



**Selected Papers of #AoIR2020:  
The 21<sup>st</sup> Annual Conference of the  
Association of Internet Researchers**  
Virtual Event / 27-31 October 2020

## **TOWARDS THEORIES OF DIGITAL WELL-BEING**

Moritz Büchi  
University of Zurich

### **Introduction**

How can we live a good life both thanks to and despite the constant use of digital media? The presented framework describes the nature of and connections between three relevant phenomena – digital media practices, harms/benefits, and well-being – and creates a blueprint for explanatory theories.

Academia and policy makers have long attempted conceptualizing the “good life,” using various indicators to determine quality of life (Diener et al., 2018). Although different facets of digital media have been presumed to affect well-being, strong theories for the question of how individuals’ personal well-being relates to their everyday digital practices is missing – in particular to guide research that substitutes the moral panic, or alternately utopianism, around the use of digital media for empirical-analytical rigor and a sensitivity for the complex social/cultural, economic, and technical conditions that frame individual experience. Digital media should be integrated into everyday life in such a way that they enable and support rather than detract from the achievement of personally valued goals.

### **The Relationship Between Digital Media Use and Well-Being**

Notably, large Internet companies – ostensibly in the business of “making information universally accessible” or “bringing the world closer together” – have started to publicly address the issue of potential negative effects (Makin, 2018). For instance, Google introduced an application to “disconnect when needed” and an online course that aims to help users “learn how to develop and maintain healthy tech habits” (Google, 2019); Facebook introduced a tool to exclude content related to a defined keyword from their feed for 30 days (Facebook, 2019). However, real progress in harnessing the benefits of digital media while minimizing the harms cannot rely on a technological fix.

Suggested Citation (APA): Büchi, M. (2020, October). *Towards theories of digital well-being*. Paper presented at AoIR 2020: The 21<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Virtual Event: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

Different research traditions have dealt with the relationship between digital media use and well-being with different assumptions and definitions. Findings depend on how both sides of the equation are defined and operationalized, and on a host of potential moderators and mediators for this primary relationship (see e.g., Kushlev, 2018). This paper points to the need to explicate intermediary mechanisms: theoretically plausible causal chains that lead from a specific manifestation of digital practice to a relevant individual well-being outcome with some regularity.

Many studies assume, although rarely empirically demonstrate, beneficial effects of digital media use (e.g., digital inequality research: Robinson et al., 2015). This line of research suggests that digital media use is individually beneficial, but socially problematic because its proliferation tends to exacerbate social inequalities. On the other hand, several findings can be subsumed under a countering narrative as negative impacts of Internet uses on measures of personal well-being have also been demonstrated (e.g., Salo et al., 2017).

*Digital well-being* is therefore here defined as the maintenance and improvement of subjective, personal well-being in a social environment characterized by the digitization of virtually all life domains and the constant abundance of digital media use options as a default (see Büchi et al., 2019; Gui et al., 2017).

### **Harms and Benefits of Digital Practices in the Context of Structure and Habitus**

This article offers a conceptual starting point, a way of systematizing effects at the intersection of digitization and well-being. Different mechanisms become salient in different ways in people's everyday lives. The macro-trend of digitization has been affecting virtually all life domains, entwined with three key socio-technical transformations (Rainie & Wellman, 2012): a turn away from small groups, the proliferation of the personalized Internet, and the mobile-making of information and communication. Anticipated or realized consequences of digitization at this level of analysis include increased efficiency, innovation, and transparency; but also political manipulation, privacy breaches, and growing socioeconomic inequality. With relative stability, such current macro conditions function as structural-situational constraints and opportunities for an individual. The concept of habitus helps in understanding how even highly individualized attributes such as "tastes" in one's online uses relate to the social structure and conditions in which Internet user were socialized and live their everyday lives (see Bourdieu, 1977).

At the micro level, personal digital practices, produced by the habitus and thus, in part, by the social structure, can yield beneficial and harmful outcomes, and ultimately impact well-being; for example, increased feelings of belongingness, convenience, or relevant information, but also stress, disinformation, or embarrassment. Concrete harms and benefits at the individual level are empirically accessibility and causal mechanisms can be specified. Analytically, outcomes of digital practices as concrete harms and benefits can be disaggregated to varying degrees depending on the specific empirical phenomenon and research question. Importantly, beneficial and harmful consequences of digital practices are often concomitant factors – for example: an adolescent who joins

a social networking site may gain gratifications from connectedness with peers and at the same time experience stress and social pressure; and in many instances there are reinforcing and bidirectional processes at play.

## Conclusion

The framework provides a set of general principles that call for the formalization of the specific manifestations and relations of digital media use to generate valid findings on their effects. In essence, there are three seemingly simple but crucial interdependencies: (1) Individuals' digital practices depend on the opportunities and constraints, situational and long-term, afforded by their social surroundings, societal conditions, and technological developments. (2) Different manifestations of individuals' digital practices lead to often concomitant concrete harms and benefits. (3) The balance between and cumulation of concrete harms and benefits affect overall well-being. Future studies should focus on intermediary mechanisms between digital media use and well-being, and invoke or develop substantive theories to explain them.

## References

- Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge University Press.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511812507>
- Büchi, M., Festic, N., & Latzer, M. (2019). Digital Overuse and Subjective Well-Being in a Digitized Society. *Social Media + Society*, 5(4), 1–12.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119886031>
- Diener, E., Oishi, S., & Tay, L. (2018). Advances in subjective well-being research. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 2(4), 253–260. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-018-0307-6>
- Facebook. (2019, January 1). *Facebook Newsroom Well-Being*. Facebook Newsroom.  
<https://newsroom.fb.com/news/tag/well-being/>
- Google. (2019, January 8). *Our commitment to Digital Wellbeing*.  
<https://wellbeing.google/>
- Gui, M., Fasoli, M., & Carradore, R. (2017). “Digital Well-Being”. Developing a New Theoretical Tool for Media Literacy Research. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, 9(1), 155–173. <https://doi.org/10.14658/pupj-ijse-2017-1-8>
- Kushlev, K. (2018). Media Technology and Well-Being: A Complementarity-Interference Model. In E. Diener, S. Oishi, & L. Tay (Eds.), *Handbook of well-being*. DEF Publishers.
- Makin, S. (2018). Searching for digital technology's effects on well-being. *Nature*, 563, S138. <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-018-07503-w>

Rainie, L., & Wellman, B. (2012). *Networked: The new social operating system*. MIT Press.

Robinson, L., Cotten, S. R., Ono, H., Quan-Haase, A., Mesch, G., Chen, W., Schulz, J., Hale, T. M., & Stern, M. J. (2015). Digital inequalities and why they matter. *Information, Communication & Society*, 18(5), 569–582. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1012532>

Salo, M., Pirkkalainen, H., & Koskelainen, T. (2017). Technostress and Social Networking Services: Uncovering Strains and Their Underlying Stressors. In S. Stigberg, J. Karlsen, H. Holone, & C. Linnes (Eds.), *Nordic Contributions in IS Research* (pp. 41–53). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64695-4\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64695-4_4)