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Online communication with strong ties and subjective well-being in Japan



Kenichi Ishii

Faculty of Engineering, Information and Systems, University of Tsukuba, Tsukuba, Ibaraki 305-8573, Japan

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ABSTRACT

Recent developments in communication technologies have changed how people connect and interact with each other. This study investigates whether and how online communication with strong ties (mobile phone and social networking service [SNS]) enhances subjective well-being in Japan. Study 1 examined whether the correlation between happiness and mobile phone use was mediated by the number of offline and online friends. Study 2 assessed the associations between the Japanese relationship-oriented value “interdependent self-view,” life satisfaction, and the use of SNS. Results indicate that only the use of LINE (an instant messaging application), which is the most popular SNS in Japan, was significantly correlated with life satisfaction and interdependent self-view. The number of friends (offline and online) mediated the effect of LINE use on life satisfaction. Interdependent self-view was significantly correlated with the frequency of LINE use, homogeneity of LINE friends, and life satisfaction. These results indicate that the use of a dominant online communication method with strong ties is significantly correlated with subjective well-being, and this significant correlation is mediated by the number of offline and online friends.

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It is well known that friendship is associated with happiness (Diener & Seligman, 2002; Demir, Dagan, Bilyk, & Tyrell, 2011; Myers, 2000). Happy people are highly social and have better social relationships than less happy people (Diener & Seligman, 2002) because strong and homophilous ties promote the sharing of resources, which in turn enhances life satisfaction (Lin, 2001). Recent developments in communication technologies have significantly changed how people connect and interact in their daily lives. This study focuses on the following two online communication technologies in Japan: mobile phone use and social networking service (SNS). With regard to the 3G ratio (97.2% in 2010) and the mobile Internet penetration ratio (89.5% in 2010), Japan was ahead of the major countries in 2012 (Ministry of Information and Internal Affairs and Communication, Japan, 2012). Japanese mobile Internet use has become a unique culture in that users are more dependent on mobile mail (text messaging and email on mobile phones) than PC-based Internet or mobile phone calls (Ishii, 2009, 2015). In Japan, mobile mail was associated with strong ties in closed networks (Miyata, Wellman, Boase, & Ikeda, 2005). However, mobile mail was eventually replaced by SNS (particularly LINE), especially among young people in Japan. Currently, except

for in-person conversation, the most popular communication method for casual conversations with close friends among young people (in their 20s and 30s) is LINE (<http://line.me>), which is an instant communication application like WhatsApp and WeChat for electronic devices, while mobile mail is the most popular among people in their 40s and over (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2015). LINE is an application for instant communication and is mainly used for closed communication among friends and family. Fifty-two percent of young Japanese in their 20s use LINE for small talk with friends, 23.5% use electronic mail, and 8.6% use other SNSs, such as Facebook and Twitter (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2015). However, there is a lack of knowledge about why LINE is embraced in Japan while Facebook is not as popular as in many other countries. Furthermore, only a few studies on SNS have focused on the effect of instant messaging applications (e.g., WhatsApp and LINE), while many have focused on Facebook use in the world. Given the unique media situation in Japan where different communication methods are popular than in the US and other major countries, it is academically significant to conduct a study on online communication with strong ties in Japan, particularly since the study tests the generalizability of previous studies on the effect of Internet use on subjective well-being.

E-mail address: ishii@sk.tsukuba.ac.jp.

1. Communication behaviors in Japanese SNS

A cross-cultural study found that the same SNS platform was used differently across cultures. Ishii (2014) found that Facebook was used differently by Japanese people compared to people in the US and Taiwan. For example, Japanese users had much fewer Facebook friends, showed a higher level of homogeneity in their friendship network, and had more offline friends. These results suggest that unlike peoples, Japanese users depended more on their offline homogeneous relationships in their friendship processes on Facebook (Ishii, 2014). In other words, Facebook was used more for close friends in a closed network compared to its use in the US and Taiwan. A text-mining study on Twitter also reveals another unique pattern of Japanese SNS users (Ishii, 2011). On Twitter, the mutual following–follower relationship rate is much higher for Japanese language users (63.2%) than for English language users (37.9%). In other words, Japanese Twitter users are more closely connected via mutual following–follower relationships than English users. One of the key factors to understanding unique Japanese communication behaviors is the degree of trust of the Internet (Ishii, 2016). Many previous studies have showed that Japanese people do not trust the content on the Internet compared with people in other countries (Ishii, 2016). Privacy concern on SNS is also higher in Japan than the US (Thomson, Yuki, & Ito, 2015).

The unique communication behavior patterns in Japan suggest that Japanese culture is embedded in the way online communication platforms are used. Cultural psychologists have posited that the concept of happiness has distinctly different characteristics in Asian and Euro-American cultures (Kitayama & Markus, 2000; Lu & Gilmour, 2004). In Japan, cultural psychological research has found the “self” to be dependent on those with whom the self has personal relations. Accordingly, in Japan, general positive emotions are most closely associated with interpersonally engaged positive emotions, while in the US, they are most closely associated with interpersonally disengaged emotions (Kitayama, Markus, & Kurokawa, 2000). In Japan, individualistic values are negatively correlated with happiness, and this correlation is mediated by the number of close friends, while individualistic values are not correlated with happiness in the US (Ogihara & Uchida, 2014).

To examine these differences more closely, the independent-self versus interdependent-self theory (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) is quite useful for postulating a hypothesis to explain the use of SNSs within a Japanese cultural context. This theory states that Asian and American cultures have distinct individuality constructs, i.e., Americans seek to maintain independence by attending to the self and expressing their uniqueness; in contrast, Asians, and particularly the Japanese, emphasize maintaining a harmonious interdependence with others and attending to them (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This difference may lead to the difference in their favorite SNS between the US and Japan.

The popularity of LINE and the relative unpopularity of Facebook in Japan are explained by the fact that interpersonal relations are maintained in Japan differently than in the US. More specifically, Facebook requires users to use the name they use in real life (www.facebook.com/help/) based on the “one identity” principle, as Facebook founder Zuckerberg believes in a more “open and transparent” world among independent selves (Kirkpatrick, 2011). In contrast, in Japan, the adoption of just “one identity” does not hold true for everyone. For example, 65.3% of Japanese agree that the “true self is not necessarily the only one” (Matsuda, Dobashi, & Tsuji, 2014). (Note: This survey was conducted in 2011 based on a random sample of Japanese.) Many previous studies in Japan have shown that people, and young people in particular, like to engage in

closed mobile phone communication (Ito, Matsuda, & Okabe, 2006), and have suggested that SNS can enhance subjective well-being by enhancing the interdependency with others.

2. Social interaction, SNS, and happiness

A number of studies have revealed that online communication enhances user well-being (Chan, 2015; Kim, Ahn, & Vitak, 2015; Lee, Lee, & Kwon, 2011; Manago, Taylor, & Greenfield, 2012; Nabi, Prestin, & So, 2013; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007; Wang, Jackson, Gaskin, & Wan, 2014). Multimodal connectedness and the frequency of strong-tie communications could enhance well-being (Chan, 2015). Similarly, Valkenburg and Peter (2007) found that instant messaging, which is mostly used to communicate with existing friends, was positively correlated with well-being through the time spent with existing friends and the quality of these friendships in Dutch teenagers. Kim et al. (2015) also found a positive relationship between the use of KakaoStory, an instant message application similar to LINE, and mothers' perceptions of positive relationships. Nabi et al. (2013) found that the number of Facebook friends was associated with a stronger perception of social support, less stress, less physical illness, and greater well-being. Facebook users have, on average, 440 friends in the US, and it has been found that larger Facebook networks predict higher levels of life satisfaction (Manago et al., 2012). Some studies distinguished the effect of strong ties and weak ties on well-being. Receiving targeted messages from strong ties on Facebook is associated with improvements in well-being, while viewing friends' wide-audience broadcasts and receiving one-click feedback were not (Burke & Kraut, 2016). These studies suggest that online communications with strong ties promote subjective well-being. However, these studies only tested the direct relationship between SNS use and subjective well-being and did not examine the mediators between the two variables. To overcome this limitation, the present study examines mediators between online communication use and subjective well-being. It should also be noted that traditional media (e.g., talking on a mobile phone or a fixed phone) have supported strong ties before the advent of SNS. To test the continuity of the function of mobile media, this paper tests the relationship between subjective well-being and mobile mail use, which has recently begun to be substituted by LINE in Japan (Ishii, 2015); however, many older people mainly use mobile mail for communication with close friends (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2015).

The most presumable reason why SNS is popular in many countries is that it enables users to efficiently extend and maintain friendship networks (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007). Given that the central function of SNS is to connect friends, it is naturally expected that SNSs are contributing to changes in social interaction. For example, SNS users show higher scores than non-users in face-to-face interactions, the number of acquaintances held, and bridging social capital (Brandtzaeg, 2012).

In sociology, social capital is conceptualized as a social asset by virtue of the actor's connections and access to resources in the network (Lin, 2001). Previous social capital studies have shown it to have positive correlations with subjective well-being (Han, Kim, & Lee, 2013; Kuroki, 2011). In Japan, an empirical study found that trust had positive and significant effects on individual happiness (Kuroki, 2011). A recent study revealed that even interactions with weak social ties were also related to subjective well-being (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014).

Given that the fundamental function of SNS is to extend and maintain the users' personal networks, SNS use is expected to promote subjective well-being. However, we should also consider the social network size of an SNS, as a larger network via a

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