The Effects of Social-Withdrawal Characteristics Among Older Academics: An Indonesian Case Study

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Abstract

Indonesia, the world's fourth-most populous country, sees a significant increase in its aging population each year. This demographic shift is reflected in the country's public higher-education sector, where the number of older academics has been growing substantially in recent years. However, older people's social participation is often limited due to certain forms of withdrawal, such as shyness, avoidance, and unsociability. This research report aims to explore the impact that these social-withdrawal characteristics among older people may have on data collection and policy-formulation processes in public universities in Indonesia. To gather data for this study, an online questionnaire was employed. The results of this study suggest that older people's social-withdrawal characteristics can have two effects. First, older individuals are often reluctant to participate in research, particularly as online questionnaire respondents, which can result in a lower response rate. Second, our study found that most older academic staff were unwilling to request or demand specific services or facilities from university administration, making decision-makers unaware of the needs of their older staff and aging issues in general. As a consequence, university administration may not consider instituting an aging policy at their institution, as they believe that older workers do not require special attention. This lack of awareness can have serious implications for the well-being of older academic staff and the overall effectiveness of university policies.

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Introduction

Indonesia, the world's fourth-most populous country, has experienced a significant increase in its aging population each year. As of 2019, there were 25 million older people aged 60 and over in the country, accounting for 9.6% of the total population (Maylasari et al. 2019). The number of older people in Indonesia continued to rise in 2020, with 26 million individuals comprising 9.92% of the population (Sari et al. 2020). Recent statistics show that the number of older Indonesians has reached 29.3 million, making up 10.82% of the population (Girsang et al. 2021). These statistics demonstrate a clear trend of population aging in Indonesia, which has significant implications for public policy and social programs aimed at supporting the needs of older individuals.

The public higher-education sector in Indonesia is also affected by the country's aging population, with a significant increase in the number of older academic members each year. Based on government data, the percentage of older academic staff in public higher-education institutions was 27.16% in 2018 (Ministry of Research Technology and Higher Education 2018). However, this percentage slightly decreased in 2019 to 27.13%, or 21,712 older academic staff of the total number of academic staff in Indonesian public higher-education institutions, which was reported to be 80,023 (Ministry of Research Technology and Higher Education 2019).

Maintaining health is one of the most pressing issues that older people experience, as emphasized by the WHO (World Health Organization 2015). A study by scholars on the theory of "active aging" (World Health Organization 2002), found that participation in various activities is a key factor in maintaining older people's health and well-being; older adults who participated in social activities experienced an improvement in their quality of life during the aging process (Paúl, Ribeiro, and Teixeira 2012). This finding has been supported by another scholar, who highlighted the benefits of social activities for the health of older people (Boudiny 2013). Older people's participation is observed in different domains, such as work opportunities (Boulton-Lewis and Buys 2014; Walker and Maltby 2012), social activities (Rosso et al. 2013), and political engagement (Powell et al. 2012). Both scholars and officials at WHO emphasize the importance of participation in various activities. However, older individuals are often susceptible to certain forms of social withdrawal, such as shyness, avoidance, and unsociability (Hill et al. 2021).

These social-withdrawal characteristics among older people can have a significant impact on data collection for research and policy formulation in public universities. This can lead to lower response rates and an incomplete understanding of older adults' needs and perspectives, as we highlight in this report. Specifically, this study aims to investigate the effects of social withdrawal on data collection and the process of formulating policy concerning older adults at public universities.

Older Indonesian Academic Staff

According to Indonesian Law 13/1998 on the Welfare of Older People, individuals in Indonesia are considered "older people" when they reach the age of 60 (Pemerintah Republik Indonesia 1998). However, most Indonesians begin retiring from their official jobs before they turn 60. State business and private-sector workers begin retiring at age 55, while government workers start at age 58 (Adioetomo and Mujahid 2014). But certain occupations mandate retirement at age 60 or later, including academic staff in higher education who retire at the age of 65 or at 70, if they have been promoted to full professor (Indonesia Higher Education Database 2020).

Regardless of gender, older academic staff members have the same responsibilities and obligations as their younger colleagues. These duties include teaching courses, conducting research, and publishing academic work as well as contributing to community service, commonly known as *tridharma* in Bahasa Indonesia. Every academic staff member is expected to fulfil the *tridharma* annually. University workplaces do not differentiate between older and younger academics, and they provide the same services to all staff members (Ramadhan, Sibly, and Khelghat-Doost 2022).

In Indonesia, the merit system for higher-education academic staff consists of five tiers. The first tier is junior lecturer, which is the entry-level for academic staff in higher education. The second and third tiers are lecturer and assistant professor, respectively. The fourth tier is associate professor, and the highest tier is full professor. Academic staff members must accumulate academic points to move up from one tier to the next. These points are earned through three primary functions: teaching, research, and community outreach.

Academic staff members who are aged 60 and older have typically accrued significant experience and expertise through years of teaching, research, and community service at the university, making numerous contributions to the institution. Many of them hold the rank of associate professor or full professor due to their senior academic status, and they are generally highly regarded by both their colleagues and the university administration.

Conceptual Framework

Several academics have used various terms to describe social withdrawal among older people, though it is typically referred to as "social reductionism" (Schroots 1996). Sociologist Lars Tornstam (1997) introduced the concept of "social disengagement" as part of his theory of *gerotranscendence*, which involves a shift in perspective of older people on the emphasis and meaning of their social relationships. He suggests that this may lead to older people being more selective and less interested in certain social and personal relationships.

Older people often experience social withdrawal and may have various types of it (Li and Zhang 2015). The most common types are shyness, avoidance, and social isolation (Hill et al. 2021). Social isolation is typically defined as a lack of social contacts (Kobayashi and Steptoe 2018).

Older people may experience social isolation for various reasons, such as deteriorating health, losing their spouses or partners, living alone, and having fewer confidantes (Victor and Bowling 2012). Other reasons are that cognitive and physical impairments may make people withdraw from social interactions (Li and Zhang 2015). Moreover, older people tend to avoid using technology like the internet because of their cognitive and physical challenges, a behavior called "technology avoidance" (Jokisch et al. 2020, 2).

Internet technology can pose challenges for the current generation of older people, as noted by several scholars (Hargittai, Piper, and Morris 2019; Morrison, Coventry, and Briggs 2021; Xie et al. 2020). There are three reasons why older people may disengage from online activities (Morrison, Coventry, and Briggs 2021). First, older individuals may choose not to engage due to a perceived cost-benefit imbalance. Second, they may not feel the need to engage since it is not their responsibility. Finally, older individuals may be unable to engage due to a lack of technological proficiency, which can cause anxiety and a fear of making mistakes.

Online technology may limit older people's participation in online questionnaire research (Poli, Kelfve, and Motel-Klingebiel 2019). However, a different perspective has been proposed, claiming that online surveys may be more efficient for older people in a country where internet access is widespread (Kelfve et al. 2020). Furthermore, Kelfve and colleagues acknowledge that the online response rate for older respondents is lower and that a paper questionnaire should be provided as an option. Moreover, education appears to be a significant factor related to internet skills among older adults (Schehl, Leukel, and Sugumaran 2019). In particular, older people with higher levels of education tend to have better internet skills than those with lower levels of education (Hargittai, Piper, and Morris 2019).

Methods

This paper reports on a study conducted at two prestigious public universities in West Java Province, Indonesia. This province has the highest population and the largest number of public universities in Indonesia, as well as a high percentage of older academic staff at its public universities (Ministry of Research Technology and Higher Education 2018). Furthermore, West Java Province is Indonesia's most populous province and shares a border with Jakarta Province, the country's capital. The public universities involved in the study are located in two different cities in West Java Province.

This study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Sains Malaysia with the code number: USM/JEPeM/20050257. The ethics committee and the principal investigator agreed to keep the identities of all participants, institutions, and older people involved in the study anonymous. The data collected and used in this paper are presented as letters and numbers to protect the confidentiality of any person or institution. This research involved two public universities, referred to as University 1 and University 2. University 1 has 1,527 academic staff, of which 18.2 % are aged 60 and over. University 2 has a larger academic workforce (1,740), with 17.7 % of the staff aged 60 and older. The quantitative sample consisted of 277 older academic staff from University 1 and 309 from University 2, a total of 586 older academic staff.

In this study, a sequential exploratory mixed-methods approach was employed, which involved both qualitative and quantitative methods. The first phase of data collection involved conducting semi-structured interviews with top university administrators, including the rector, vice rectors, and directors at both universities. The qualitative findings from this phase were published in an international journal (Ramadhan, Sibly, and Khelghat-doost 2022). The second phase was quantitative and used a questionnaire to collect data from older academics at both universities in the study. The questionnaire was distributed online to the participants, and an online pilot test was conducted before sending the actual questionnaire to respondents.

The data collection for the quantitative part of this study took place during July and August 2021 in Indonesia, a period when the COVID-19 pandemic was at its worst. Consequently, all research activities that required physical presence in Indonesia and other data collection were conducted through online platforms such as Google Forms and WhatsApp applications. This study collected questionnaire data

for nearly two months. In the first two weeks, liaison officers from the participating universities distributed the questionnaires to their colleagues via WhatsApp groups. However, this method did not reach many older academics, as there were fewer than 10 in the study sample. Therefore, the deadline for the questionnaire was extended by one week and a different distribution method was used.

Due to the extremely low response rate of the first distribution, the liaison officers at Universities 1 and 2 were instructed to send out the questionnaire again but in a different way. According to the liaison officer from University 1, he re-sent the link to the questionnaire along with a cover letter to older academic staff members. The liaison officer from University 2 delivered the cover letter and questionnaire link to all deputy deans of resource affairs at the university, and urged them to disseminate it to all older academic employees.

These methods increased the number of responses to about 30. The researchers also extended the deadline twice and contacted friends, colleagues, and acquaintances who had connections with University 1 and University 2. They helped to distribute the questionnaire or provided the contact details of potential participants. Through these efforts, the researchers recruited 41 participants for the study, which was a significant improvement from the initial response rate.

Findings and Discussion

This study has revealed two effects of social withdrawal among older academic staff. The first effect is their reluctance to participate in the research process. Out of the 586 older academics targeted in this study, only 6.99% or 41 respondents completed the research questionnaire, despite repeated attempts to encourage more participation. The respondents' academic levels were distributed as follows: full professors (41.5%), associate professors (43.9%), and assistant professors (14.6%). Further details regarding the demographics of the respondents are presented in the table below.

No.	Selected demographic characteristics of the respondents	
1	**Age in Years**	
	Mean	64
	Standard deviation	2.60
2	**Sex**	
	Men	20 (48.8%)
	Women	21 (51.2%)
3	**Mean duration (in years) of work in university**	
	Men	34.95
	Women	36

Figure 1: Respondent demographics

One might assume that older academics' low rate of participation in the questionnaire was due to their difficulty or confusion with using technology; however, this assumption is not supported by the evidence from this study. The older academics who agreed to take part in the pilot study did not encounter any problems or challenges when they completed the online questionnaire. This is consistent with the findings of other studies indicating that older adults who have higher levels of education tend to demonstrate better internet skills compared to those who have lower levels of education (Hargittai, Piper, and Morris 2019; Schehl, Leukel, and Sugumaran 2019). Thus, the older academics' low rate of participation in the questionnaire was unlikely to be caused by technological limitations, since most of them had high academic ranks of full professor or associate professor. This suggests that their low

response to the survey was likely due to their avoidance of technology, as other scholars have observed (Jokisch et al. 2020), or disengagement from online activities because they did not have the motivation or feel the need to do so (Morrison, Coventry, and Briggs 2021). This type of avoidance could be one form of social withdrawal (Hill et al. 2021).

Moreover, it would be premature to infer that older academics' reluctance to participate in the questionnaire was attributable to either the complexity of the questions or an excessive number of questions. The evidence gathered from the pilot study, which also enlisted older academic members as participants, suggests that neither of these factors represented significant obstacles to completing the online questionnaire.

The second effect of social withdrawal among older academic staff is the lack of policies for aging. Most of the older academics who participated in this study did not ask for any facilities or services from the university administration that could benefit them. Specifically, 65.9% of respondents reported never requesting specific facilities for older personnel, and 63.4% reported never asking for special services for individuals over 60. The study also found that older female academic staff were the least likely to request such services or facilities.

The older academics who did not ask for any facilities or services for older people came from various schools, such as School of Language and Literacy, School of Education, Social and Humanities, School of Social Science, School of Science and Technology, and School of Medical Science. The older academics from the School of Science and Technology were the least likely to ask for facilities (33.33% never asked) or services (34.6% never asked) for older people. These findings highlight the importance of more research and policy development to support aging individuals in various academic settings.

In general, universities may face serious consequences if they do not open a dialogue with older academics about their needs and issues related to aging. As some scholars have pointed out, decision-makers may not be aware of the possible challenges that their older workforce is facing (Earl, Taylor, and Cannizzo 2018). This may lead to a lack of aging policies or inadequate services and facilities to support older staff. Moreover, older staff who are socially withdrawn or too shy to ask for support from university management may not get the fulfilment or support they need (Hill et al. 2021). Therefore, insufficient or nonexistent communication with older academics suggests that the university may not be ready to support its aging workforce, which can harm both the institution and its employees.

Even though the older academics in our study did not ask for their needs to be met by the university administration, we found that they had their own strategy to cope with their problems; specifically, they sought help from younger staff (Ramadhan, Sibly, and Khelghat-Doost 2022). Furthermore, they explained that this situation was influenced by the local Indonesian culture of caring for and supporting each other. Other scholars have also argued that Indonesian people tend to choose informal ways of coping with their problems (Berenschot and van Klinken 2018).

Conclusion

This research report has highlighted the significant impact that social withdrawal among older adults can have on data collection for research and policy formulation. The social withdrawal or social disengagement mentioned in the *gerotranscendence* theory alters the perspectives and interpretations of older people regarding social and personal relationships. As we found, older academics may be more selective and less interested in certain social and personal relationships.

To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the needs and perspectives of older adults, survey research involving older adults should consider their social withdrawal characteristics. The findings of this study, particularly in the context of Indonesian public universities, suggest that older adults' social withdrawal may lead to a lower response rate, incomplete data collection, and a lack of formal and informal policies that support aging individuals. To address this issue, there is a need for more research involving older people from different socio-economic backgrounds and in other geographical contexts. However, based on this study, the universities that employ older people should start to recognize the need for an aging policy within the university institution that promotes inclusivity and accommodates the needs of all workers; this could have a significant impact on the prevention of social withdrawal, especially as employees get older.

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