Social Capital, Social Networks, And Trust In Times Of Physical Distancing Due To COVID-19 In The USA

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Abstract

In the COVID-19 pandemic, social distancing guidelines limit the amount of in-person social interactions. Thus, the Internet serves as an important medium for social interaction. We conducted a scoping literature review to determine if massive online interactions generate individual and contextual social capital, trust, and empathy, especially in times of COVID-19, and second scoping review to find current existing instruments that measure social capital, social cohesion, and/or trust generated by online interactions among people. **Social capital refers to features of social structure such as levels of interpersonal trust, norms of reciprocity, and mutual support that may act as resources for people and facilitate collective action.** Social capital and perceived trust in relation to compliance with physical distancing guidelines and disease rate during the COVID-19 pandemic was also explored. The search strategy for the first research question included 41 search combinations and yielded 5,754 published articles, with 19 articles fitting the inclusion criteria. The articles analyzing the relationship between online interactions and social capital agree that the Internet supplements already existing social capital. Email on personal computers was found to create new social capital. There is no general relationship between social media use and perceived social isolation, but problematic social media use is associated with higher perceived social isolation. Social capital and trust both encourage people to follow physical distancing guidelines, but high trust can lead to a decrease in sanitation behaviors if they believe that other people are keeping their environment clean. A limitation of this scoping review is that there are no articles focusing on if online interactions generate empathy, but people report caring more for family members during the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings indicate that public health interventions should target online social capital and social support to improve subjective well being. The search strategy for the second research question included 28 search combinations and yielded 4,923 published articles, with 26 articles fitting the inclusion criteria. Our second conclusion is that most measurements of online and offline social capital and wellbeing where conducted through online surveys and questionnaires, but there were no methods measuring online social capital found.

Introduction

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals were forced to socially and physically distance themselves from people outside of their household. Thus, social media and online interactions became the predominant means of communication instead of a supplement to in-person relationships. Because social relationships are important to mental and physical health, physical distancing imposed by the pandemic underscored the importance of assessing the effect of online relationships on social capital, trust, and wellbeing. However, most measures of social capital do not specifically distinguish between online and offline social capital.

One scoping review was performed to understand how the internet affects social, capital, trust, and empathy, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Another scoping review was performed to find any existing methods and instruments to measure social capital, social cohesion, and trust originating from online interactions.

Methodology and Results

Two scoping reviews were performed. **A scoping review is used when there is no strong body of evidence about a specific subject and the overall goal is mapping what and how a particularly issue is currently being studied.**

Our Scoping Methodology follows Munn et al. (2018) guidelines. Each review answered a different question:

- Scope Review 1: Do massive online interactions generate individual OR contextual social capital AND/OR trust in times of online interactions?
- Scope Review 2: What are the current existing instruments (questionnaires, surveys, measuring instruments) to measure social capital AND/OR social cohesion AND/OR trust generated by online interactions among people?

Each review utilized three databases: 1) PubMed National Library of Medicine/ National Center for Biotechnology Information; 2) PsycINFO - American Psychological Association, and 3) ERIC - Education Resources Information Center, Institute of Education Sciences of the United States Department of Education.

Scoping Review 1 was performed by two researchers and consisted of 41 search combinations of key terms: social capital, trust, online, social networks, virtual, empathy, covid-19, pandemic, corona, social distancing, and physical distancing. Scoping Review 2 was performed by three researchers and included 28 different combinations of the following key-words: Social, Capital, Cohesion, Trust, Online, Digital, questionnaire, survey, measure, instrument, and method. In both searches, terms were entered as "Text Word." Each researcher conducted an independent search, and then the members who conducted the same search met to confirm that each search generated the same number of results and to resolve any inconsistencies between results. Scoping Review 1 was conducted in October and November of 2020. Scoping Review 2 was conducted in November and December of 2020.

Inclusion Criteria:
a) Date of publication – papers published since 1990 until the present date. b) All the epidemiological study designs including: cross-sectional, ecological, case-control, cohort, randomized control trials, and community control trials; c) studies that investigated the topic of interest among adult populations.

Exclusion Criteria:
a) studies that were reviews or summary studies; c) studies that investigated the topic of interest among children and or adolescents; d) studies that abstracts were not fully available.
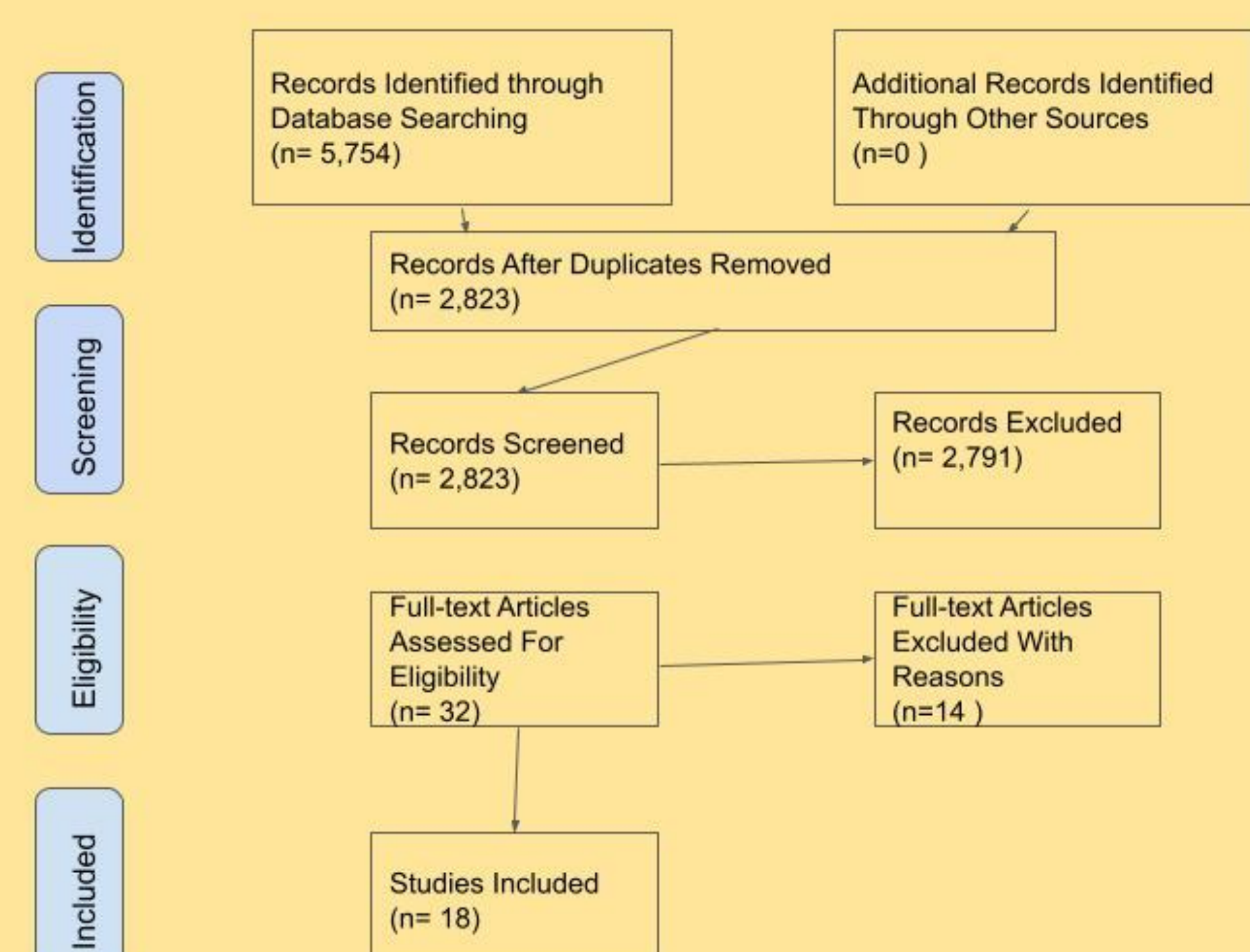

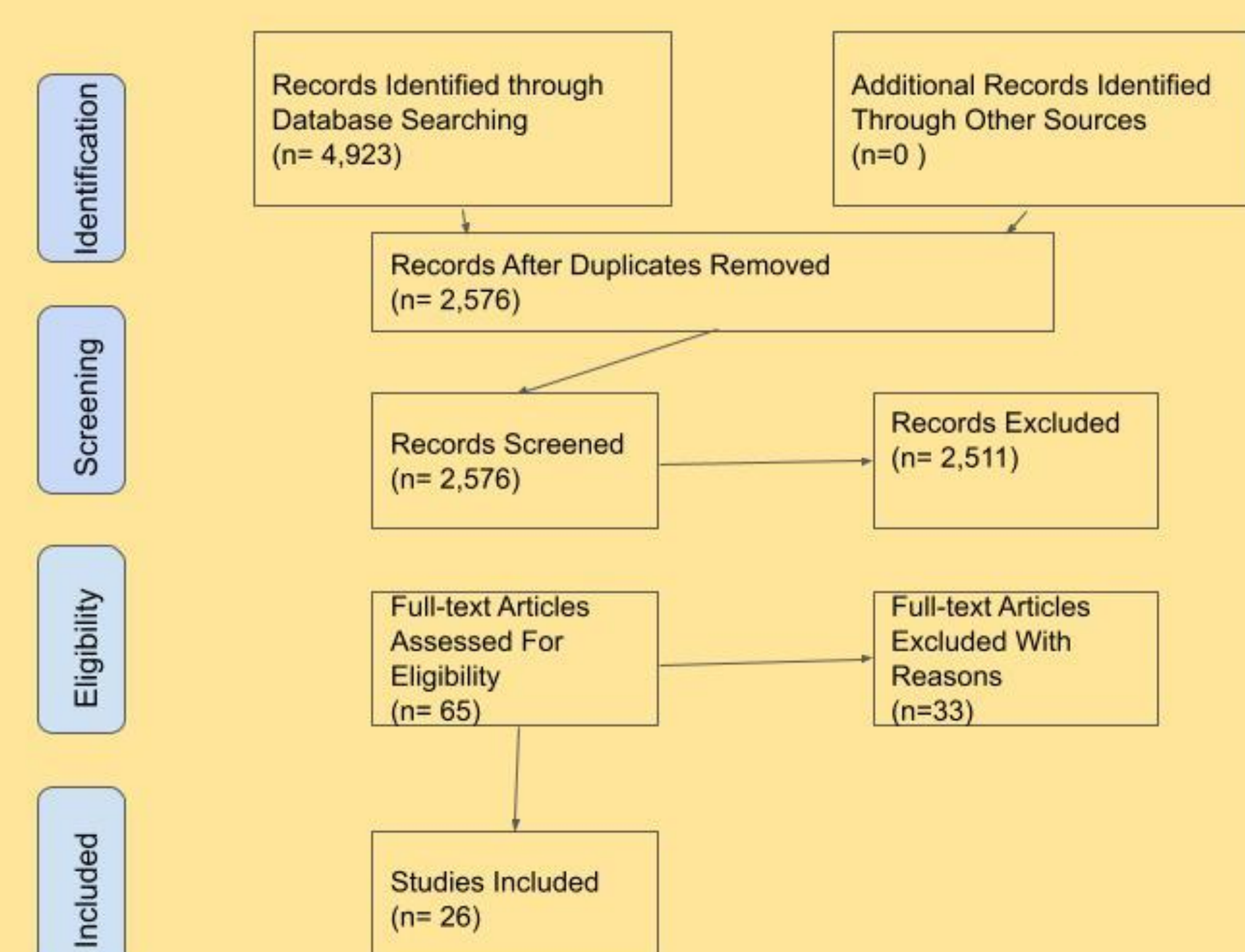Figure 1. The flowchart outlines the process and results of Scoping Review 1

Figure 2. The flowchart outlines the process and results of Scoping Review 2

Discussion & Conclusions

- Emailing through a personal computer was found to increase social capital while mobile phones were found to be a supplement to existing relationships. However, a limitation of the first scoping review was that the research available on the effects of online interactions on social capital was mostly published before 2010. Social media use does not affected perceived isolation unless the amount of social media use is problematic. Since smartphones and social media are currently prevalent technologies, mobile phones likely have a better ability to generate social capital in 2020. In both online and offline relationships, feeling supported by the community is important to developing trust and wellbeing. Both social capital and trust encourage people to follow social distancing guidelines, but high trust can lead to a decrease in sanitation behaviors due to thinking that other people are already being sanitary. Public health messaging and interventions should focus on online social capital and creating a sense of social support to improve perceived wellbeing.
- Of the articles that met the inclusion criteria, only three assessed existing assessment tools for social capital, including a friendship quality questionnaire, multidimensional scales for social capital and social cohesion, and a twelve item adolescent student survey. While these methods were determined to be valid, they did not specifically measure online social capital. The results of this scoping review underscore the need for the development and assessment of a tool to measure online social capital.

References

Munn, Z., Peters, M.D.J., Stern, C. et al. Systematic review or scoping review? Guidance for authors when choosing between a systematic or scoping review approach. *BMC Med Res Methodol* 18, 143 (2018). https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-018-0611-x