



The impact of communication technologies on life and relationship satisfaction



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ABSTRACT

Previous studies have shown a relationship between the use of communications technology and well-being, particularly mediated through its effect on personal relationships. However, there is some debate over whether this effect is positive or negative. The present study explored this issue further, examining whether the effect varies depending on the type of communications technology, and the nature of the personal relationship. An online survey was conducted with 3421 participants in three countries (Australia, UK and US). It examined the use of ten communication methods, overall satisfaction with life and satisfaction with four different kinds of relationships (close and extended family, and close and distant friends).

Results indicate that richer communication methods, which include non-verbal cues, were positively associated with both overall satisfaction with life and satisfaction with relationships. These methods included face-to-face communication, and phone and video calls. Conversely, more restricted methods, such as text messaging and instant messaging, were negatively associated with both variables. Social networking was negatively associated with overall satisfaction, but not with satisfaction with relationships. The strength of the association between a communications method and satisfaction with a relationship varied depending on the type of relationship, but whether it was positive or negative did not change.

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1. Introduction

The nature of communication has changed significantly over the last few decades with the advent of the Internet and mobile communications. These communications technologies (CTs) are becoming increasingly popular with recent surveys showing that 91% of British households have mobile phones (Dutton & Blank, 2013), 83% of UK adults use the internet (Ofcom, 2014), and 73% do so every day (Office of National Statistics, 2013).

As these forms of communication become increasingly ubiquitous, it is important to examine their impact on people's lives, well-being and relationships. They have many potential benefits, enabling people to stay in touch with friends and family members across the world more easily and quickly. In line with this, several studies have indicated a positive association between the use of

these technologies and well-being and relationships (e.g. Grieve, Indian, Witteveen, Tolan, & Marrington, 2013; Kraut et al., 2002; Wang & Wang, 2011). However, other studies have indicated detrimental effects, particularly on the strength and nature of relationships (e.g. Kraut et al., 1998; Kross et al., 2013; Shklovski, Kraut, & Rainie, 2004). There is debate about the reasons for these contradictory findings, but one possibility is that the effect of communications technologies is not uniform (c.f. Best, Manktelow, & Taylor, 2014). The aim of the current research was to explore whether the effects vary depending on the type of communications technology, and the nature of the personal relationship.

1.1. Background: communications technology and relationships

Some studies have examined the impact of communications technology (CT) on subjective well-being, i.e. on people's perceptions of their well-being, and their satisfaction with life (e.g. Chesley, 2005; Gross, 2004; Kraut et al., 1998; Schiffrin, Edelman,

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Falkenstern, & Stewart, 2010). However, well-being is a broad measure with many facets, covering issues such as standard of living, health, achievement and relationships. These individual facets are more susceptible to change than the overall measure, and more likely to be affected by factors such as the use of technology (Cummins, Eckersley, Pallant, Van Vagt, & Misajon, 2003; Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003).

Therefore, many studies have focused on the impact of CT on more specific aspects of well-being. In particular, much of the previous work has focused on its impact on relationships. This is because CT is an inherently social technology, and therefore seems likely to affect relationships in particular. This is backed up by Valkenburg and Peter (2007)'s finding that instant messaging affected well-being through the mediating variables of time with friends and quality of friendships.

There have been a large number of studies examining CTs and relationships. However, they do not all agree, with different studies giving very different (and even contradictory) findings (Best et al., 2014). There are various different theories about the effects of CTs (particularly online CTs), but they mostly fall into two main, opposing camps, as described below.

1.1.1. Negative effects

Some argue that online communication has an overall negative effect on relationships. In particular, the displacement hypothesis suggests that online communication takes time away from face-to-face communication, weakening relationships, and encouraging weak relationships at the expense of strong ones (Kraut et al., 1998).

Several studies have found evidence supporting the displacement theory. In particular, Nie and Erbring (2002) found that *"the more time people spend using the Internet, the more they lose contact with their social environment"*. A follow-up study used time diaries to identify that *"time online is largely an asocial activity that competes with, rather than complements, face-to-face social time"* (Nie, Hillygus, & Erbring, 2002). In addition, Shklovski et al. (2004) found that *"heavy use of the Internet is associated with reductions in the likelihood of visiting family or friends on a randomly selected day"*. Another example is Lee (2009)'s study which indicated that online communication displaces time with parents, though not with friends.

Schiffirin et al. (2010) also argue for the negative effects of online CTs. They found that people generally perceived computer-mediated communication to be less useful than face-to-face communication, and suggest that replacing face-to-face with online communication is likely to have a negative effect on relationships and well-being. In line with this, they did find an association between Internet use and reduced well-being.

Other studies have also found negative associations between particular types of online communication, well-being and relationship satisfaction (Chesley, 2005; Kross et al., 2013). Some studies further point out that some individuals (e.g., those who are lonely or have poor social skills) run the danger of developing compulsive, harmful Internet use behaviours (Kim, LaRose, & Peng, 2009; Muusses, Finkenauer, Kerkhof, & Billedo, 2014).

1.1.2. Positive effects

In contrast, others argue that online communication has a positive effect on relationships. In particular, the stimulation or increase hypothesis proposes that online communication builds up and augments existing social ties, thus helping to strength relationships. For example, the authors of (PEW Internet and American Life Project, 2000) said *"This survey provides clear evidence that e-mail and the Web have enhanced users' relationships with their family and friends—results that challenge the notion that the Internet contributes to isolation"*.

Several other studies have provided support for this hypothesis. For example, Valkenburg and Peter (2007) found that online communication in adolescents was positively associated with time spent with existing friends and the quality of these friendships. Similarly, Wang and Wang (2011) found that instant messaging among adolescents was mostly used with existing friends, and positively associated with well-being. They suggest: *"it may be that online communication with existing friends can promote user' interaction in offline settings, which could strengthen their closeness to friends and improve their subjective well-being"*.

More generally, several studies have found positive associations between online communication, well-being and relationships (Bessière, Kiesler, Kraut, & Boneva, 2008; Grieve et al., 2013; Shaw & Gant, 2002). In particular, Kraut et al. (2002) followed up his earlier study (Kraut et al., 1998) that had shown negative associations and that led to him proposing the displacement hypothesis. The follow-up study indicated that many of the negative effects of online communication had dissipated, being replaced by mostly positive effects on communication, social involvement and well-being. They suggested that this may be due to a change in the nature of the Internet. In particular, as more people moved online, Internet use became less isolating. However, it should be noted that Kraut did not abandon the displacement theory entirely (c.f. Shklovski et al., 2004).

Other studies look at new relationships formed online, as well as the impact of CTs on existing relationships. They highlight that many relationships formed online can be *"real, deep and meaningful"* (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002), thus having a positive impact on life satisfaction and well-being. McKenna et al. further explain that negative associations of online communication with well-being are often based on a small percentage of the sample, with the vast majority not reporting these ill effects.

1.1.3. Reasons for the conflicting findings

There are various possible reasons for these differences in findings, including differences in methodologies, measures and robustness in the studies (c.f. Best et al., 2014). Another possible reason is that causality may have been wrongly ascribed in some cases (c.f. Nie, 2001; Shklovski et al., 2004). For example, some of the results above indicate that higher use of CTs is associated with higher well-being and better relationships. Nie (2001) argues that it is more likely that people with good social connectivity make more use of communication (including online communication) than that CT use stimulates the social connectivity.

The differences in findings may also be partly explained by different effects on different groups of people. In particular, Kraut et al. (2002)'s findings indicated that extraverts and those with good social support may benefit from Internet use, while introverts and those with less support may find it detrimental. Other findings also support this hypothesis. For example, Lee (2009) found that participants who already had strong social relationships *"were more likely to use online communication, which in turn predicted more cohesive friendships and better connectedness to school"*. Pornsakulvanich, Haridakis, and Rubin (2008) also highlighted the impact of individuals' dispositions, motives and interaction behaviour on the outcomes of CT use.

Another possibility is that CT use has different effects on different kinds of relationships. For example, Lee (2009)'s study of adolescents found a negative effect of online communication on time with parents but not friends. It is possible that online communication strengthens some ties and weakens others.

Furthermore, the effect of communications technology is not uniform, with different technologies having different effects. For example, Stepanikova et al. (2009) found a negative association between time spent on "Other Internet communication" (Instant

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