

ABSTRACT

Discussion amongst social theorists is rife with arguments that the proliferation of social media platforms and their negative effects on society have led to the disintegration of traditional community forms. This paper looks at the impacts of social media on a specific minority group, the gifted, who collectively make up just 2% of the population. The paper discusses the positive ways in which social media has enabled the gifted population to form communities, engage in feelings of belonging and the potential impact on the health and wellbeing of this at-risk population.

Finding your tribe: social media as the key to community, belonging and wellbeing for the gifted

Amongst every population there lie small statistical minority groups, such as those of high intelligence quotient – or the gifted. For gifted individuals establishment of core human needs such as acceptance, understanding and inclusion amongst peers is severely impeded by their lack of mutual experiences and negligible population size. As statistical outliers this group are prone to a range of adverse mental and physical health outcomes, making it crucial that the innate human desire for a sense of belonging is fostered amongst the gifted. Historically, whilst the benefits of community were easily accessible to the majority, the establishment of a community of like-minded gifted individuals was complicated by the marginal size and geographic dispersion of their population, however, the proliferation of modern digital communication technologies has provided the means to overcome these issues of population density and distance. Social media provides gifted individuals with an effective mechanism for finding their tribe, in turn, enabling development of communities, building belonging and improving long-term health outcomes.

Who is gifted?

Intellectual giftedness is identified as a score of "two standard deviations above the mean or higher" on an intelligence quotient [IQ] test (American Psychological Association, n.d.). Statistically speaking, this equates to a minimum IQ score of 130 in order to be identified as gifted (Bar-on & Maree, 2009, p. 561). In line with the descriptions above, Mensa – a global high IQ society with an Australian branch – accepts members who have a score in "the upper 2% of the general population on an approved intelligence test" (Mensa, n.d.), which also equates to an IQ score of 130 or above (Pollet & Schnell, 2017, p. 1460). Amongst the currently estimated twenty-six million people in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2022a), 2% represents a mere 550,000 individuals that are likely to be a part of the minority population known as gifted (Macquarie Dictionary, n.d.).

According to the American Psychological Association (n.d.), giftedness is defined as "the state of possessing a great amount of natural ability, talent, or intelligence". The Columbus Group (1991, as cited by Silverman, 1997, p. 39), described giftedness as development that is out-of-sync, "in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm". Research indicates that, in this marginal population, these marked differences lead to a lack of shared experience, understanding and acceptance amongst peers (Riley & White, 2016, p. 214). The social exclusion experienced by gifted individuals, exacerbated by both their statistical rarity and disparate lived experience, results in a collective sense of "longing to belong" (Blackett, 2006, as cited in Riley & White, 2016, p. 214).

Human Need to Belong

Sociologists hypothesise that humans have an inescapable need to form "lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 497). This need to belong should not be confused with requirements for general social contact – as this could easily be satisfied by interplay with complete strangers – rather, it encompasses the key features of positive regular communication, mutual care (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 500) and, as described by Hall (2010, as cited in Fortune, 2021), "insiderness and proximity to people, activities, networks and spaces". In this sense, belonging goes beyond general affiliations with workplaces, education facilities, sporting clubs, local organisations and social networks, as these interactions may not satisfy all of the criteria required. Thus, community – a "mode of imagining and experiencing social belonging as a communicative, public happening" (Delanty, 2018, p. 28) – is a key requirement for developing a tangible sense of belonging.

It is the reciprocal nature of community – the give and take of ideas, support and solidarity between its members (Delanty, 2018, p. 80) – that enables the development of belonging, and research indicates that the failure of an individual to sufficiently engage with, or have reciprocated, these core tenets of belonging can lead to severely detrimental outcomes (Santarelli, 2020, p. 4). The lack of a sense of belonging is tabled as "severe deprivation [that]... can cause a variety of ill effects" such as an increased risk of mental illness, physical illness and behavioural issues (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 497, 511). Thus, a sense of belonging can safeguard both an individual's social and psychological wellbeing (Sargent et al., 2002).

Gifted Belonging and Wellbeing

When considering any aspect of a population, the further one deviates from the mean, the more considerable their differences will be compared to the average person (Falck, 2020, p. 3). For gifted children there is great difficulty in developing a sense of belonging in the world outside of their immediate family due to the "infrequency of persons who are like minded" (Hollingworth, 1942, as cited in Hyatt & Cross, 2009). Even within the gifted community itself, as individuals score further from the mean on assessments – mildly gifted (IQ 130+), highly gifted (IQ 145+), exceptionally gifted (160+) and profoundly gifted (IQ 175+) (Silverman, 2013, p. 98) – the differences become more pronounced. For context this could be likened to the contrast between a mildly intellectually delayed child versus one who has a profound intellectual delay (Silverman, 2013, p. 240).

As a small population of outliers, Silverman (2013, p. 85) notes that the further gifted people "veer from the norm in either direction, the greater their psychological differences", supporting reports that gifted individuals are at significantly higher risk of developing physical and mental illnesses compared to the general population (McDowall, 2019, p. 18). In the case of families with gifted children, almost 40% of parents reported feelings of isolation and inadequacy, with 25% indicating they receive very little support from their existing social circle or affiliates (Wellisch, 2021, p. 16). Overall, parents of gifted children experience heightened levels of stress due to their social isolation and lack of support (McDowall, 2019, p. 23). Collectively, there is much in the literature to indicate that gifted adolescents, adults, children and their parents are all at much greater risk of mental and physical illness due to their minority status, social isolation and lack of belonging.

Belonging and Community

For most, developing a sense of belonging is forged in their interactions and memberships of discrete communities. Bessant (2014, as cited in Glover & Sharpe, 2021, p. 8) supports this notion in saying "people think, talk, and act community into existence in the course of their everyday interactions". However, with almost two centuries of intellectual debate over the concept, defining what constitutes community can be a difficult task (Parks, 2010, p. 107). At one time scholars conceived of community in a geographical sense, that is, it was the "domain of immediate social relations, the familiar, proximity" (Delanty, 2018, p. 14). More recently, theorists moved towards a somewhat abstract psychosocial approach perceiving community as "a culture, a set of ideas and interpersonal sentiments" (Parks, 2010, p. 107). However, across the competing views – from Stacey to Turner to Bourdieu to Wellman to Calhoun to Delanty – is the recurring characteristic of belonging (Delanty, 2018). In this sense, community can be defined as a web of interaction, support and exchange that provides a sense of belonging (Wellman, 2001, p. 2031).

Virtual community and social media

In today's technologically advanced world the interactions, support and exchanges that define community are increasingly sustained by communication technologies and social media. Platforms such as Facebook, Discord, Twitter and TikTok enable individuals to throw off the constraints of locality and embrace connections with likeminded others – trading "social accessibility" for "spatial accessibility" (Delanty, 2018, p. 216). Whilst there are some who yearn for the community of yesteryear's greater geographic, social and familial affiliations – purporting these were more conducive to social etiquette, accountability, connection and support (Hampton, 2016, p. 105) – for many, social media has diminished social isolation, amplified the diversity of community foci and enhanced connection (Hampton & Wellman, 2018). Current technologies provide opportunities for new communities to emerge based on individual interest and personal preference (Delanty, 2018, p. 201).

Key activities – such as self-identification as a community, a sense of belonging and mutual care amongst members, shared rituals, and the capability to work toward common objectives (Parks, 2010, p. 108) – all serve to affirm the validity of social media as a form of community, despite the many scholars who question this. Rather than be constrained by geography, Delanty (2018, p. 204) asserts that we should ignore any distinction between real and virtual communities but, rather, embrace the technologies that have bolstered our capacity for actualising ever greater ideations of community. Virtual communities can empower the underserved, raise inclusion of minorities and provide new opportunities for greater democracy (Delanty, 2018, p. 216; Johnson et al., 2010, p. 189).

Giftedness, social media and communities

For gifted people, as a marginal demographic, the advent of social media has heralded an age of empowerment. Much like other minority demographics, social media use has provided an alternative mechanism for constructing community, increasing advocacy and strengthening belonging (Terra, 2020, p. 31). Until the advent of social media, there have been very few ways a gifted individual could locate other gifted persons, aside from organisations such as Mensa International. Historically, any individual who identifies as part of a statistical minority was likely to face extreme difficulties when attempting to identify, locate and engage with others within their unique population in order to build a community and sense of belonging. The enormity of such a task, particularly true of a country such as Australia, can be demonstrated with the interplay

between land size – 7.692 million km² (Australian Government, n.d.) – and population – 25.75 million people (ABS, 2022a) – which results in a population density of 3.3 people per km² (ABS, 2022b), but would see this reduced to a miniscule 0.07 people per km² (ABS, 2022c) for the gifted population.

Today, the connectedness of the gifted minority is increasing with the use of social media. Assisted by platforms such as Facebook, gifted adults and children alike are exploring and implementing new ways in which to find their tribe (Reber, 2018). Social media has afforded those on the periphery, such as gifted persons, a way in which to: find and support one another; mobilise for action and advocacy; share experiences, knowledge, tips and advice; and socialise ("Online Proves to Be a Lifeline for Parents", 2018). The opportunity to connect with others who share comparable traits, experiences and challenges reduces the propensity for social isolation and, more crucially, increases sense of belonging (Silverman, 2013, p. 119; Terra, 2020, p. 16). Gifted individuals hail from all ethnicities and socioeconomic groups (Silverman & Gilman, 2020, p. 1570), yet there is an immediate sense of belonging and overwhelming validation when they are able to share their experiences with each other (Reber, 2018).

These groups not only provide a safe space for gifted people to belong in the virtual realm, but they also spill out into the physical world with adults, parents and children gathering for games nights, national holidays, play dates and other activities related to shared interests ("Online Proves to Be a Lifeline for Parents", 2018). For gifted children, in particular, these get-togethers with likeminded counterparts provide opportunities to strengthen bonds, develop a deeper sense of belonging and, hopefully, ensure that they have better health and wellbeing outcomes than their predecessors (Eren et al., 2018).

Gifted individuals make up a small minority of Australia's population, however, the difficulties associated with locating and connecting with like individuals has limited the access of gifted people to communities and a sense of belonging. Along with other statistical minority groups, gifted individuals have long had the choice of masking their true selves and conforming to be included or risk exclusion from communities with which they have little in common (Falck, 2020, p. 92; Silverman, 2010, p. 205). Each of these avenues – masking, conformity, exclusion, lack of belonging – pose serious long-term risks to mental and physical wellbeing of gifted adults, parents and children.

Despite traditionalists lamenting the destruction of traditional community with the advent of social media (Hampton & Wellman, 2018, p. 643), minority groups such as the gifted have, in fact, made significant use of this new technology to engage in the key activities associated with community building (Hodges et al., 2022, p. 2; Mustafa et al., 2015, p. 347; "Online proves to be a lifeline for parents", 2018, p. 1; Sweet et al., 2020, p. 2). For gifted individuals, and others in statistical minority groups, social media provides a forum for building a sense of belonging through participation in community that has previously been difficult to replicate in the physical world. In this way, social media has become a key element in allowing the gifted to find, connect and engaging with their tribe – something we hope will result in much better outcomes in the long run.

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