interaction for the elderly (Kang and Ridgeway 1996; Wilson et al. 2004), there has been little recognition of the relationship between loneliness and consumption among older people. Examining the emotion of loneliness through a consumer behaviour lens may yield additional insights to complement existing conceptualisations of the condition and contribute to the development of strategies for its prevention and management.

METHOD

A qualitative approach was adopted in this study due to the exploratory nature of the research task. Previous consumer research has employed quantitative methods to investigate seniors' purchasing preferences and to categorise older shoppers into multiple consumption segments (e.g., Moschis and Mathur 1993; Uncles and Ehrenberg 1990; Uncles and Lee 2006). Given the emotional nature of the present study, qualitative methods were deemed more appropriate as they are able to generate more detailed and nuanced information (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988). The direct examination of the phenomenon of loneliness and its relationship to consumption does not appear to have been reported previously and as such rich data were required to provide insight into the phenomenon.

Individual interviews were employed in this study as they have been recommended as an appropriate method of collecting detailed data relating to the experience of loneliness among older people (Prince et al. 1997). The sample comprised 19 Australians aged 65 years or over, four of whom lived with a spouse or family members and the remainder lived alone. The interviewees lived independently in retirement villages or their own homes and were recruited via an elder care agency and retirement village managers. While the sample was not intended to be representative, seniors of varying economic means living in a wide range of suburban environments were recruited to obtain a range of perspectives. Reflecting the significantly higher proportion of women in the age group, 13 interviews were conducted with women and six with men. This distribution also reflected a greater apparent interest among women in participating in discussions on the topic of loneliness as indicated by responses to recruitment efforts. The ages of interviewees ranged from 65 to 95 years, with an average age of 79.

The interviews occurred in interviewees' homes to make them more comfortable discussing the stigmatised subject of loneliness (Donaldson and Watson 1996). At the commencement of the semi-structured interviews, interviewees were asked to talk a little about themselves and describe their typical day. This led to discussions across a wide range of subjects including relationships with family members, financial issues, transport problems, food preparation, sexual activity, hobbies, and religion. Loneliness was not raised as a specific topic until later in the interviews when substantial rapport had been achieved. However, loneliness almost always emerged as a topic of discussion during the interviews prior to any specific questions being posed – an outcome at least partly due to the fact that interviewees were aware that they were being recruited for a study on loneliness.

All interviewees agreed to have the interviews audio-taped. The tapes were transcribed and imported into NVivo2 for coding and analysis. Open, axial, and selective coding sweeps (Strauss and Corbin 1990) yielded 142 demographic and content codes (called nodes in NVivo). Interviewees were able to direct much of the conversation and they largely determined the extent to which they wanted to discuss particular topics. This allowed the size of the nodes to be indicative of the importance and relevance of particular topics as node size was determined by the amount of content (coded transcript) assigned to it. For example, social contact was found to be a strong theme because 359 passages were assigned to the parent node of 'Family and Social Networks' and its 12 child nodes.

As this was a qualitative study, node size was not statistically analysed. Rather, the number of passages assigned to each node was used as one indicator of the importance of particular issues to the interviewees. Subsequent analysis involved reiteration between the full transcripts and specific nodes and use of the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss 1967) to identify those themes that best illuminated the relationship between consumption and loneliness as evident in the data. Once the findings had been summarised into themes, a member checking process was employed (as per Belk et al. 1988). This involved providing the emergent analysis to three seniors (one man and two women) for comment. One of the member checkers had been one of the interviewees and the other two were new to the study, the purpose being to encourage the inclusion of both emic (informant) and etic (analytical) perspectives (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). Member checking was found to be a useful approach in terms of reinforcing the importance of the identified themes. It was also a gratifying process as the member checkers were very pleased that the subject of loneliness among seniors was being given attention and were keen to discuss the various themes that had emerged from the data. None of the member checkers expressed disagreement with any of the findings and they reinforced the importance of the themes that were selected for discussion in this article.

Findings

Most interviewees described themselves as lonely at least some of the time and those without partners generally considered themselves to be profoundly lonely. Reflecting both the emotional and social aspects of loneliness, one gentleman defined loneliness as follows:

Lonely is craving for crowded places, going out, then come home and being just as miserable (M, 75 yrs).

As has been found in previous studies, most interviewees considered loneliness to be an inevitable outcome of ageing as a result of the increasing social isolation that accompanies losses in sight and hearing, deteriorating mobility, and the passing away of spouses and friends (Barg et al. 2006). Another contributing factor is the tendency for younger family members to be too busy to spend time with their elders:

We are all very close and enjoy spending time together. I just wish the others were closer or that the grandkids wanted to spend more time with us. But they're young and out with their friends. They don't have time for us oldies (W, 73).

While considered a natural part of ageing, the experience of loneliness was also seen to be under the control of individuals to some degree. Interviewees discussed a range of

consumption-related coping behaviours by which they attempt to minimise the incidence of loneliness. The most commonly discussed coping behaviours are outlined below.

Consuming Others

As has been found in previous studies, loneliness was viewed by interviewees to constitute insufficient human contact and a lack of satisfying emotional relationships with others. Almost any interaction with other people was considered favourable in the prevention of loneliness, although there appeared to be a pronounced hierarchy of preferred contacts ranging from family members and close friends to casual contacts. Children and grandchildren appeared to be the most desirable contacts:

I've got four beautiful daughters, grandchildren who love spending time with their Nan, and friends. If I didn't have that I would be very lonely, but I feel very blessed (W, 66).

Those interviewees with little access to their loved ones reported their lives to be bereft of meaningful social contact. Many were widowed and several either had no children or their children live a considerable distance away. These individuals reported higher levels of loneliness and more difficulty in finding enjoyment in their lives. These problems were attenuated by only a small number of other factors--usually a heavy reliance on reading and television viewing to pass the time. For a small number of interviewees, looking after pets provided some relief from loneliness with the additional benefit of instigating regular physical exercise. However, for most the responsibility of pet ownership represented too great a cost in the trade-off between the emotional benefits of pet ownership and the difficulties associated with looking after another creature when many were finding it difficult to look after themselves.

It could be expected that interviewees' recognition of the importance of social interaction in the prevention and treatment of loneliness would encourage them to seek contact with their peers. Senior citizens' centres, for example, typically organise a range of activities that aim to meet older people's social needs while catering to their physical limitations. A small number of the interviewees utilised such centres but most appeared reluctant to take this course of action. The main reasons for their lack of enthusiasm were hearing difficulties because of high levels of ambient noise and an aversion to actively making new friends in their own age group because of the perceived narrow-mindedness of other seniors and the difficulties associated with breaking into existing friendship groups:

Have you ever been to one of those places? The people there are really old and they are already set into their groups (W, 67).

Existing friends in older age brackets were valued for their friendship and shared history, but older people with whom they were unacquainted were suspected of having restricted conversation abilities and a propensity to engage in repeated complaining behaviours about trivial matters. These perceptions appeared to prevent some interviewees from seeking new friendships.

Food and beverage consumption rituals

The data supported previous analyses of the social and cultural significance of food and beverage consumption (e.g., Levy 1981). Interviewees' accounts of how they spend their

time, maintain interactions with friends and family, and preserve their health consistently included mentions of the preparation and consumption of food. In particular, interviewees focused on the social aspects of eating and drinking and how they reduce loneliness. Meals, snacks, and drinks offer a means of preventing loneliness by providing a specific activity to facilitate the coming together of friends and family members. The rituals associated with eating and drinking were particularly important around festive times, especially Christmas. Hosting the Christmas meal at their homes offered some women the opportunity to recapture, albeit temporarily, earlier times of family integration:

I have Christmas here...So that's nice. I do all the cooking the day before and Susan (*her daughter*) will bring a salad. That way I can sit back and enjoy the day. It's nice with the little ones around and we make a day out of it (W, 74).

In terms of beverages, coffee facilitates ritualised activities and provides what some interviewees considered to be a legitimate reason to request others' company. This can be important to those who require specific rituals to assist them in achieving the social contact that can alleviate their loneliness:

I go and annoy a few friends and say, "Come round for coffee" (W, 72).

Alcohol was also frequently mentioned as being consumed during episodes of social contact. Alcohol is well understood as a social lubricant among young and middle-aged adults (Beck et al. 1993), but the relevance of this function for older consumers is not as well recognised. For some interviewees, rituals surrounding alcohol consumption were valued for their ability to facilitate regular social contact:

At 5pm we meet at someone's house for a glass of wine, then it's home to fix dinner (W, 73).

Some who had lost a partner and experienced significant coping difficulties reported resorting to what they considered to be heavy alcohol consumption during the early stages of bereavement. They acknowledged this behaviour as a coping mechanism but recognised that it is not an ideal means of dealing with grief and loneliness:

After my husband died, I did go through a period where I seemed to drink more. It helped me sleep at night. But then one day I said to myself, "You had half a bottle last night - time to stop." So I went back to my glass a night (W, 66).

Reading and television

Reading (primarily books and newspapers) was described by many interviewees as a form of self-medication in their attempts to alleviate feelings of loneliness. Reading provides a means of passing time and keeping the mind active. It is also a favoured alternative to television which was often reported to be a vice if viewed during the day:

I read a lot. I don't watch TV until night time. I don't want to be one of those people who sit in front of the TV all day and do nothing else (W, 67).

Particularly for those living on their own, television was frequently watched later in the day as a result of its ability to partially substitute for the human company they would have previously enjoyed with partners or other family members in the evening. Evening programs, especially

the news, were considered acceptable viewing material, while daytime television was generally seen as lacking in quality and the capacity to stimulate mental activity. Books and newspapers, by comparison, supply a window into worlds that may be inaccessible to the constrained older person and assist the mind in remaining active. Unfortunately, deteriorating eyesight can prevent once-avid readers from enjoying this pastime and thus limit their ability to satisfactorily fill their time and ward off loneliness:

I used to take an active interest in shares and things like that and do a fair bit of reading. And now I don't read the paper so much because of the eyes (M, 95).

Gardening

Gardening was frequently mentioned as a pastime that offers many benefits of value to older people, especially in terms of providing a sense of purpose and functionality.

I try and get out in the garden, if I can. I do enjoy mowing the lawn and making everything nice (M, 80).

The results are tangible and can stimulate feelings of accomplishment that can increase self-esteem while facilitating the retention of physical strength and flexibility. Gardening can also consume significant periods of time and thus assist in passing the day. For those for whom gardening is valued as a form of loneliness management, the choices of retirement housing can become limited by the need to have access to a garden.

Shopping

Shopping was discussed in two main ways – as a necessary task, similar to other household chores, and as a source of pleasure. As a task, shopping can contribute to the order and routine of seniors' lives. It is a reason to get out of the house and engage in physical activity. For most interviewees this was described as a welcome activity but for those with mobility problems or who had lost their licenses due to deteriorating eyesight, shopping can become a logistical difficulty that requires an unwelcome reliance on others:

It's having to depend on other people to do shopping or take you shopping and what ever you have to do (W, 90).

For those who have been recently bereaved, shopping can represent a constant reminder of loss due to the need to make decisions alone and purchase smaller portions than in previous times:

I absolutely hate the idea there is just me and I've got to see to my affairs. Working your budget out or even writing your shopping list, this was always done with the two of us...I still resent, I think, the fact that it's up to me, it's my decision. I've nobody to talk it over with (W, 72).

On a more positive note, many interviewees described shopping as an outing that provides a change of environment and a touch of excitement to an otherwise routine day. Even those who are constrained financially can enjoy looking around the shops. Novelty-seeking needs can be addressed through just observing the shopping environment and all that is on offer:

Sometimes I'll go the shops, especially during the summer because it's so nice and cool there. If you go to the big centres you can spend the entire day. I usually take a book with me and I'll sit and have a coffee and read. I don't really buy anything but it's nice to see all that's there (W, 67).

Although the literature focuses on shopping as an opportunity for social interaction with sales staff and other customers (Kang and Ridgeway 1996), the interviewees did not mention conversations with such people as a favourable aspect of a shopping trip. Instead, real pleasure was derived from the opportunity to "do something" with loved ones. Female interviewees in particular discussed how they enjoyed shopping with daughters or close friends.

DISCUSSION

This study focused on the experience of loneliness among older people and the role of specific consumption activities in the management of this condition. Several consumption-related pastimes were perceived by interviewees to be instrumental in determining whether the increasing levels of social isolation experienced with advancing age result in feelings of emotional isolation and thus of loneliness. The consumption behaviours that were found to ameliorate loneliness and contribute to a higher perceived quality of life included utilising friends and family as an emotional resource, maintaining social contacts by engaging in eating and drinking rituals, and spending time constructively by reading and gardening. Shopping was also discussed as a pastime that assists in keeping seniors mentally, physically, and socially active. For those who interact regularly with older people, these findings do not provide any surprises. They do, however, formalise anecdotal knowledge and constitute a base from which appropriate public policy changes and social marketing programs can commence.

In terms of social interaction, the health and gerontological literatures highlight the importance of social contacts to alleviate loneliness (Bondevik and Skogstad 1998; Kim 1999; Tjihuis et al. 1999). However, less understood is the relative attractiveness of different kinds of social contacts for those experiencing loneliness. Prince et al.'s (1997) US study found that interaction with friends seemed to be more important than interaction with family members. By comparison, interviewees in the present study desired contact with both friends and family but they especially valued their time with family members, particularly children and grandchildren.

There was an apparent reluctance among some interviewees to establish new friendships with peers. It is recommended that seniors be encouraged to engage in social activities to reduce loneliness (Forbes 1996; Ranzjin and Grbich 2001), but the findings of the present study suggest that this will not always be perceived as an attractive option. Where seniors are averse to seeking the company of those their own age, programs that promote and facilitate intergenerational mixing may be more effective in alleviating loneliness. Such programs are being increasingly implemented in Australia by retirement villages, hostels, schools, mothers' groups, and libraries.

While social interaction is extensively addressed in the literature, the other methods of alleviating loneliness identified in this study have received considerably less attention. The findings thus have the potential to inform social marketing campaigns to address the problem of loneliness that will only become more common as populations age. For example,

an understanding of the food and beverage consumption rituals and other activities that facilitate social interaction could enable more effective communication with the community at large about the benefits and pleasures of spending time with older family members and friends. Those concerned about having to commit large amounts of time when visiting their older relatives may be encouraged to make the effort to meet over a coffee on a regular basis if they can see that the interaction need not be prolonged to be effective. Similarly, shopping trips can constitute a means of interacting with older friends and relatives that is pleasant for both parties and alleviates the need to make conversation over an extended period of time. This approach would treat the older person's family as the communications audience which may be more effective than attempting to encourage the lonely older person to take the initiative in arranging interactions. However, communications could also encourage seniors to actively contact others to arrange meetings around eating, drinking, and shopping as having a purpose for the meeting could make the request feel more legitimate and lessen concerns about refusal.

Reading and gardening were viewed by interviewees as being enjoyable and mentally stimulating. Rane-Szostak and Herth (1995) have noted that reading can produce a flow experience (as per Csikszentmihalyi and LeFevre 1989) that is inherently satisfying. This outcome was evident in this study for both reading and gardening, suggesting that, where aptitude and health permit, these pastimes could be the focus of programs designed to promote protective behaviours. For example, seniors could benefit from regular information provided by local libraries regarding the availability of large-text and talking books.

The benefits of gardening have implications for the design of living quarters in retirement villages and other eldercare facilities. Access to senior-friendly gardening equipment and explicit permission to tend certain garden areas may improve the emotional wellbeing of residents. Allowing residents to keep pets may also alleviate feelings of loneliness amongst those capable of caring for an animal. Alternatively, retirement housing could own communal pets that are able to interact freely with residents.

Theoretical Contributions

While human relationships are not usually considered within the realm of consumer behaviour, Belk's expansion of the discipline to include macro consumption contexts (1987) and his description of the self as including multiple layers that include other people as well as things (1988) combine to create the possibility of perceiving human relationships as forms of consumer behaviour. In addition, discussions of the dark side of consumer behaviour include reference to "consumed consumers", a category that encompasses such activities as receiving blood donations and participating in the baby market (Solomon 1999). It thus seems reasonable to conceptualise consumption more broadly to include people consuming each other. The findings of this study indicate that such an approach may be justifiable on the grounds that individuals can have specific outcomes that they desire (in this instance, the alleviation of loneliness) that require certain 'things' (in this case, other people) to be interacted with in certain ways. Definitions of consumption focus on the process of usage or destruction. Given the difficulties older people can face in achieving human interaction because of the finite time resources of others, this description exhibits a degree of fit as to spend time with older friends and family members consumes time that is then unavailable for other tasks or pastimes. Considering relationships as a possible form of consumption also draws attention to the range of consumption activities that are involved in both mundane and special modes of human interaction.

In terms of knowledge relating to the consumption of products, previous research examining the consumption practices of older consumers has noted a preference for objects of contemplation over objects of action (Rochberg-Halton 1984). While this may be the case when interviewees are asked about tangible consumption objects, it does not necessarily provide a complete picture of how consumption is embedded in the older person's life. When consumption activities, not just objects, are taken into consideration, the role of consumption in the quality of life of the older person becomes readily apparent. So while books may be listed as objects that are especially important to seniors, looking more deeply into the purpose of reading can shed light on why books are amongst those items prioritised by older consumers and explicate the role of such items in assisting individuals to cope with the ageing process.

Finally, existing models of loneliness in the gerontological literature focus on social interaction along with physical health and cognitive capacity to explain the increasing likelihood of experiencing loneliness with advancing age (Fees et al. 1999). The findings of the present study support the importance of social interaction and physical limitations but did not delve into the area of cognitive capacity as none of the interviewees suffered from a serious mental health problem. However, the findings suggest that a range of consumption behaviours may influence the extent to which seniors experience loneliness in the face of age-related social and physical restrictions. Models that take into account seniors' ability and willingness to enact these behaviours may be more effective in identifying those most at risk of the debilitating effects of loneliness and thus who are most in need of intervention.

Conclusion

This study examined older people's experiences of loneliness and how they may be ameliorated through consumption practices. Such research is important because the social and emotional needs of older consumers continue to be neglected in the consumer behaviour literature. Most interviewees reported the use of a range of consumption-related coping mechanisms to avoid experiencing distressing levels of loneliness. These included seeking human contact (especially through rituals involving food and beverages), engaging in extensive reading (and to a lesser extent television viewing), taking an active interest in gardening, and using shopping as an excursion or time filler.

The findings suggest several strategies to reduce the experience of loneliness. The strategy with the most potential may be to encourage family members to make regular contact with their older relatives by outlining specific consumption practices that can provide structure or parameters to interactions with older people. Other strategies include facilitating reading and gardening activities through the provision of modified reading materials and providing access to gardening opportunities.

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