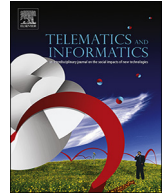


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# Digital communications and psychological well-being across the life span: Examining the intervening roles of social capital and civic engagement

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between multimodal connectedness (i.e. communicating with others through multiple digital channels) and subjective well-being. Analyses from a serial mediation model showed no direct relationship, but there were several significant mediating pathways through individual social capital, civic engagement and positive affect. Further analyses of three age cohorts (18–34, 35–54, 55–70+) demonstrated two significant indirect pathways for the 18–34 cohort, one for the 35–54 cohort, and five for the 55–70+ cohort. Even though the oldest cohort used fewer communication technologies and had smaller social networks, they are more likely to benefit from multimodal communications because they are motivated to engage in behaviors that result in positive emotions and feelings, which in turn engenders overall well-being. The study points to the utility of a lifespan perspective in understanding the effects of communication technologies in society.

## 1. Introduction

The study of subjective well-being (SWB) has long been a central concern not only for scholars, but also for policy advocates and lawmakers seeking to maintain or enhance quality of life among the citizenry (Helliwell et al., 2013; OECD, 2013). This is because of the accumulated evidence in the past decades showing that well-being is related to a variety of positive outcomes, including better health, longer life, more satisfying relationships and productivity, among others (Diener, 2013). Thus, works from diverse academic fields have been produced to explicate the antecedents of well-being. Psychologists for example have demonstrated the importance of the quality and quantity of social relationships on reducing mortality risk (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010) while sociologists showed that active engagement in local community activities engenders greater satisfaction with life and society in general (Wallace and Pichler, 2009). In the field of communication, a large body of literature has focused on the impact of new communication technologies, with studies showing that certain uses of the mobile phone (Chan, 2015a) and social network sites (Burke and Kraut, 2016) have positive consequences for well-being and life satisfaction.

Most of the studies in the previous decades have examined the correlates of well-being. Less effort has been put into explicating the possible *mechanisms* that engender this key variable. This study provides an initial attempt by integrating the roles of social relationships and civic engagement into a parsimonious model to explain well-being. Underlying these predictors is the pivotal role of mediated communications that facilitate and maintain social relationships (Stafford and Hillyer, 2012) and opportunities to engage with the local community (Campbell and Kwak, 2010a). Indeed, interpersonal communications among one's close ties in today's

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social environment has become increasingly multimodal as face-to-face interactions with friends are often supplemented by a range of other channels as different needs and goals arise. This is possible because of the lower costs and availability of Internet access, digital devices like the mobile phone which facilitate anytime anywhere interactions, and a plethora of social network sites and messaging apps that facilitate different modes of communication and content. Communication between and among close ties provide important sources of information, social support and companionship (Leung and Lee, 2005), which in turn has positive outcomes for various aspects of everyday life that are beneficial for well-being.

Insights for the study are also drawn from the lifespan literature, which has consistently shown that individuals' well-being remain quite stable over their lifetimes despite their diminished physical and mental capabilities bought upon by aging as well as depressing life events such as the death of close ties (Ulloa et al., 2013). Therefore, it is worthwhile to examine the implications of the uses and effects of technologies as well as the nature of social relations and community engagement across different age cohorts as the pattern of relationships may differ (Chesley and Johnson, 2014; Wrzus et al., 2013). For example, older people may focus more on the quality of their communications and social relationships even though they may use fewer communication technologies and have fewer social ties compared to the younger cohorts.

The study is structured as follows. First, it reviews the relationship between mediated communication and well-being. Then, the roles of individual social capital and civic engagement are introduced as important mediators of the relationship as well as insights from the lifespan and gerontology literature. A theoretical model is proposed and is tested using a representative sample of adult citizens in Hong Kong, a city state with among the highest Internet and mobile phone penetrations in the world (OFCA, 2018). By integrating insights from different academic fields, this study responds to the call for communication scholars to “work more interdisciplinarily” so as to better understand the role of communication to promote and engender a “good life” (Vorderer, 2016).

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Multimodal communication and well-being in the digital age

Communication and well-being are inextricably tied because communication is a fundamental antecedent to the establishment and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. This “need to belong” as argued by psychologists, provides “a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships” (Baumeister and Leary, 1995), and such relationships in turn can engender positive feelings, emotions, and life satisfaction (Reis et al., 2000). Of course, communication with others can also be hurtful and may have negative outcomes. Nevertheless, all things being equal, the body of theorizing and research suggest that communication and social interactions are fundamental antecedents of well-being (Vorderer, 2016).

Communication among interpersonal relationships has long been characterized by multimodal connectedness, defined as “the various modalities through which people maintain their connections with each other in everyday life” (Schroeder, 2010)<sup>1</sup>. This is because individuals use more available modes of communication to maintain social connectedness with their close ties (Haythornthwaite, 2005). Before the Internet era, postal mail and the telephone were important supplement to face-to-face communications. Together, they helped individuals maintain social bonds by affording both synchronous and asynchronous interactions with others based in different geographical locations and/or time zones (Ledbetter, 2008). In the last two decades, the degree of multimodal connectedness has increased exponentially because of the growth of the Internet, social media, and mobile phone technology, giving rise to more ways to stay connected (Rainie and Wellman, 2012). Different technologies coexist because each one typically is more effective at fulfilling a specific communicative ‘niche’ or purpose (Dimmick, 2003). For example, e-mails are generally more suitable for sending long messages compared to text messaging, and messaging apps like WhatsApp may be preferred to text messaging when information needs to be sent quickly to certain predefined groups of recipients (Church and de Oliveira, 2013). Thus, multimodal connectedness has become the norm in today’s digital communication environment because people use a variety of channels to connect with others, which in turn engenders greater well-being because collectively they fulfil the need to belong and the desire to sustain meaningful social relationships.

However, most studies on the implications of communication technology still focus on one technology in isolation, such as Facebook (Nabi et al., 2013) or mobiles (Hall and Baym, 2011). Of course, there is nothing inherently wrong with these approaches as they offer important insights on whether and how specific technologies engender well-being. But, such studies omit the holistic nature of how individuals use communication technology and its implications for social relations, civic engagement and well-being. The few exceptions include a study by Chan (2015b), which found that multimodal communications among strong ties was positively related to well-being, but the measure of multimodal connectedness was based on device ownership (e.g. tablet, laptop, desktop, telephone, and mobile) rather than the use of specific technologies for communications with friends, such as messaging and email. In another study, Boase (2008) used cluster analysis to show that ‘heavy’ communicators used a combination of in-person, landline phone, mobile phone, and email channels more often than ‘light’ communicators. These same individuals also typically had more friendship ties and diverse networks, leading to the author’s important insight that multimodal connectedness is closely related with the relative complexity of one’s social network. The more voluminous and diverse the network, the more channels of communication individuals use to stay connected with their social ties.

Of course, it should be noted that well-being is a very broad concept. Diener et al. (2009a) elaborated that there are at least three

<sup>1</sup> Boase (2008) also proposed the term ‘personal communication system’, which conveyed a similar idea to multimodal connectedness.

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