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Social Isolation among Elderly People in the Digital Era: A Sociological Analysis of Aged Care in Australia

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, it is understood through various resources, that there is a significant increase in the elderly population worldwide and it has become the talk of many social platforms domestically and globally. In Australia alone, there is an increasing demand for residential aged care centres to take care of such increased elderly population. But it is evident that such established centres often fail to provide service to the maximum, to fulfil psychosocial needs of increased elderly population in particular. Even though the digital technology has significantly transformed communication and social interactions, there is a huge gap prevailing between the social platforms and elderly population. Opportunities in using digital platforms are not provided equally among the elderly population and they are unfamiliar with such digital tools due to the lack of basic skills and not being tutored with sufficient tutoring support. This study examines the relationship between social isolation and digital inequality among elderly populations residing in aged care centres in Australia. A qualitative research approach was used based on observational experiences collected from a residential aged care facility in Melbourne, Australia. It apparently shows the day-to-day lives of such elderly population is being socially disconnected and excluded from using technology. This issue has been analysed using key sociological perspectives including Durkheim's theory of social integration, conflict theory and symbolic interactionism to better understand the nature and characteristics of the issue. Thus, this study aims to provide an understanding that centres engaged in taking care of elderly people must link social and emotional wellbeing with digital platforms to provide a quality service.

1. Introduction

In this twenty-first century, the rising of aged population has reached to a notable point globally, which is one of the most important global demographic transformations actually. Especially, this rise is very clear throughout Australia in its sharp increase. Individuals at the age between 50 and 65 or above that are desperately in need of intensive care and also, they require different levels of care, (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2023). Because of this importance, residential aged care centers are seen as a most important part of the society and system. At the same time, these centers are on the first place dealing with the elderly peoples' physical and medical issues but there is a huge need to focus on the needs of psychosociology of those elderly people, especially as they are left alone by their own family and the society. This loneliness and social isolation are the biggest issue across Australia.

Social isolation is often defined as lack of meaningful social relationships or lack of regular social contact according to (Cornwell and Waite, 2009), and also loneliness can be described as the experience of feeling alone and disconnected from all the relationships and connection that they usually have around them. Even though these two concepts are different by nature, they are indeed having a close connection and they do have very serious and dangerous impact on mental and physical health of those elderly people. In such aged care service providers social isolation is most of the time understood as a combination of things such as separation form their own family and community interactions, failure in physical health and their current living life style. Ultimately, these factors are likely to weaken their existing social bonds with the community and it reduces the opportunities for a meaningful interaction, and most importantly, it leads to lowered sense of belonging and acceptance among residents.

On the other hand, it is evident that the vast development and expansion of digital technologies have completely modified and reshaped patterns of communication and social interaction. Digital platforms such as video conferencing tools, social media, and online communities provide new ways to maintain social relationships. Based on the theories presented by the knowledgeable the above said technologies greatly support to lessen social isolation among the elderly people throughout the country. But, when it comes to reality, many elderly people find it very difficult in using such digital tools properly and effectively. This is what known as the digital divide, goes beyond mere access to technology and covers differences in skills, self-confidence and support (van Dijk, 2020). Therefore, the digital divide suggests wide range of inequalities, especially in relation to age, education and institutional resources.

These issues and difficulties are much more compounded by organizational and structural limitations within such service providers. It can be said that without enough training in using such digital tools, assistance by staff, and user-friendly systems most of the time prevent them from benefiting at the maximum from the digital communication despite the lack of digital technologies available. Because of this fact, there is a possibility to have increased the existing issues instead of reducing social isolation by the technological advancements

This paper critically examines the connection between social isolation and digital inequality among elderly people in such residential aged care centers throughout Australia. It tries to deal with the following question: How does the digital divide contribute to social isolation among elderly residents in aged care settings? And this study gives an understandable analysis of how structural, institutional and interactional factors shape the lived experiences of elderly individuals in the digital era by linking key sociological theories with qualitative observational understanding and knowledge.

In that way, the paper presents that social isolation in aged care cannot be considered as an individual or psychological issue alone. But it is a very complicated social issue deeply rooted in broader patterns of inequality, institutional practices and changing modes of communication. Therefore, when speaking about this particular issue, it needs a more holistic approach that explains the importance of both social integration and digital inclusion in promoting wellbeing in their later life. And this study is conducted by qualitative observational insights collected and archived during a placement in a residential aged care facility in Melbourne, Australia.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conceptualizing Social Isolation and Loneliness in Later Life

It is understood that social isolation and loneliness are very much closely related but still, they are two different concepts in their nature and they are significantly discussed in gerontological and sociological research. Social isolation is often said that the real condition of having limited contacts or communication with the outer world, on the other hand loneliness is personally emotional experience which is caused from a perceived gap between desired and actual social relationships (Cornwell and Waite, 2009). Even though these concepts are varying analytically, they often combined among elderly people and they bring the same negative outcomes.

At present social isolation is identified as a public health issue through the researchers conducted by an institution that is very interested. Holt-Lunstad et al. (2010) conducted a meta-analysis proving that social isolation increases the rate of death and impermanence by roughly 29%, saying that its impacts that come out of such issue is very much similar to major health risk inputs such as smoking and obesity. Likewise, Cacioppo and Hawkley (2009) present their argument that loneliness causes to a wide range of psychological issues such as depression, anxiety and weakens their understanding ability. These

outcomes of the study clearly and firmly state that social isolation is not just a social inconvenience but a very serious element of health and wellbeing of elderly people.

And also, according to the statement of National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, loneliness has been linked with neurocognitive failure and it has increased the risk of dementia (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, 2020). Further the physiological mechanisms basically on this relationship see that increased stress responses, inflammation and reduced immune functioning. That is why, social isolation has to be seen as a multidimensional problem that strongly affects elderly people at psychological, physiological and social levels.

2.2. Ageing, Life Transitions and Social Disconnection

The natural ageing process in lifespan of men and women is often going with life transitions that disturb or destroy already functioning social systems and pave way to social isolation. Now when we talk about retirement of elderly people it becomes a very crucial turning point, because it reduces the day-to-day interactions of elderly people with their co-workers or other friends, they loved so dearly and also it reduces opportunities for their social engagement. At the same time, grief on loss of their loved ones like the death of their spouse or close friends can cause very serious emotional distress and it can also distance them from the social support (Victor et al., 2000).

In addition to the personal life issues of the elderly people, the sudden and planned societal changes also have affected the social attachment of them. Putnam (2000) presents his argument that the societies of today's era is experiencing a reduction in social capital, due to the reduced participation and engagement in community activities and it is weakening of social communications. In fact, this weakness is particularly evident in urbanized societies. Because, in urbanized living societies, elderly people are left alone due to several reasons and they are left alone from neighborly interactions and participations.

Likewise, we see in this modern era the that the extended family systems used to live in groups of multiple family members are shifting to nuclear family structures. This particular change of the system is one of the major reasons among many to affect elderly care. We know that in many traditional societies, elderly people were supported and taken care by family members within the household. But, in this modern world, due to increased migration from place to place or mobility of family set-ups and changing family living style have lowered the availability of informal caretaking. Because of these changes, elderly people of today's world are depending on formal caretaking systems such as residential aged care facilities, though they fail to provide emotional support to such elderly people in the way they are supported and taken care by their family households.

2.3. Institutional Living and the Dynamics of Aged Care

When the elderly people are admitted in to residential aged care centers, they are affected on their sense of identity and belonging hugely because of the sudden change of lifestyle. Goffman's (1961) concept of "total institutions" gives us a comprehensive guidance for understanding the social changes of aged care service providers. In so called aged care centers, when elderly people are admitted, they sense that they are removed from a lifestyle used to live with their loved ones, they were free to move and use things that they used. But here in aged care centers they will have to follow a routinary life. They will have to follow certain rules and regulations that they were not used to. These rules and regulations will definitely affect their mental health and their freedom.

When their daily activities are organized around aged care service providers and leaving little space for their own choice or engagement, they become depersonalized like they start to feel that they are no more an ordinary person but a patient who has been admitted to a hospital for care. In fact, they lose their identity as residents. Studies show that this loss of freedom and identity is closely connected to feelings of loneliness and emotional distress (Chen et al., 2014).

In reality, the organizational affairs of an aged care service providers they mainly focus or mostly deal with affairs related to physical needs. They give priority for physical care needs such as feeding, medication and hygiene rather than emotional and social support for the elderly. Meanwhile, people who work for such service providers may not find enough time sit with those elderly people for casual conversation due to increased workloads or they may have limited time. And also, staffing shortages may be another reason. Because of such reasons social connections between elderly people and the outer world are minimized or restricted without their knowledge. In an environment such as this can lead to increase the issue to an extent which we wouldn't have expected.

If not, interactions and communications within such aged care centers may not be continuously happening. Of course, relationships with staff are always task-oriented. They each interact with others on time basis. Staff appear at their prescribed time unlike their home members. And also, the interactions that take place within the aged care centers may differ based on their cognitive ability, health conditions or their personal interests. They are not bound to engage in with interest or in the means of relationships. That's why these factors directly or indirectly fuel to a decline in meaningful social engagement or increasing feelings of isolation.

2.4. The Digital Divide among Elderly Populations

The understanding of the digital divide has developed from an understanding on entry to a broader exposure that included variations in skills, usage and final outcomes (van Dijk, 2020). When the modern technology is handled by elderly people

residing in aged care centers because of the physical limitations or their cognitive weakness and the poor knowledge of handling such technological tools are becoming the main reasons for this digital divide issue. And they don't have prior experience in using such tools also a reason. But access to digital devices is only one segment of the divide. Because, sometimes, residents of such aged care center may have enough access to the digital technology based on the center's structure and operations, but if the residents do not possess required skills or knowledge of the devices that they having may cause difficulties in using them effectively. This includes difficulties with handling, understanding of digital terminology and maintaining its safety on online. That is why the availability and handful of access do not help those elderly people to be engaged in fruitful digital participation and engagement.

Friemel (2016) puts his argument that the digital divide echoes broader social inequalities, like elderly people with higher levels of education, well paid income and social support are more beneficial to engage with digital platforms and on the other hand, those who are below the level, they are less likely to benefit from technological advancements. This may lead to remain separated from mingling with the society.

Further, the concept of digital divide in aged care service providers is worsened by institutional limitations which is an undeniable truth. They may do not have needed technological infrastructure and well trained or average staff. Sometimes staff may not be having the appropriate training or resources to support such elderly people in using digital tools. This is how elderly populations are kept away from the digital platforms of communication and they are kept further in isolation.

2.5. Digital Technologies as Tools for Social Inclusion

Though there are issues existing with the digital divide, studies carried on this subject matter says that digital technologies have very great influence to develop and improve social connectivity and engagement among elderly populations. Chen and Schulz (2016) discovered that the use of information and communication technologies can lessen feelings of loneliness by making them engage with their family and loved ones through digital communication. For an example, video calls, especially, provide them an opportunity for face-to-face live interaction by which elderly people can maintain emotionally supportive bonds.

In fact, social media platforms give multiple scopes and opportunities for elderly individuals to mingle and interact with the communities in wide range and take part in social activities form the place where they reside. For example, now-a-days, online groups and social forums can create and provide opportunities and circumstances for sharing their experiences, they will be able exchange information and also, they can build strong relationships with the outer world. This practice of course can pave ways and ways to have the feelings of belonging and they will definitely help them to create and maintain their identity through these kinds of platforms even though older adults in such service providers are far from their loved ones and family. The absence of physical interaction is not going to harm the survival of older residents of such service providers.

But, to reduce or eradicate the feelings of isolation among the elderly people in such elderly service centers digital technologies must be used effectively and intentionally. Because, the effectiveness of digital technologies is very important in a service center. And it mainly depends on factors like, including accessibility, usability and support. Tsai et al., (2015) clearly states that elderly people often require structured training and ongoing assistance to develop digital skills. The staff and the individuals reside in the service centers must be given opportunities and they should attend training sessions in advance before they are put to practice. In the absence of such support, technology may become a source of frustration instead a base of improvement.

Above all these facts we discussed herein, the digital technologies should be viewed and approached as complementary tool but not as if substitutes for in-person social engagement. Because as we know, face-to-face interaction is very much essential for emotional wellbeing. The interest and engagement on digital communication should not become a threat to replace the face-to-face interaction at any cost.

2.6. The Impact of COVID-19 on Social Isolation and Digital Use

During the pandemic of COVID-19, it was an evident fact that the restriction on visiting personally the elderly people caused a huge breakdown in the centers of elderly people. It became an intensified issue of social isolation. Limited visits and social distancing measures and limited opportunities for interaction in person leaving many residents dependent on digital communication to maintain contact with their families (Seifert et al., 2021).

Though the digital technologies were an aid to communication during the pandemic, it also exposed the limitations of digital inclusion among elderly individuals. Not all the residents who were admitted into elderly people care centers could use the digital tools effectively due to the lack of skills, lack of access and lack of necessary guidance and support. This shortcoming had come to lime light and it addressed the digital divide as part emergency preparedness and social care strategies.

Fortunately, the COVID-19 was one of the reasons for us to revise and reshape the role of technology in aged care centers and organizations. It was understood the importance of digital access and improvement and also, it was understood the elderly people who reside in the centers must be provided with necessary training in advance. And also, it was understood, that the means that are considered to be included in the process of developing communications skills and relieving the old

population from the feelings of isolation were much more reactive and limited in opportunities. Therefore, we must be pretty much systematic and we must have long-term approaches.

2.7. Critical Gaps in the Literature

Even though this research provide very useful understandings on social isolation and digital divide, still there are many gaps unattended. Firstly, personal level factors like, health and individual circumstances are considered much on literature focus and very little focus is given to system and organizational strategies. These particular limits understanding of how broader social systems are worsening to isolation.

Secondly, there are researches lacking to combine sociological theories with direct observations in such aged care service providers. Most of the studies speak about the isolation existing in aged care centers but they fail in reality to see what is underlying in the social processes and power factors that shape these experiences.

Thirdly, the service providers involved in this field remain inefficient when it comes to bridging digital usage and social interactions. As we know, aged care service providers an important part in shaping the experiences of the elderly populations but at the same time they don't hold their responsibilities correctly when they identify digital inequalities.

That is this paper of study on the issue of isolation and digital divide attempts to identify these existing gaps by connecting theoretical analysis with observational knowledges, giving a much more comprehensive understanding of social isolation in this modern digital era.

2.8. Theoretical Framework

Introduction to Theoretical Framework

Without a solid theoretical knowledge, it is quite difficult to understand the nature of social isolation among elderly populations in this digital era that expands beyond illustrative analysis and it discovers the existing social processes shaping this serious issue. That is why this research study is carried out on three key sociological reflections, which are Emile Durkheim's theory of social integration, conflict theory and symbolic interactionism to submit a multidimensional understanding of social isolation in aged care service providers across the country.

The existing social isolation has been analyzed using all these three theories very seriously and sincerely to have a quality understanding in this regard. Durkheim's methodology signifies the importance of social bonding and unity for personal wellbeing of elderly people. Conflict theory talks about the inequalities especially in availability on resources like digital technologies. On the other hand, symbolic interactionism tries to focus on daily routinely interactions and the meaningful attachments, identity and sense of belonging. All these theories together give an understandable explanation on how social isolation is formed and experienced in elderly lives and digital inequality.

Durkheim's Theory of Social Integration

This is the main theory of social isolation which can be used to understand nature of social and emotional outcomes of isolation. Durkheim has strongly argued in his seminal work Suicide (1897) that a normal person needs strong social connections to maintain psychological stability and a sense of belonging. Social unity is meant the extent to which people are connected to their social sects including their family, community and institutions.

He further says that low levels of social mingling can create feelings of alienation, meaninglessness and feelings of disconnected from the community. And there are cases may be victimized as "egoistic suicide" which often happens when individual start feeling separated from society and lack a sense of purpose for their life on this earth. But this study does not focus on suicide but Durkheim's understandings are closely connected in explaining the emotional distress experienced by socially isolated elderly people.

When it comes to aged care centers, elderly people in such centers most of the times experience decline in social unity. The change of lifestyle from independent living lifestyle to an organized structure settings creates a loss of familiar social networks including family, friends and neighbors. This strange experience weakens social bonding and decreases opportunities for meaningful interaction. This is why residents of such care centers tend to feel loneliness, isolation and loss of identity.

And also, aged care centers fail to provide them with enough opportunities for social integration. Center routines, staff workloads and limited social activities will definitely restrict interactions and engagements. Even though the residents are with lots of people around them the absence of meaningful relationships are meant to say that social integrations remain at low level. This indicates Durkheim's argument that the sound social connections are more important than mere physical presence.

In this modern digital world, social integration mainly mediated by technology. Because, digital tools like video calls and social media have the power to create strong social bonding by helping contact with family members and loved ones. But, in reality, when elderly people who are lacking by using Knowledge of the digital devices, the digital divide additionally decreases their level of social connections. Therefore, digital exclusion can increase their feelings of isolation and disconnection. That is why, Durkheim's theory shows that social isolation is not just a personal issue among elderly populations within aged care centers an understanding of damaged social bonding and insufficient unity within both physical and digital social environments.

Conflict Theory and Structural Inequality

Conflict theory gives an argumentative understanding on inequality and power relations within society. According to Karl Marx, conflict theory makes its argument how social systems create and maintain inequalities in using resources, opportunities and power.

In this deep study, we understand the issue of digital divide as a form of systematic inequality. Availability of technologies is not equally distributed within the society; but it is mainly controlled by factors like income, education, age and social support. In this regard, elderly populations within aged care centers are disadvantaged especially because of their financial issues, lack of technical knowledge or without the needed support on using digital tools.

In the application of this theory, inequality is understood as an embedded broader social and economic structures. Those who possess resources and skills are benefitting all the privileges of technological advancements but the weak groups are left behind. Because of this difference, the digital divide worsens existing social inequalities and creates new forms disconnection.

institutional factors available within an aged care center also encourage inequality. They may not have enough funding to provide proper facilities, to build needed infrastructure or training programs to support digital engagement among the residents of the centers. There may be unskilled staff to assist the residents to use the digital tools. Because of this shortcoming, elderly individuals stand out of digital communication.

And also, conflict theory speaks the role of ageism in shaping inequalities. Ageism is understood as discrimination and stereotypes according to age, which mostly result in marginalization of older adults. When it comes to digital platforms, elderly individuals are often left behind in the name of incapability of using technology, leading to a lack of investment in training and support programs. This in particular worsen their participation and the digital divide.

There are issues in accessing to information and services in digital divide. Now at present many basic services like healthcare, banking and government support are mostly delivered through digital platforms so, when elderly populations lack digital access, they may face difficulties in receiving these facilities and services.

Therefore, based on conflict theory we understand that social isolation among elderly populations is not just an issue of personal affairs but it is deeply rooted in systematic inequalities and power variations. This issue needs systematic gradual changes that provide equal access to digital resources and support.

Symbolic Interactionism and Meaning of Social Relationships

Day-to-day Interactions and meanings individuals attach to their experiences are dealt in symbolic interactionism. This theoretical approach connects with scholars like George Herbert Mead (1934) and Herbert Blumer (1969), argues that social reality is created by interactions and communications.

When it comes to aged care, symbolic interactionism points out the need of meaningful social communications in maintaining elderly peoples' identity and sense belonging. Because, elderly populations experience a sense of self from their deep-rooted relationships with family members, their loved ones, friends and caregivers. When these communications and interactions are disturbed or reduced immediately those individuals start to feel their loss of identity and self-worth.

Observations conducted several aged care service providers throughout the country say that residents value the interactions with family members. For an instance, the question that they repeatedly ask on their family visits shows the importance of family in maintaining a sense of identity. We should not see these interactions as merely social exchanges but they really carry a deep symbolic meaning, showing love, belonging and recognition.

At the same time, interactions with staff within the care centers also an important role. But since these interactions are mostly task based and lacking in emotion. Because, most of the time conversations between the staff and the residents would be about routine activities, like meals, medical care rather than meaningful personal engagement.

Therefore, digital technologies carry the ability to conduct symbolic interaction by engaging with frequent and meaningful communication. Video calls is one of the finest examples among many. But, when elderly people are left behind from using these digital tools, they become hopeless for meaningful interactions, and further it is weakening their sense of identity.

This theory also insists the role of interpretation in handling social isolation. Because depending on the differences in the expectations interpretations in a common environment people may have different experiences.

Therefore, symbolic interactionism clearly says that social isolation is not only the poor or decreased interaction but about the quality and meaningful relationships.

Integrating Theoretical Perspectives

Though the theories discussed in this work give very useful understandings on social isolation among elderly populations within the centers dedicated towards providing sincere care, their integration gives much more reasonable understanding in this regard. Durkheim’s theory details how loss of social integration creates feelings of isolation and emotional distress, conflict theory says how structural inequalities especially, the digital divide limit usage of resources and symbolic

interactionism points out the importance of effective communications and identity in handling individual's experiences.

Altogether these theories attempt to discuss that social isolation is a complicated and multidimensional issue created and carried out by both macro level strategies and micro level interactions. In fact, within the aged care service providers social isolation is influenced by a combination of very worsened social bonding, imbalanced usage of technology and limited opportunities for fruitful communication.

This approach of integration too pinpoints the need of focusing social isolation at different stages. At the planning level, policies created in this regard must focus seriously on imbalanced usage of digital tools and support. At the organizational level, aged care service providers must give first place to social and emotional wellbeing together with physical care. And at the interpersonal level, we must put our maximum efforts to carry out meaningful communications that improve sense of identity and belonging of elderly people who remain in so called aged care centers.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Approach

In order to evaluate the living experiences among the elderly people remaining in aged care centers, a qualitative, interpretivist research approach was used and a considerable course of time has been spent in this regard. A qualitative research approach is highly appropriate for examining complex social issues such as social isolation, since, it helps researchers gain a detailed and in-depth understanding of emotions of upset elderly population, their meanings and social interactions within the given environment (Creswell, 2014). The interpretivist approach identifies that the social reality is maintained by their personal experiences and communications, by which making it very suitable for understanding subjective experiences of isolation.

3.2. Research Design and Context

This research was conducted over a period of time at a residential aged care center in Melbourne, Australia, named (OACG) Opal Aged Care, Glenroy based on participant observation done during a placement with a timeline of about 10 - 12 weeks. In the center, there were groups of elderly population who were from different family backgrounds with diverse physical and understanding abilities.

The study has been drawn on ethnographic theories where a direct engagement could be supported with the social environment in observing their daily routinary affairs and communications (Bryman 2016). This approach greatly helped on this research to identify the systems and functions of aged care center which we cannot understand through ordinary interviews or surveys.

3.3. Data Collection

In this research to collect data, multiple qualitative methods have been used and all these data have been gathered by engaging in daily interactions with the elderly populations present and keen observations on them within the Opal Aged Care service provider in Glenroy, Melbourne, giving live understanding into day-to-day experiences of them. The researcher engaged in direct interactions with approximately 25 residents during their daily routines.

Live observation on social behavior, different ways of communication and participation in organized group activities. Understandable field observations recorded throughout the placement

Observation carried out on:

- Repeated social interactions
- The quality of social interactions
- Emotional expressions repeated often
- Behavioral patterns of elderly population
- Engagement with digital technologies
- Interactions between staff and elderly populations

3.4. Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) has been applied to analyze collected data. Using systematic coding and grouping methodology it was quite easy to identify key themes such as loneliness of elderly population, their emotional distress which is a serious concern among them and the gap between elderly population and technology advancement.

Also in this research, theoretical interpretation has been used connecting observed patterns to sociological structures with social integration, conflict theory and symbols interactionism. This combined approach further strengthens both empirical and theoretical value of this study.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards were strictly maintained throughout the study. Not a single information has been identified and recorded without solid and sincere observation and all the observations throughout the period of staying at this specific center have been anonymized. Even interactions with the residents of this specific center were carried out with utmost respect, sensitivity to their weak state and vulnerability. And reflexivity has been maintained throughout the research from the beginning till the end.

3.6. Limitations

This research has been conducted based on a single aged care environment applied to broader populations with different backgrounds and the real-world scenarios beyond the original

study group. At the same time the depth of qualitative knowledge gives very useful understandings of living experiences and supports to innovative research in this field.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Lived Experiences of Social Isolation in Aged Care

In reality, social isolation is not restricted to a particular fragment of life but it is deeply rooted in daily lives of residents in aged care centers. According to keen observations carried out on elderly population, it is understood that how the experiences within aged care centers shape the daily routine of elderly population considering limited opportunities and resources for a meaningful connection with the community. Further, it was evident that the elderly residents continuously kept on saying that they strongly longed to return to their family because of their emotional dependency. They were not able to get used to the new environment where their family members are missing.

The question frequently asked by all the residents of aged care centers was, "When will my son or daughter come?" or "Can I go home soon?" and it was asked within short intervals. In fact, this was not a memory-related issue, but it showed their deeper emotional longing to connect with their family back. Observations indicated that residents longed to return home primarily because of emotional attachment and the sense of security associated with family relationships. Their main concern is not the environment itself, but the absence of meaningful relationships. They tend to show their loss of belonging or loss of identity.

And also, it was noticeable that few elderly people used to sit at a certain place at their choice for long period of time and they were not engaged with anyone, not talking to anyone or not taking part in activities at all. Though, there were many activities around them to be engaged, they appeared emotionally withdrawn and socially disengaged during social activities.

These findings indicate that social isolation in such aged care centers structured through active expressions of loneliness and withdrawal without any reason stating its complicated and multidimensional facts. This further shows the research by demonstrating how isolation is experienced within an organized institution in real-time.

4.2. Digital Divide and Technological Exclusion in Practice

During the observation period, it was observed that limited access to digital tools contributed significantly to social isolation among elderly residents. Which is an important factor contributing to social isolation. Even though they are provided with tablets and phones to connect with their family, due to the unavailability of digital tools or nor everyone possess the skill to use them properly isolation is still prevailing. And also, these digital devices were available occasionally within the centers is to be noted.

Among the observations carried out on this, it was noticed that most of the residents of care center showed hesitation or they were reluctant in using such devices due to their inability and lack of knowledge. Because of this situation not knowing how to operate, they become highly dependent on staff support and which worsens the issue further. Staff's availability is restricted to their workloads. Therefore, residents in the center will have to wait for a long time to get connected with their loved ones.

And also, the unavailability of structured digital support system was seen during the observation. They didn't have a regular training session in supporting the residents with digital communication. Because of this fact, contacting with family and loved ones through video calls and messaging facilities are very much restricted.

These findings clearly show that the digital divide works not only at the level of entries but also at the level of confidence, skills and the support of organization. This is related to van Dijk's (2020) argument that digital inequality is multidimensional and socially interrelated. Very importantly, the digital usage and engagement directly affect social connection. When the residents within aged care centers do not get in-person meetings with their loved ones then they will have to use digital devices to connect with them. In such situation, due to digital divide issue they become further isolated. This shows that digital exclusion becomes as a key factor to recreate social disconnection within the aged care service providers.

At the same time, it becomes very important to understand that the existing research gives a different mixed findings on the usage of digital technologies in order to reduce social isolation within aged care centers. Some findings give an understanding that the usage of digital technologies can hugely enhance social connectivity and help the residents within aged care centers to be connected with their loved ones. On the other hand, some other studies argue that to use the digital technologies effectively digital literacy, usability of digital tools, organization support are very necessary to benefit maximum. Ultimately, without the necessary conditions discussed above, technology may have a limited impact on reducing social isolation., if not it might have serious feelings of frustration and abandonment among elderly users.

4.3. Emotional and Mental Health Consequences

All the findings seriously focus on the important connection between social isolation and destroying mental health among elderly population who remain in the aged care centers. Observation carried out on them clearly shows that strong and serious emotional moods created by deep emotional distress after admitted into aged care centers from their family, anxiety because of not enough in-person meetings with their loved ones and confusion of their belonging and identity frequently pave

ways to feelings of loneliness and disconnected from their family and loved ones.

These kinds of emotional downfall do not only affect the isolated residents but also across multiple individuals mentioning an organized issue rather than personal vulnerability. The residents who were longing to get back to their home were having the feeling or experiencing the loss of belonging and identity greatly, where these characteristics are very important factors of a human for a sound psychological wellbeing. This understanding really goes with Holt-Lunstad et al., (2010), who seriously speaks about the important outcome of social isolation on mental health and mortality. But this study supports the existing research by explaining how these grave effects are faced within such aged care organizations in real-time mentioning the day-to-day emotional struggles of elderly population.

Very importantly, according to the studies carried out on this subject matter, it is understood, that emotional distress is aroused and enhanced not only by lack of in-person interactions through digital technologies but also by the loss of meaningful interactions between the residents and outer world. The physical care provided by such aged care centers to its elderly residents do not fulfil their emotional needs and wants, but creating an empty space between physical care and psychological wellbeing of them.

4.4. Durkheim's Perspective: Disintegration of Social Bonds

According to Durkheim's theory of social integration, it is understandable that, elderly people admitted into aged care centers by their own family members face low level of social integration and this condition create emotional and psychological distress among them. This sudden change of life style, new strange environment away from their own disturbs their present social bonds and it decreases opportunities for creating new meaningful and strong relationships within new living environment.

Durkheim (1897) presented his argument on this subject matter stating that people need personally strong social bonding to carry on a sense of purpose for their stay within aged care centers and for their sense of belonging within the environment. In this study, the repeated expressions of loneliness and the desire to reconnect with family members reflected the lack of strong social bonding among residents. This takes us to a serious condition of social disintegration where elderly people fall under state of disconnected from the social network where they are safe and healthy by mental and physical requirements.

Above all these, the findings on this subject matter give an understanding that, when the elderly population are admitted into organized or routinary environment, the new living style may without their knowledge lead to this disintegration because of the limited opportunities for meaningful social interactions they have. The system within centers finds very much difficult to create strong social bonds among the elderly residents because of the lack of emotional connection. It is the main factor that prevents them to come to a common platform of unity even if they are collectively engaged for group activities.

Therefore, from the perspective of Durkheim social care is not just an individual experience but an impact of worsened social gathering within centers for elderly people.

4.5. Conflict Theory: Digital Inequality as Structural Exclusion

Conflict theory mainly focuses on inequalities within an environment. According to the theory, the findings clearly state that how the digital divide plays the role as a form of structural inequality which encourages social exclusion. Due to limited access to the available digital tools, training and help needed for effective engagement, elderly people within aged care centers are put to disadvantageous state.

Further, the study reveals that digital exclusion created by systemic factors, such as:

- Limited institutional investment in digital infrastructure
- Lack of training programs for elderly people
- Time restrictions and workload pressures on working staff

These factors show broader inequalities in the distribution of digital tools, where only those who already possess vast knowledge, experience is benefitting heavily by the technological advancement.

Furthermore, the study gives an understanding that digital exclusion contributes to a form of marginalization since the elderly populations are kept away from modern ways of communication and participation. Due to this situation, elderly people admitted in aged care centers not only limited to maintain their relationship with their family and loved ones but also, they become highly dependent on the staff or the organizational practices with regard to communication.

On this background, the digital era creates a paradox: though they create new opportunities for being connected with their loved ones and family through digital tools, on the other hand, it creates new form of inequality and exclusion too. Thus, conflict theory shares a critical lens for understanding how technological advancement can affect and worsen the existing social isolation and loneliness further holding by elderly population within the care centers.

4.6. Symbolic Interactionism: Meaning, Identity, and Belonging

Symbolic interactionism gives an understanding that how social isolation is seen or experienced by the individuals within the aged care centers at micro level particularly in relation to

identity and meaning. The studies and findings on this subject matter clearly show that communication with family and loved ones gives them an important symbolic value for elderly people representing connection, recognition and sense of belonging.

When all the residents again and again mentioned of going back to their family or asking about their family visits show that this longing is a common sense of all the residents who remain in aged care centers. So, when there are long intervals in visiting by family members and loved ones or when the interactions are not happening regularly elderly population who live in aged care centers start feeling loss of identity as their social roles and their relationships with others become lost.

At the same time, mingling with mates withing aged care centers always limited in emotional part. Because, in an environment where rules and regulations take the control of activities the communication between the elderly people and the staff cannot be very effective like interactions in-person. That is why, when residents lose the opportunities to use technologies, they also lose meaningful interaction too. In this way, symbolic interactionism argues that social isolation is not just about lack of communication but it is always about the loss of meaningful, identity-affirming relationships.

4.7. Bridging the Gap: Reimagining the Role of Technology

Overstating the reality of digital technologies in reducing social isolation is not an appropriate view since, there are scholars who continuously argue that technological solutions cannot only solve the deeper social and emotional aspects of isolation, that are deeply rooted in abandoned social relationships and organizational limitations. This clearly shows that digital technologies must have closely linked with broader social and organizational setups for an effective outcome.

Technologies have significant ability to reduce social isolation but on the other hand, their effectiveness highly depends on how such digital tools are handled or used into daily usage. Because, simply making availability of the digital tools cannot fulfil the need of communication or it cannot reduce the feeling of isolation by the elderly people in care centers. For a meaningful communication and interactions digital technologies definitely need commitment by the organization, they must be trained properly and must be supported.

To fill the gap between elderly people and isolation felt by them the study presents multiple key plans:

- Providing structured digital literacy programs designed for elderly users
- Introducing simplified and user-friendly technologies
- Encouraging staff involvement in facilitating digital communication
- Linking digital interaction with daily care routines

Therefore, these ideas should not be taken lightly as optional enhancements but as very much needed aspects for a dedicated care to be given to those poor elderly populations in so called aged care centers. Thus, digital connectivity must be taken as a key concern in promoting and maintaining social wellbeing of elderly populations especially in the environments where interactions in-person are very limited. The findings further advise to have a different view about digital technologies. We should not see technology as only a tool but it should be a social resource by which we can improve relationships and improve the quality of life.

5. Conclusions

In this study, an attempt has been made to examine social isolation among elderly populations admitted in aged care centers in this era of digital, showing that it is a complex social issue rather than it is a personal issue of an individual. According to the research questions given above, the findings provide a clear understanding of the concept of digital divide which has become an inevitable concern in contributing to and rearranging social isolation among elderly populations who are left alone from their family and loved ones.

This research further shows that, though the availability of digital communication and digital technologies have reached an extent in large yet, most of the elderly individuals in aged care centers remain abandoned or they quite far from the usage of such digital tools due to their weakness or complete unawareness in handling digital tools or they are not trained to use them with proper knowledge. Sometimes, they are lacking of their confidence and from the support they supposed to be provided by the organizations where they remain. As it has been stated in the introduction above, the digital divide goes beyond the availability of digital tools and shows broader inequalities in the provision of resources, needed education and required social support. Therefore, digital exclusion not only prevents smooth, regular communication but also worsens existing systems of marginalization within aged care centers environments.

Furthermore, the findings gathered in this regard show that social isolation within aged care centers worsened by organizational functions, including designed and implemented daily routines, very limited available opportunities for effective interactions and mainly objective of the organization is focusing on physical care rather than the psychosocial wellbeing of the elderly population. These factors actually weaken linking social communication and encouraging emotional distress based on the argument presented by Durkheim that reduced social bonds lead greatly to disconnection and loss of identity and belonging. At the same time, according to the conflict theory unequal access to digital tools within aged care centers reshape organizational inequalities and further, symbolic interactionism

shows the importance of meaningful relationships in maintaining an identity and a sense of belonging.

Altogether, these understandings make the central argument of this research: that social isolation faced as a serious and growing issue within aged care centers is controlled by organizational rules and regulations, structural inequalities and digital exclusion. Therefore, in discussing this major issue demands a different understanding from a narrow focus on physical care to a more holistic model to priorities social and emotional wellbeing of elderly population.

In order to achieve this as a goal, many key planning strategies are needed definitely and such planning or strategies include the development of effective digital policies, the implementation of carefully designed and easily understandable digital education programs for elderly populations. The organizations dedicated to taking care of the elderly population of the nation must focus on increasing institutional investments in technology and provide training sessions continuously along with the growth of digital devices. Person centered approaches must be adopted and practiced to promote meaningful social engagement. Very importantly, digital technologies should be linked as tools for improving and expanding relationships rather than treating as optional additive tools to care the elderly population.

In the summing up of this research study, filling the gap of digital divide should not be a technological challenge. Making sure that elderly populations remain in aged care centers are able to use and participate in digital communication without any hesitation or reluctance because it is the key aspect for eradicating isolation, strengthening social bonding and improving overall quality of life of the elderly populations. Aged care centers functioning with the objective of taking care of elderly population of the nation can move forward by focusing on both structural and interactional dimensions of isolation. It can move towards providing not only longer lives, but also more socially connected, respected and meaningful lives for older populations.

6. Recommendations

The rise of elderly population as a critical issue existing at present has become a significant concern among many prominent sociologists and scholars globally. In this research study, in order to devise a solution on social isolation among elderly populations how the digital advancements can be utilized, its pros and cons have been discussed particularly in Australia. Several recommendations have been tabled based on the findings of this study. Despite the digital advancements at its peak, lack of knowledge and unequal provision of digital tools within established aged care centers worsen the issue discussed in detail. Therefore, service providers for elderly populations inevitably must adopt certain approaches and practice consistently to eradicate social isolation among elderly populations. They should increase institutional investment in digital infrastructure by providing easy access to tablets, smartphones, internet facilities, and other communication technologies. At the same time, organizations should ensure that elderly residents receive regular assistance and guidance when using such digital tools. And also, psychosocial wellbeing and physical, medical care should be taken to the consideration evenly. Meaningful interactions and engaged communications must be designed and practiced too. Finally, future researchers should conduct broader studies in different aged care settings across Australia in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of social isolation, digital inequality, and the effectiveness of digital inclusion programs among elderly populations.

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