

Emotional Connectivity: The Influence of Intergenerational Digital Communication on Subjective Well-being of Chinese Elderly

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Abstract: *In China, more and more Chinese families are increasingly living apart, with digital media becoming an important channel for intergenerational communication. From the perspective of family communication, the article explores how intergenerational digital communication affects the subjective well-being of the Chinese elderly. Based on survey data from more than 400 older adults across the country, a regression model was used to analyze the impact of intergenerational digital communication on older adults' subjective well-being, and the Bootstrap method was used to test the mediating role of emotional support in it. It was found that intergenerational digital communication can affect older adults' subjective well-being, with emotional support playing a fully mediating role. The findings suggest that when communicating digitally with older adults, the emotional needs of older adults should be emphasized in order to enhance their subjective well-being and help achieve positive aging.*

Keywords: Family communication, Digital communication, Emotional support, Active aging.

1. Introduction

Ageing has become the reality in human society and has a profound impact on its sustainable development. Data from China seventh national population census show that the trend of aging in China has intensified, with the proportion of the elderly population rising to 18.7 percent, of which 13.5 percent are 65 years of age or older. The increase in the elderly population is closely linked to China economic development and social life. China is currently implementing a national strategy to actively respond to population ageing, which calls for a new mindset in social governance that actively responds to the laws of development of an ageing society and enhances the sense of access, happiness and security of older persons. "Health", "participation" and "security" are the three core ideas of the concept of active ageing, of which "health" requires older people to have a positive and optimistic attitude towards life and a good state of health in order to improve the quality of life in old age and reduce diseases and wastage caused by physical decline [1]. For the elderly, poor subjective well-being will accelerate aging and have a negative impact on physical and mental health, while stronger subjective well-being will improve their quality of life. Therefore, how to enhance the subjective sense of well-being of older persons is not only a key measure to help older persons achieve positive ageing, but also an important task in China's response to population ageing.

With the transformation and development of modern society, the traditional Chinese family form has been deconstructed, and the family size has shown an obvious trend of shrinking, with fewer and fewer families living with three generations, and the phenomenon of "broken relatives" in which "living in the same city but not living together" has appeared in many families in terms of physical space [2]. The size of the Chinese family has been gradually shrinking, with 4.41 persons in the 1980s, 3.96 persons in the 1990s, 3.10 persons in the first decade of this century, and 2.62 persons in 2020, with a clear trend of shrinkage [3]. In the 1980s, seventy percent of the

elderly lived with their children, while this percentage has dropped to fifty percent or even lower in recent years [3].

Established studies have long confirmed that digital communication has become an important way of intergenerational family communication [4], but researchers have paid less attention to the impact of family digital communication on the subjective well-being of the elderly. Family is the basis for understanding Chinese society. In modern society, even though various factors of modernity have caused some deconstruction of traditional Chinese family relationships and ways of living, Chinese family relationships possess extremely rich connotations, and the emotional and ethical bonds among family members are very strong [5]. Unlike the high degree of "socialization" in the West, birth, old age, sickness and death in China are often regarded as family matters [6]. As the media intervene in the process of family relationships, it is necessary to explore the impact of intergenerational family digital communication on the subjective well-being of Chinese older adults and its mechanisms. Therefore, this paper looks at the impact of intergenerational digital communication on older adults from the perspective of family communication, and rationalizes the impact mechanisms behind it.

2. Literature Review and Research Hypotheses

Subjective well-being is an ancient topic, and the pleasure theory of the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus argues that pleasure is the purpose of life, as well as the beginning and end of a happy life, and that positive emotional experience is the source of happiness [7]. However, in Ryff's view, the happiness theory that overemphasizes emotional experience ignores the fact that happiness should also include the perfect unfolding of potential and authenticity [8]. Diener synthesized the internal and external factors affecting well-being and proposed the concept of "subjective well-being", which is defined as an individual's evaluation of his/her quality of life based on self-established criteria, and its main contents

include three dimensions: life satisfaction, positive emotions and negative emotions [9], and numerous researchers have based their measurements on these three dimensions.

In addition, subjective well-being is characterized by holistic, subjective and relative stability. Among them, wholeness reflects that subjective well-being is a series of comprehensive evaluations of the overall quality of life; subjectivity means that the assessment of subjective well-being is mainly determined by the individual himself, and the evaluation standard is subjective; relative stability means that subjective well-being is a stable emotional tendency formed in the long term, and the emotional state of the individual may affect subjective well-being in the short term, but it may not necessarily be able to form a stable state.

The subjective well-being of older adults has received much attention from researchers who have confirmed the impact of family intergenerational relationships on the life experiences of older adults. For example, in the process of aging, along with the decline of physical muscle function and social resources, older people are prone to the subjective feeling of psychosocial loss, which not only makes them feel lonely, but also induces the risk of depression [10]. Social relationships of the elderly can effectively reduce their negative emotions, and children, spouses, and friends and neighbors can alleviate loneliness and depressive tendencies and enhance subjective well-being [11]. Intergenerational support from family members, especially adult children, has a greater impact on older adults' perceptions of a positive life than other support from friends or neighbors [12]. Intergenerational support refers to the reciprocal mutual support between generations within a family in terms of economy, life as well as emotion, including economic support, emotional support and life care. For the elderly, intergenerational support from the younger generation plays a fundamental role in enhancing their subjective well-being, which is significantly better than the influence of demographic factors [13], the more emotional support, financial support, and life care given to the elderly by younger generations, the more positive life perception of the elderly [14].

With the change of residence and the digitization of interpersonal communication channels, some researchers have argued that when studying intergenerational family interactions, in addition to the frequency of meetings, it is also important to consider the ways in which they communicate [15]. In recent years, smart devices have increasingly intervened in family interactions, reconfiguring the communication system between family members, and human interaction with these media has become a paradigm of human existence [16]. After older people achieve digital inclusion, the Internet can empower and enable them. ICTs such as social media and smart monitoring are reshaping family interactions and daily life by constructing increasingly realistic social scenarios, allowing older people to better connect with family members, improve the quality of relationships, and gain adequate intergenerational support [17]. Therefore, we propose the first research hypothesis of this paper:

Hypothesis 1: Intergenerational digital communication can significantly influence the subjective well-being of older

adults.

However, intergenerational relationships in Chinese families are complex, and family intergenerational interactions in social transition are a dynamic, complex and flexible process with many uncertainties in intergenerational relationships [18]. According to the theory of intergroup contact, young and old are two groups caused by age, and young people will tend to treat older people as outside the group, considering them backward and decaying, with closed and lonely lifestyles, which contrasts with the dynamic group characteristics of young people, in which case intergenerational interactions, instead of increasing the connection and integration between the two sides, exacerbate the intergenerational segregation, old-age discrimination, and reduces the self-efficacy of older adults [19]. Nussbaum J F, Coupland J, based on the Communication Adaptation Theory (CAT), examined the dialog process between older and younger generations, and they concluded that communication barriers may be caused by inequality in values and intergenerational relations between generations, especially the older people's habit of initiating dialogs from an egoistic point of view, in which the way of expression and the content of the expression are not understood and accepted by the younger people, thus leading to the failure of intergenerational interactions. This leads to the failure of intergenerational interaction. Therefore, the key to the impact of intergenerational interaction on older adults lies not in the mode and frequency of interaction, but in the quality of interaction [20]. Socioemotional selectivity theory suggests that as they aging, the elderly perceive life time as increasingly limited, and this perception of limited time prompts them to prioritize target objects that are sufficient to gain emotional significance. Of the three components of intergenerational support, researchers have found that emotional support has the most pronounced effect on the elderly' perception of life, followed by financial support, and finally life care [21]. Emotional support is the most stabilizing and can bring spiritual fulfillment to family members [22]. Intergenerational family relationships in the context of Chinese culture are not contractual relationships or an absolutized authoritative relationship, but rather the basic emotional relationship of originality in the daily life of Chinese people [23]. In view of this, we believe that emotional support is likely to be a mediating variable in intergenerational digital communication that affects the subjective well-being of older adults, leading to the second hypothesis of this study:

Hypothesis 2: Emotional support as a mediating variable between intergenerational digital communication and subjective well-being of the elderly.

3. Research Process

3.1 Sample Acquisition

A questionnaire survey was conducted to test the research hypothesis. The survey was conducted in 2022, and interviewers were recruited mainly from teachers and students of a university in Guangdong Province, and after training, the survey was conducted on the elderly at home and in the community when they returned home during the vacation, a total of 437 elderly people filled out the questionnaires, and

after removing invalid questionnaires, 405 valid questionnaires were finally retained.

3.2 Dependent Variable

The dependent variable of this study is subjective well-being of the elderly. Subjective well-being was measured based on the three dimensions delineated by Diener, including life satisfaction, positive affect and negative affect. The measurement of life satisfaction is based on the life satisfaction scale developed by Diener and the other dimensions are based on the emotional balance scale developed by Bradburd include "My life is relatively satisfactory", "My life situation is very good", and "I am satisfied with my life", "I get a lot of what I want," and "I can feel meaning in my life," and five questions; positive affect included "I feel that life is fun." "I feel that life is happy", "I feel that I am worthwhile", and 7 questions; negative emotions include "I am tired of life", Negative affect includes 7 questions such as "I am tired of life", "I feel life is painful", "I feel useless". All three dimensions were scored on a five-point scale. The Cronbach's alpha for the total scale was $0.944 > 0.7$, indicating good reliability.

3.3 Independent Variables

The independent variable is intergenerational digital communication, and the communication targets are both adult children and grandchildren, who are uniformly referred to as "juniors" in the measurement. Based on Zhou Yuqiong's measurement method, the methods and frequency of digital communication were measured by asking "Which of the following ways do you mainly contact your juniors", with the options of "phone calls, text messages, WeChat messages, and videos" based on smartphones. A five-point scale of "hardly ever, a few times a year, at least once a month, many times a week, and almost every day" was used to measure the frequency of digital communication, and the Cronbach's α value of the scale was $.782 > 0.7$, indicating good reliability.

3.4 Mediating Variable

The mediating variable is emotional support, which refers to the love, care and understanding of elders by their juniors, so that elders can get comfort and encouragement. We borrowed the Intergenerational Emotional Support Scale from Taiwan scholar Lin Ching-shou, which includes six questions, including "my juniors care about my feelings", "my juniors understand my thoughts", "my juniors respect my opinions", etc. The scale is scored on a five-point scale, with six questions. Six questions were scored on a five-point scale, and the scale's Cronbach's α value was $.895 > 0.7$, indicating good reliability.

3.5 Control Variables

According to the literature review, age, marital status, gender, education, income and place of residence may affect the life experience of the elderly [24], so these factors were considered as control variables in the study. In gender classification, male = 1, female = 0; residence was categorized as urban and rural, where urban = 1, rural = 0; in marital status, spouse alive = 1, widowed = 0; and educational level was

categorized into seven tiers of measurements: illiterate, private school/literacy class, elementary school, junior high school, high school/secondary school, undergraduate degree, and postgraduate degree and above, where illiterate = 1 and postgraduate degree and above = 7. For statistical convenience. Combine illiteracy, private school/literacy class, and elementary school into elementary school and below, middle school and high school into secondary school education, and college/undergraduate, graduate, and above into college and above; Income is measured in six tiers of less than \$1,000, \$1,001 to \$2,000, 2001 to \$3,000, \$3,001 to \$4,000, \$4,001 to \$5,000, and \$5,000 above, and for statistical convenience, the 1001~3000 is combined into one interval, and 3001 and above is combined into one interval.

3.5 Statistical Methods

We used SPSS22 software for Pearson correlation analysis and regression analysis, Bootstrap method to construct the model and test the mediation effect. Specifically, we used the process plug-in to validate the mediation model by taking 5,000 samples from the original sample and estimating the 95% confidence interval of the mediation effect; if the confidence interval does not contain 0, the mediation effect is established, and vice versa, the mediation effect does not exist.

4. Research Findings

4.1 Descriptive Analysis of Variables

Table 1: Descriptive analysis of variables (N=405)

| variable | percentage | mean value | Standard deviation |
|---------------------------------|------------|------------|--------------------|
| Dependent variable | | | |
| subjective well-being | | 3.72 | 0.67 |
| Independent variable | | | |
| Digital communication | | 2.52 | 1.05 |
| Mediating variable | | | |
| Emotional support | | 3.83 | 0.75 |
| Control variables | | | |
| age | | 74.11 | 6.74 |
| Gender (1= male) | 48.40% | | |
| Spouse alive or not (1 = alive) | 59.01% | | |
| Residence (1= city) | 37.04% | | |
| Below 1,000yuan | 23.20% | | |
| 1001~3000yuan | 56.10% | | |
| 3000yuan and above | 20.8% | | |
| Primary school and below | 70.90% | | |
| High school degree | 24.50% | | |
| University and above | 4.70% | | |

Descriptive analysis found (as shown in Table 1) that the sample had a close ratio of men to women, with 48.40% men and 51.60% women; the average age was 74.11 years old, indicating that the majority of the respondents were middle-aged to senior citizens; 59.01% of the respondents were elderly with living spouses, and 40.99% of the respondents were widowed; 37.04% of the respondents were elderly in urban areas, and 62.96% of the respondents were elderly in rural areas; The proportion of those with incomes of less than 1,000 yuan is 23.20%, those with incomes of 1,001 to 3,000 yuan is 56.10%, and those with incomes of more than 3,000 yuan only accounts for 20.80%; most of the elderly people have a low level of education, with elementary school education and below accounting for 70.90%, secondary

school education accounting for 24.50%, and university education and above accounting for only 4.70%. Their subjective well-being was on the positive side, with a mean value of 3.72 and a standard deviation of 0.67. The mean value of communication through digital media with the younger generation was 2.52 and a standard deviation of 1.05, indicating that the elderly communicated with the younger generation through digital media less frequently. The mean value of emotional support received was 3.83 with a standard deviation of 0.75, indicating that the elderly receive more emotional support.

4.2 Correlation Analysis of Variables

The data in Table 2 show that there was a significant positive correlation between subjective well-being and digital communication, with a correlation coefficient of 0.328 (p < 0.001), as well as a significant positive correlation with emotional support, with a correlation coefficient of 0.433 (p < 0.001). Among the demographic variables, age, marital status, place of residence, income, and education level all had significant correlations with subjective well-being, with age (β= -0.137,p < 0.001) showing a negative correlation with subjective well-being, and marital status (β= 0.256, p < 0.001), place of residence (β= 0.222, p < 0.001), income (β= 0.248, p < 0.001), and education (β= 0.224, p < 0.001) showed a positive correlation with subjective well-being, and there was no significant correlation between gender (β = 0.068, p > 0.05) and subjective well-being.

Table 2: Correlation Analysis of Variables (N=405)

| variable | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
|-----------------------|-----------|-----------|---------|-----------|----------|---------|------|------|
| subjective well-being | | | | | | | | |
| Digital communication | 0.328*** | | | | | | | |
| Emotional support | 0.433*** | 0.360*** | | | | | | |
| age | -0.137*** | -0.259*** | -0.037 | | | | | |
| Gender | 0.068 | 0.071 | -0.004 | -0.004 | | | | |
| marital status | 0.256*** | 0.240*** | .135*** | -0.317*** | 0.313*** | | | |
| Residence | 0.222*** | 0.236*** | 0.121* | -0.027 | 0.007 | 0.04 | | |
| income | 0.248*** | 0.295*** | 0.157** | -0.127 | 0.112 | 0.20 | 0.40 | |
| Education level | 0.224*** | 0.285*** | 0.139** | -0.148* | 0.342** | .293*** | 0.38 | 0.42 |

***p<0.001,**p<0.01,*p<0.05

4.3 Regression Analysis

In order to further explore the influence of each variable on the subjective well-being of the elderly, we used hierarchical regression to analyze the causal relationship between each predictor variable and the dependent variable. A total of two regression analyses were conducted in this study, and the VIF of each regression was less than 5, indicating that there was no multicollinearity among the independent variables.

As shown in Table 3, in Model 1, demographics were first included in the regression model, and residence, marital status,

and income all positively affected the subjective well-being of the elderly,(adjusted R2 = 11.8%), those who lived in the city for a long period of time (β=0.192, p<0.05), had a living spouse (β=0.276, p<0.001), and had a higher income (β=0.059, p< 0.01) had greater subjective well-beings. In the second regression, demographic variables were considered as control variables, and digital communication was included as an independent variable in the regression analysis to obtain Model 2. The data showed that the adjusted R2 increased by 4%, and the coefficient of the independent variable digital communication β=0.144 (p<0.001), which indicated that the intergenerational digital communication could influence the subjective well-being of the elderly, and the more digital communication, the stronger, Hypothesis 1 is confirmed.

Table 3: Hierarchical regression analysis (N=405)

| | | modell1 | modell2 |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Control variables | Gender (1= male) | -0.044 | -0.036 |
| | Age | -0.004 | -0.003 |
| | Residence (1= city) | 0.192* | 0.155* |
| | Education level | 0.032 | 0.018 |
| | marital status (1=Spouse alive) | 0.276*** | 0.240*** |
| Independent variable | income | 0.059* | 0.043 |
| | Digital communication | | 0.144*** |
| | adjusted R2(%) | 11.8 | 15.8 |

***p<0.001,**p<0.01,*p<0.05

4.4 Mediating Effect

In order to explore the intrinsic mechanism of action of intergenerational digital communication affecting the subjective well-being of the elderly, demographic factors were considered as control variables, and the mediating effect of emotional support between digital communication and subjective well-being was examined through the bootstrap method.

When the independent variable is digital communication, the results of the analysis of the mediating role of emotional support between digital communication and subjective well-being are shown in Table 4, and the bootstrap deviation-corrected trust interval for the path of digital communication → emotional support → subjective well-being is [0.044 0.099], which does not contain 0, indicating that the mediating role is established, and Hypothesis 2 is confirmed, and the amount of indirect effect is 53.8%. The deviation-corrected trust interval for the direct effect was [-0.007, 0.123], containing 0, indicating that the direct effect was not significant. The trust interval for the deviation correction of the total effect is [0.065, 0.193], not containing 0, indicating that emotional support plays a fully mediating role between digital communication and subjective well-being, intergenerational digital communication can only affect the subjective well-being of the elderly through emotional support, and we need to pay attention to the conveyance of emotions when communicating with the elderly digitally.

Table 4: Mediated effects test (N=405)

| decomposition of effect | Effect | BootSE | BootL LCI | BootU LCI | Percentage of effect sizes |
|-------------------------|--------|--------|-----------|-----------|----------------------------|
| total effect | 0.130 | 0.033 | 0.065 | 0.193 | |
| direct effect | 0.060 | 0.033 | -0.007 | 0.123 | 46.2% |
| indirect effect | 0.070 | 0.014 | 0.044 | 0.099 | 53.8% |

5. Conclusion and Discussion

In this study, we first confirmed that intergenerational digital communication can significantly affect elderly people's subjective well-being in Chinese families, and secondly, we revealed the underlying mechanism of influence, intergenerational digital communication affects elderly people's subjective well-being through emotional support, which brings positive insights into how we can promote positive aging among elderly people. Compared with previous studies, we have discovered the intrinsic mechanism by which intergenerational digital communication affects Subjective Well-Being of Chinese Older Adults, expanding and deepening related research. Modernization, aging, and informationization are significant social characteristics in China nowadays, and how to actively cope with population aging in family transition and promote effective intergenerational communication through various interaction methods, including the media, so as to enable the elderly to have a happy life in their twilight years is a research issue of great theoretical and practical significance.

As lifestyles change, the traditional multigenerational living patterns of Chinese families have changed, the proportion of intergenerational cohabitation has declined, and opportunities for face-to-face communication and interaction among family members have decreased. According to a study by Zhan Hu and Xizhe Peng, among the types of housing for the elderly, living with their children has been decreasing since the 1980s, and it is no longer the most dominant type of housing in Chinese families [25]. Our previous study also showed that younger generation see their older generation less often because of schooling and work [26]. With smart media embedded in the daily life of Chinese families, social media represented by WeChat and QQ has built a communication channel between the older and younger generations. Social media overcomes the interaction barriers caused by the mode of residence and spatial distance, realizes simulated intergenerational interaction at a lower cost, maximizes the psychological distance between family members' communication, creates a virtual sense of intimacy, and makes distant family members who are far away from each other as if they are right next to them. As some researchers have said: the greatest impact and significance of digital media on the elderly lies in the communication of family relationships rather than the acquisition of media information [4].

More importantly, for the Chinese elderly, the digital media not only constructs a common place for intergenerational interaction, but also weaves the emotional network of family members. Emotional support is the spiritual core of intergenerational digital communication. Chinese older people are generally more concerned about the emotional representation of family members, and a large number of studies have shown that spiritual interaction can promote the mental health of older people [14]. The spiritual support given by the younger generation can make the elderly feel more secure, alleviate mental stress, guide the elderly to think positively, gain a sense of self-achievement and higher satisfaction in life, and ultimately feel the value of life and the significance of life [27]. There are profound Chinese cultural factors behind this. As a matter of fact, how to satisfy the

spiritual needs of the elderly has always been the core idea of elderly care in Chinese families. Confucian theory holds that "it is not only material support, but also spiritual support that is the core."

Pan Guangdan first addressed the problem of the elderly in China from a social science perspective in *On the Problem of the Elderly* [28], especially emphasized the importance of spiritual support in intergenerational interaction. He categorizes the problems of the elderly into economic problems and non-economic problems, and the non-economic problems refer to the emotional problems of the elderly, and believes that emotional support is a "less prone to problems" in the process of pension [29]. In his view, while the material problems of the elderly can be solved by the cooperation of the Government, society and the family, the emotional problems can, to a large extent, only be solved through the family. Therefore, the ultimate problem of the elderly in China is a spiritual problem, not a material one [28]. It can be seen that intergenerational emotional interaction fundamentally affects the life experience of the elderly. In the Chinese context, spiritual interaction is largely reflected in "filial piety". "Filial piety" is further divided into "filial piety heart" and "filial piety way". In the development of Chinese filial piety culture, there is a great deal of debate on filial piety way, but very little debate on filial piety heart. This is because filial piety heart reflects the spiritual core of filial piety, which is a kind of affectionate connection between generations; while filial piety way is the external appearance, which reflects the system, norms and ways of maintaining affection [28]. Although the outward form of filial piety may vary according to historical conditions, the spiritual core of filial piety changes very little, and for the elderly, it is only when they receive expressions of affection from their offspring that they have a positive experience of life. Once they lose their family role, status and emotional support, their sense of self-efficacy decreases, and they may even lose their sense of denial about the meaning of life and living, thus losing their value judgment of old age and their confidence in living. Therefore, when we communicate with the elderly, we should pay more attention to their emotional needs, especially for the "distant" generation who need to communicate with the elderly through the media, emotional support is the key to enhance the subjective well-being of the elderly.

Positively coping with population aging is China's strategic initiative to face the arrival of an aging society, and digital media plays an important role in it. We look forward to exploring more countermeasures to promote the subjective well-being of the elderly through digital media in the context of Chinese culture, so as to contribute to the positive response to population aging.

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