
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.

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Introduction

This study explored 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.

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. Given the association between older age and loneliness, these negative consequence make the prevention and treatment of loneliness an important priority in rapidly ageing populations

Method

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.

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. 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.

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, 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.

The findings of this study have the potential to inform social marketing campaigns to address the problem of loneliness in older age groups. 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.

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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