Reducing Later Life Loneliness: A Systematic Literature Review of Loneliness Interventions

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Abstract : Later life loneliness is a social issue that is increasing alongside an upward global population trend. As a society, one way that we have responded to this social challenge is through developing non-pharmacological interventions such as befriending services, activity clubs, meet-ups, etc. Through a systematic literature review, this paper suggests that currently there is an underrepresentation of radical innovation, and underutilization of digital technologies in developing loneliness interventions for older adults. This paper examines intervention studies that were published in English language, within peer reviewed journals between January 2005 and December 2014 across 4 electronic databases. In addition to academic databases, interventions found in grey literature in the form of websites, blogs, and Twitter were also included in the overall review. This approach yielded 129 interventions that were included in the study. A systematic approach allowed the minimization of any bias dictating the selection of interventions to study. A coding strategy based on a pattern analysis approach was devised to be able to compare and contrast the loneliness interventions. Firstly, interventions were categorized on the basis of their objective to identify whether they were preventative, supportive, or remedial in nature. Secondly, depending on their scope, they were categorized as one-to-one, community-based, or group based. It was also ascertained whether interventions represented an improvement, an incremental innovation, a major advance or a radical departure, in comparison to the most basic form of a loneliness intervention. Finally, interventions were also assessed on the basis of the extent to which they utilized digital technologies. Individual visualizations representing the four levels of coding were created for each intervention, followed by an aggregated visual to facilitate analysis. To keep the inquiry within scope and to present a coherent view of the findings, the analysis was primarily concerned the level of innovation, and the use of digital technologies. This analysis highlights a weak but positive correlation between the level of innovation and the use of digital technologies in designing and deploying loneliness interventions, and also emphasizes how certain existing interventions could be tweaked to enable their migration from representing incremental innovation to radical innovation for example. This analysis also points out the value of including grey literature, especially from Twitter, in systematic literature reviews to get a contemporary view of latest work in the area under investigation.