Living Well Together Online: Digital Wellbeing from a Confucian Perspective

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ABSTRACT *The impact of social media technologies (SMTs) on digital wellbeing has become an increasingly important puzzle for ethicists of technology. In this article, we explain why individualised theories of digital wellbeing (DWB) can only solve part of this puzzle. While an individualised conception of DWB is useful for understanding online self-regulation, we contend that we must seek greater understanding of how SMTs connect us. To build an account of this, we locate the conceptual resources for our account in Confucian ethics. In contrast to individualised conceptions of human flourishing that are found in the Western tradition, Confucian thinkers strongly emphasise that individuals cannot flourish alone, but need wider social structures (partner, family, society, nation). Not only do strands of Confucian ethics explain how individuals are defined by the roles they take up in relationships, but this perspective also makes practical suggestions for how these roles can be cultivated. We conclude our article by identifying the Confucian notions that seem to have most promise for the future design of SMTs.*

1. Introduction

Ethicists of digital wellbeing (DWB) contend that the widespread use of online technologies fundamentally changes our understanding of human flourishing. These ethicists typically follow Christopher Burr and Luciano Floridi's influential definition of DWB as the 'impact that digital technologies, such as social media, smartphones, and AI, have had on our wellbeing and our self-understanding of what it means to live a life that is good for us in an increasingly digital society'.[1] Online technologies affect our DWB in various ways, but one underexplored way relates to how these technologies connect us to one another. Social media technologies (SMTs) exemplify this capacity insofar as they are designed to connect users on many levels.[2] While social media companies often speak of the emancipatory potential of bringing us together, it has become increasingly apparent that the ways SMTs do this can be inimical to the DWB of at least some users. Since users remain connected for much of their waking lives, SMTs subject them to intense new social pressures that show signs of compromising their DWB in myriad ways. Numerous psychological studies confirm that chronic distraction, self-esteem issues, depression, and fear of missing out (FOMO) can at least partly be attributed to the unwieldy ways that SMTs connect us.[3] This research reveals negative sides to social connectedness, which is often viewed as valuable in other areas of our lives. Innumerable studies by ethnologists, psychologists, and ethicists support the idea that social connectedness is an integral part of human flourishing. So why does social connectedness affect the DWB of (at least some) SMT users so negatively? And why do many threats to DWB seem to relate – directly or indirectly – to how we are connected to other users via SMTs?

We contend that many challenges for DWB stem from how social media services are currently designed. Today's designs are typically highly individualistic, despite the providers of these services lauding the value of connectivity. This can be seen in the design of SMTs themselves (individual avatars, personal accounts, etc.), as well as in the remedial tools that tech companies have started building to improve DWB. Both operate with an atomised conception of personhood, one in which a user's DWB is regarded as their own personal concern and responsibility. Google's 'Digital Wellbeing Tools', to take one of many examples, illustrate this well. We contend that such individualistic approaches to DWB are in danger of stymying the development of practical initiatives that could improve DWB to a significant degree. Simultaneously, adopting an individualistic solution to DWB hampers our ability to understand the role of social connection in flourishing.[4]

While a strikingly individualistic approach to DWB is endorsed by today's SMT providers, precisely the same tendency can be seen in academic approaches to this topic. Like the approaches to DWB offered by social media providers, an individualised approach pervades much theoretical discussion.[5] In each of these cases, DWB (or its cognates) is viewed as an individual endeavour: a task and an achievement for which users must take personal responsibility. Although some have pointed out the limits of thinking of DWB in these terms,[6] ethicists and human–technology interaction (HTI) theorists still overwhelmingly understand DWB from an individualistic point of view or understand social connection in the most general of terms. For example, in their recent collaboration with Richard Ryan, Raphael Calvo and Dorian Peters use self-determination theory (SDT) to underwrite what has swiftly become one of the most influential theories of DWB, one that unites 'motivation', 'engagement', and 'thriving' in what Ryan, Calvo, and Peters call the 'METUX model'.[7] While METUX discusses 'relatedness', it says relatively little about how this applies to SMTs, saying only that we can be connected well or badly. When discussing social interactions on Facebook, for example, these scholars acknowledge that 'connectedness to others' is important, but METUX does not offer a full conceptual framework that explains how salutary social connections can be maintained online. We aim to do both these things.[8]

In what follows, we contend that an individualised approach is eminently unsuitable for tackling problems relating to DWB, especially those problems relating to how SMTs connect users. Our aim is to explain why the DWB of any one user cannot be isolated from the online behaviour of others and why a successful theory of DWB must be able to explain how social connectivity can be harnessed in ways that improve the quality of our online lives.[9] To do this, we draw on the resources of Confucian ethics and the empirical resources of moral psychology. From a Confucian point of view, human beings grow ethically and emotionally when they are shaped by (and, in turn, shape) their family, society, and larger community structures.[10] Not only does Confucian ethics offer a set of collectivist ethical resources, but these resources are strikingly congruent with the most up-to-date empirical findings on the value of social connectedness for living well. Given the importance of social connectedness to DWB, we believe that a Confucian approach is especially suitable for explaining how we can flourish with online technologies. Confucian ethicists explain in great detail why living well depends on our relationships with others, so it is useful to apply Confucian insights to design the social connections of the next generation of SMTs.

We proceed as follows. In the next section, we identify the key problems with an individualistic approach to DWB, explaining why such approaches cannot do justice to the hyperconnected nature of SMTs. Drawing on the Confucian understanding of the good life, in Section 3 we argue that social connectedness is a powerful engine driving our ethical development. We then move to isolate what Confucian accounts of human flourishing have to offer current accounts of DWB, focusing on Confucian conceptions of social roles, rituals, and ethical connectedness. We conclude by sketching how Confucian insights into DWB could contribute to the design of future SMTs, as well as in improving our understanding of DWB from a theoretical point of view.

2.   Problems with Individualised Approaches to Digital Wellbeing

Social media companies and their PR gurus often emphasise how their technologies provide powerful tools for generating and maintaining social connection. *Prima facie*, Facebook's and Instagram's emphasis on social connectedness should be embraced, as this fits with the latest empirical findings that social connectedness is a key aspect of living well online.[11] Nevertheless, today's SMTs are designed according to a relatively atomised conception of human flourishing. We suggested that this is illustrated by both the design of SMTs in general and in the specific DWB tools that have been created to mitigate negative effects of SMT use. The design of each of these tools presupposes that DWB is the user's own concern and responsibility, which can be improved through one's own personal effort. If this analysis is correct, then we should be wary about the promises that social media companies make about social connectivity because they are in tension with the highly individualistic design of SMTs.

So, what are the problems with an individualised approach to the design of SMTs and to current DWB tools? In what follows, we identify three key problems with the design of today's SMTs, each of which affects the DWB of users while also hampering their ability to connect with other users in prosocial ways.

2.1.   *Problem 1: Unstructured Social Connection on SMTs*

The first problem concerns how today's SMTs are designed in order to facilitate social connection. These technologies make social connection – or at least the simulacrum of it[12] – unprecedentedly easy, which is evidenced by the huge numbers of connections that many SMT users maintain. While some SMT providers only offer asymmetrical connections, others offer fully fledged symmetrical connections in order to replicate offline social reciprocity. Twitter and Instagram are conceived according to an asymmetrical-connection model because their social connections take the form of 'followers' or 'fans'. Facebook, by contrast, employs a symmetrical-social-connection model. Its 'friend' function is designed to facilitate mutual reciprocity and solicitude between users, replicating offline friendship. Given that asymmetrical social relations require less effort and engagement than symmetrical ones, social relations on Twitter or Instagram can be sustained at far greater numbers than on Facebook.

Evolutionary anthropologists estimate the upper limit of meaningful social relationships any one human being can sustain is around the 150–300 mark.[13] Given that many users have considerably more social connections than this, it is no wonder that trying to

maintain many social connections has a great impact on DWB. Even users of SMTs that employ a symmetrical connection model may find themselves with fewer quality online relationships precisely because they try to sustain so many. Given the severe consequences for DWB of having too many – or at least too many unstructured – social connections, one upshot is that SMT providers might do better paying more attention to the quality of these connections. We will return to this question in the final sections.

Since symmetrical social connections – such as those found on Facebook – resemble offline relationships more closely (reciprocity, solicitude, fellow feeling, etc.), we will focus on these kinds of relationships. Despite Facebook's limit on the number of symmetrical relationships any one user can create, being so socially connected has consequences. In fact, each of the key challenges the recent psychological literature identifies for DWB can be traced to the capacity of SMTs to connect users at unprecedented levels. The potential for chronic distraction is multiplied when users have massive numbers of social connections. Self-esteem issues are compounded when SMTs provide more available comparisons.[14] FOMO becomes common when users are invited to more events than they could ever possibly attend or are bombarded with status updates. In each of these cases, at least part of the problem is the number of social connections that SMTs make possible.

Understanding that having numerous 'friends' challenges the DWB of some users fits with the insights of evolutionary anthropologists. We saw above that these researchers posit an upper limit of meaningful social relationships that is far less than Facebook's 5000 friends, so we might think it prudent to act on their advice by limiting online social connections to around 300. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, the providers of SMTs are highly motivated not to do this because users that have large numbers of social connections have many more interactions, which generates more valuable data. This means that finding a way to maintain large numbers of social connections, while improving the quality of these connections, would be useful, both for SMT providers and to users. One way to think about this would be to think about how social connections are structured. Currently, even symmetrical SMTs are designed so that any one user can connect with any other in ways that often fail to mimic the complex social structures of offline life. Section 4 returns to this problem to explore how a Confucian approach may enable us to structure our online social connections in ways that ensure both a high level of social connection and a high level of DWB.[15]

2.2.   *Problem 2: Neglecting Contextual Conditions That Facilitate Social Connection*

The second key problem is that current versions of SMTs have difficulty in recreating the 'contextual features' of offline social connections, in other words, the distinctive features (such as emotions, physical presence, and other contextual factors) that facilitate salutary offline social connections with others. Many problems relating to DWB can be traced to how SMTs face technological difficulties in recreating these factors with anything like the richness of flesh-and-blood social connections.

Take emotions, for example. According to Lavinia Marin and Sabine Roeser, SMTs 'foster a rationalistic bias and [have] an inclination towards less nuanced emotional expressions'.[16] Because today's SMTs are designed to rely heavily on 'textual communication', the emotional content that is the lifeblood of genuine social connection disappears.[17] To make matters worse, the attempts by designers of SMTs to replicate

emotional content with emoticons and other virtual nomenclature do little to stem the tendency of SMTs to privilege the individual expression of extreme emotions.[18] This is perhaps one reason why the growing popularity of SMTs has not facilitated unity and agreement in public debate, but rather fractiousness. Supporting Marin and Roeser's insights, Janna van Grunsven offers compelling arguments to show that the designers of social technologies (SMTs, social robots, sex robots, etc.) would do well to make a greater effort to replicate physical presence in their future creations. Physical presence, van Grunsven argues, underlies social connection on many levels. It better preserves the emotional content of social interactions, for example. It also provides the conditions for tactility,[19] which much psychological literature shows has been a traditionally undervalued form of communication that is closely connected to human wellbeing.[20]

Other researchers point out that various situated contextual factors are important too. These might include environmental cues, such as the room in which one is situated. Under lockdown conditions, many of us will have experienced the difference between communicating with colleagues in a bricks-and-mortar office and communicating with them using video-calling technology. In the former case, we can be primed to behave in certain professional ways due to the architecture of one's work environment, seating plan, and how our bodies are situated in a shared space with other bodies. When communicating with video-calling technology, these contextual factors disappear. Lockdown conditions have required many of us to work in the home environment, to sit wearing informal clothes for extended periods, and to converse with our colleagues as rectilinear avatars on a two-dimensional screen. All these factors have been identified as detrimental to our DWB.[21]

Looking ahead, some providers of SMTs are now trying to overcome the challenges of screen-based media for DWB. Facebook's purchase of Oculus in 2014 was reportedly motivated by the view that future VR technologies will be able to facilitate social connection and to offer at least a simulacrum of face-to-face interaction. Supporting this, Wijnand IJsselsteijn and other HTI researchers have shown why this line of research might be especially promising.[22]

2.3. *Problem 3: The Paradox of Creating Social Connection Using Individual Identity*

Our third and final criticism is more complex because it requires coming to grips with a paradox. It concerns how SMTs are designed to encourage strong expressions of individual identity in order to facilitate and foster social connectivity. Despite the PR claims of Facebook and Instagram, cited above, current SMTs are also designed in ways that encourage users to express their individuality, even their most distinctive idiosyncrasies. This creates a tension. On the one hand, the creators of SMTs emphasise their tools connect users with one another, not only with friends and family members, but also otherwise unknown users (fans and followers). On the other, SMTs are designed so that users receive more attention when they express a strong sense of individual identity.[23] By posting more, or by posting in ways that will garner attention (controversial content, etc.), users receive more feedback (likes, comments, retweets, etc.). Strong individual identity can obviously take many forms, but pernicious forms have shown to be especially effective at fuelling forms of social connectivity that stand to threaten DWB. In what follows, we briefly explore the examples of 'pro-ana' or so-called 'thinspiration' social media avatars

to illustrate how pernicious online identities can affect the physical wellbeing of users, before moving to explore how trolling challenges DWB specifically.

Despite recent attempts at industry regulation, one toxic identity that continues to be found on social media platforms is avatars that depict and glorify anorexic bodies. These avatars typically document an anorexic patient's 'journey' (weight-loss, increasing muscle or bone definition, etc.), which is scrutinised by others in the pro-ana community. Because avatars generate intense online scrutiny, it should come as no surprise that they become a strong source of identity for users.[24] This means the more pro-ana images members of this community post, the more anorexic behaviours are reinforced (in the form of likes, comments, retweets, etc.). What is especially tragic in the case of users who post about their anorexia is that weight-loss behaviours are continually reinforced in a vicious cycle.[25] Posts that depict the most extremely anorexic bodies are not only liked and commented on more, but the algorithms that rank the content that is most liked and commented upon is prioritised in the newsfeeds of other users (leading to yet more likes and comments). This leads to a toxic situation in which both the users and algorithms of SMTs are directly geared to encourage users to keep posting increasingly extreme content.

Pro-ana avatars illustrate how the current approach that SMTs adopt towards social connectivity is closely tied to the strength of individual identity. The more users stand out, the more their posts will be liked and shared, and the more social attention and connections they will generate. In this case, the strength of individual identity is closely correlated with the physical health of users. Users are encouraged to increase their social connections by posting increasingly extreme content, which in turn will increasingly affect their mental and physical health. This vicious cycle may well result in encouraging anorexic users to act in ways that increasingly endanger their health.

3. Confucian Insights into Social Connectedness

Confucians view wellbeing as synonymous with moral flourishing. In other words, for the Confucians, 'the morally good life' and 'the good life' are the same thing. This sets Confucianism apart from some contemporary approaches to wellbeing, which view wellbeing and morality as distinct domains. Despite this guiding principle, the Confucian notion of wellbeing also entails a more mundane or 'realistic' aspect. The early Confucian masters were keen observers of human nature, which can be seen by how many of today's cutting-edge insights in moral psychology have confirmed their earlier observations. In his book on Confucian wellbeing, Confucian philosopher Richard Kim explains that the Confucian's normative reflections are supported by their observations of the needs and the natural conditions of human lives. As he puts it, the Confucian tradition 'offers a reflective account of what makes human lives go well or badly, identifying what they take as good ingredients or elements of human lives, and how they hang together within human communities'.[26]

From a Confucian standpoint, human flourishing requires individuals to develop those character traits that are indispensable to achieve a good life. Character traits, such as benevolence (*ren* 仁), loyalty (*xin* 信), harmony (*he* 和), righteousness (*yi* 義), but also filial piety (*xiao* 孝), allow a fully morally developed person to think, feel, desire, and act in an ethically appropriate manner. For the ancient Confucian master Mencius, all individuals

regardless of their social background are born with the equal potential to become morally good. Mencius defines this idea through the metaphor of the four sprouts (*duan* 端) of virtue. Each human being is born with the sprouts of the virtues. 'The mind's feeling of pity and compassion is the sprout of humanness (ren 仁); the mind's feeling of shame and aversion is the sprout of rightness (yi 義); the mind's feeling of modesty and compliance is the sprout of propriety (li 禮); the mind's sense of right and wrong is the sprout of wisdom (zhi 智). Human beings have these four sprouts just as they have four limbs'.[27]

Nurturing one's moral sensitivity requires personal effort, but the Confucians also emphasise the importance of being situated in an environment conducive to this process. Mencius illustrates this point with a rich agrarian metaphor. He writes:

> In years of abundance, most of the young people have the wherewithal to be good, while in years of adversity, most of them become violent. This is not a matter of a difference in the native capacities sent down by Heaven but rather of what overwhelms their minds. Now, let barley be sown and covered with earth; the ground being the same, and the time of planning also the same, it grows rapidly, and in due course of time, it all ripens. Though there may be differences in the yield, this is because the fertility of the soil, the nourishment of the rain and the dew, and the human effort invested are not the same.[28]

Just like seeds need the right environmental conditions to grow, so, he claims, we need the right environmental conditions for our natural moral sensitivity to be expressed.

So what kind of environment is conducive for human wellbeing? For Confucians, moral cultivation cannot occur in social isolation. In order to grow morally, human beings must be situated in an appropriate social context. Confucian personhood is, as one commentator puts it, 'irreducibly interpersonal' because it is situated and shaped by social relations.[29] Just like physical environments, the human self is inextricably intertwined with its social context and human beings are likely to achieve wellbeing when they are situated in relationships of care. Survival requires that basic material needs are met, but what is also distinctive of humans is their need for affection and companionship so they can develop mentally and progress morally. Such care is ultimately expressed through *ren* (仁), which is often translated into English as 'humanity' or 'benevolence'. Expressing *ren* implies, on the one hand, helping others to establish and morally cultivate themselves and, on the other hand, not to impose on others what one would not like to be imposed on oneself (*shu*, 恕).[30]

What makes the Confucian view of wellbeing interesting for our purposes is that it is based on a relational conception of the self. This fits with the observation that many of us derive our identities through our relationships with groups, communities, and institutions. These identities are often multiple and overlapping, as we share identities with our family, religious community, nationality, college, ethnic or linguistic groups, even those who support the same football teams.[31] Empirical studies also confirm that involvement in social relations is key to individual health.[32] According to Debra Umberson *et al.*: '[h]umans are wired for social connection. Without social ties, distress emerges and health fails. In this sense, social connection seems to be a biological imperative. Social ties influence health in part through health behaviour, and this influence plays out across the life course'.[33]

Yet not all social relations are equally conducive to personal growth. Confucians would surely raise an eyebrow at the superficial nature of many connections that users develop on

SMTs and point out that being digitally connected is not sufficient to be personally connected. By considering social relations as constitutive of the human self, contemporary Confucian scholars claim that, even in a modern and technological world, wellbeing can only be achieved in a social connection based on care. Developing human relationships with a 'personal connection' is essential for human flourishing because humans have a natural need for care and companionship. For example, when reflecting on the deployment of robots in the daily care of elderly persons, Sor-hoon Tan worries that the use of care robots can overlook the need of elderly persons for human relationships. Not only do elderly persons lack the means to overcome their possible physical and mental limitations, they also need 'companionship' with another flesh-and-blood human being. Tan writes: 'She [the elderly person] needs someone in whom she could take an interest, someone who could share with her that person's daily experience in the world in which she is no longer as active, someone who has different perspectives, and life experience'.[34]

The Confucian view of wellbeing suggests it is paramount to reflect on the quality of the connections and human relationships that are developed with SMTs. These technologies give individuals unprecedented opportunities to maintain their social connections, even when geographical proximity is not possible, but not all social connections developed through SMTs are well described as 'personal connections'. For example, most users would agree that Facebook friends are not 'real' friends because these connections can exist even without care or related kinds of solicitude (concern for welfare, nurturing, etc.). This is not necessarily a problem; after all, many human interactions are based on instrumental goals, but it may become problematic when SMTs are the main venue through which individuals socialise. For Confucians, a person must also have some stable social relationships through which she can establish a deep 'personal connection'.[35]

How can these kinds of personal connections be developed? The idea that the self is constitutively social brings Confucians to link human wellbeing to good familial relationships and community. Since the family is often the first social institution in which we find ourselves and through which we can develop, Confucians view the family as a sort of 'prudential good, a fundamental component of wellbeing'.[36] Children who are born into a stable family context rely on the family to provide them with a social context in which they receive personal care and attention, so it is the first social institution that is responsible for the children's psychological and moral development. While growing up, children learn how to behave and absorb ethical principles. Confucians believe that children start with an innate nature, but it is then shaped by parents and siblings.[37]

The Confucian attention to family relationships finds empirical support in moral psychology and sociology. Psychologist and child-development scholar Willard Hartup argues that a child's ability to interact in the social world emerges from the early relationships that the child develops with her caregivers and, later on, with her peers. 'Early relationships also set the stage for social and emotional development',[38] such that 'the construction of well-functioning relationships may be the most significant achievement in the child's socialization'.[39] Parent–children connectedness is also associated with increased self-esteem and a low risk of depression in adolescents.[40] For Ackard *et al.*, a close relationship with parents is a consistent predictor of healthy behaviour among adolescents.[41] Perceived low parental caring and communication are correlated with detrimental behaviours for adolescent wellbeing, such as unhealthy weight control, substance use, body dissatisfaction, depression, and low self-esteem.[42]

These observations have direct relevance for sketching an account of digital wellbeing from a Confucian point of view. For Confucians, the family represents a sort of 'ethical training ground', where the individual learns how to behave and care for others. As the individual grows older, she learns how to extend similar feelings of kindness for other humans outside her family, and she acquires new responsibilities and duties in virtue of her new social roles. In Confucian scholarship, this idea is called 'graded theory' or 'differentiated love', as is carefully described in Mencius: 'By treating the elders in one's own family as elders should be treated and extending this to the elders of other families, and by treating the young of one's own family as the young ought to be treated and extending this to the young of other people's families, the empire can be turned around on the palm of one's hand'.[43]

The graded theory, together with the Confucian relational view of the self, suggests a very different model of social organisation from the one assumed by contemporary SMTs. While the Confucian society is characterised by interested and diverse forms of social relationships that overlap one another, SMTs assume a 'horizontal' model society in which all social connections have an equal status, regardless of the actual nature of the social relationship between the users. Confucians, therefore, would suspect that one of the reasons why SMTs seem to hinder wellbeing is that their horizontal design situates users in a flat societal network that is radically out of kilter with how humans develop social relationships in the real world.

Although the Confucian account of wellbeing begins with the family, it is intended to explain how individuals are supposed to establish, maintain, and foster social relationships outside the family, in the larger social world. Human flourishing, they believe, requires the creation and preservation of harmonious social relations with others, so a Confucian theory of digital wellbeing requires that we think about how to create these kinds of harmonious relationships in the online world.[44] Fortunately, Confucianism offers distinctive resources to fix this problem insofar as it specifies the idea that concern and attention for the other human person must be expressed through appropriate rituals (*li*, 禮). In practice, rituals consist of 'objective prescriptions of behaviour, whether involving rites, ceremonies, manners, or general deportment, that bind human beings and spirits together in networks of interacting roles within the family, within human society, and with the numinous realm beyond'.[45] Unlike norms and laws that aim to facilitate social coordination, rituals have an ethical function because they are conducive and expressive of virtue; they offer individuals patterns of behaviour to cultivate and properly express their feelings towards other members of the community in a manner that is intelligible to the community. From this perspective, rituals are a form of nondeliberative communicative practices which are considered a 'process of humanization'.[46]

One important distinction is between a 'thick' or a 'thin' notion of rituals. Confucians endorse a thick conception of rituals because against the thin view that considers rituals a code of conduct, Confucians attribute to rituals social and ethical meanings, but also an aesthetic function. The aesthetic aspect of the rituals (which can concern how certain movements are performed during the ritual or the dress worn during the performance) is supposed to help the participants to have certain positive feelings and dispositions towards the achievement of harmonious social relationships.

A contemporary reader may wonder whether there is any space for such practices in the design of SMTs. After all, the adoption of Confucian rituals requires a very specific sociocultural context, which is very different from the social setting characteristic of

modern industrialised societies. We agree on this point, and in the next section we will argue that the Confucian thick notion of ritual points to a multidimensional form of communication in which verbal exchange is only one aspect of effective human-to-human communication, often not even the most important. This, we will argue, is the key insight that Confucian rituals offer for issues concerning digital wellbeing.

The Analects discusses several nonverbal rituals. Commenting on some ritual practices, Confucius states:

> [a] ceremonial cap made of linen is prescribed by the rites, but these days people use silk. This is frugal, and I follow the majority. To bow before ascending the stairs is what is prescribed by the rites, but these days people bow after ascending. This is arrogant, and – though it goes against the majority – I continue to bow before ascending.[47]

Scholars understand this passage to show that for Confucius rituals are not a rigid protocol, and that the proper practice of rituals requires the individual to maintain a critical perspective on the ritualised practice. Confucius criticises the ritualistic practice of using a linen cap while supporting the popular use of a more economic cap (because this will not affect the function of the ritual). At the same time, he rejects the new practice of bowing in front of the ruler after ascending the stairs because the ancient ritual of bowing before ascending the stairs can better express appropriate reverence towards the ruler. For the purpose of this article, we can see that Confucius views human-to-human communication as developing through physical aspects, like dress and bodily gesture. These aspects have a communicative potential, which can express certain emotions and even cultivate certain sentiments in the person who performs the ritual. If the environmental and physical aspects of social communication need to be considered for effective communication, Confucian rituals are an interesting example to consider.

4.   Applying Confucian Insights to DWB

We are now ready to apply the Confucian concepts we have looked at to our discussion of digital wellbeing. We will use these to tentatively suggest how these concepts could inspire design recommendations that make future SMTs better at connecting us to one another (and by doing this improve our digital wellbeing). We focus on three key concepts: (a) the reciprocal nature of human relations, (b) the graded development theory, and (c) the contextual and nonverbal aspects of human communication.

4.1.   *Graduated Human Development*

The Confucian graded theory of human development sheds light on the problematic nature of the unstructured architecture of SMTs (Problem 1). From a Confucian standpoint, a key objection to the design of today's SMTs is their inability to offer users a positive (digital) social environment that is aligned with them living a good life. SMTs situate users in a flat structure of relations, but humans function well in a social environment that encourages them to gradually develop social relations. On Facebook, for example, digital social connections are structured in a highly egalitarian way: there is essentially no difference between notification from one's sibling and from Mark Zuckerberg. However, if

human beings tend to develop through a process of gradual extension from the 'inner' of the family to the 'outer' of the bigger communities, as the Confucians claim (and moral psychological research typically concurs), the SMTs appear hostile to our social relations. It should come as no surprise that this can hinder the digital wellbeing of users.

Similar considerations have brought Confucian scholar, Pak-Hang Wong, to argue that Confucianism 'promotes a turn towards role-based ethics in ethics of technology',[48] in which digital relationships express the social roles that users have in nononline life. This would imply, for instance, that parents should be able to supervise and manage the content on the SMT profile of their children. Doing this would ensure that 'familial members can actively assume and perform their roles in the online world' and also that young users can learn how to behave ethically online by being corrected by their parents.[49]

Our proposal is to critically evaluate the relational structure of SMTs. Following the Confucian insights we have explored above, SMTs should be redesigned to give users the potential to develop a network of online relations that mirrors the nononline network of relations, that is, those that they have in their offline life. One way to do this can be introducing a qualitative distinction between 'closer' connections (e.g. the connections one has with one's sibling) and more 'distant' connections (e.g. the connection that one has with Mark Zuckerberg). Distinguishing connections in this way would allow the user, if she wishes to, to configure her connections in such a way that she can bring into focus the content shared by closer connections while keeping the content shared by the more distant connections in the background. Such a proposal may have the potential to inspire a design of SMTs that is more attuned with the needs of users for human relations.

Some readers may worry that such a proposal might facilitate the development of echo chambers on social media. After all, one positive aspect of being part of a global community is that it can expose users to views and ideas that otherwise they would not have considered. In response to this point, we want to stress that we do not propose to eliminate the global dimension of SMTs. We argue that exposure to a global dimension can be instrumental for users' wellbeing if it is situated in an inter-nested societal network in which users can develop the required social skills for interactions in the global sphere at a smaller societal scale.

4.2.   *The Contextual and Nonverbal Aspects of Human Communication*

So far our discussion on Confucian wellbeing has revealed that the requirement of a graded social structure of relationships points to the lack of an adequate architecture in the design of SMTs. Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether Confucianism can shed some light on the neglect of SMTs for the contextual conditions that facilitate social connection (Problem 2). As we mentioned in our discussion of Marin and Roeser's work, SMTs rarely take into account the nuances of emotions that individuals communicate.

The above discussion of Confucian ritual practices could be taken to offer a new perspective on the nature of fruitful human communication. Whether Confucian or not, all should be able to grasp how humans are sensitive to contextual inputs, such as music and the clothes that other persons are wearing. The ability to cultivate human relations (which, as discussed, are key for human wellbeing) depends on the possibilities to have a conducive environment, where human interactions develop through different senses and take place in a natural and cultural environment. This suggests that one crucial aspect

to turn digital connections into human relations is to develop a digital environment in which the multiple dimensions of social interactions can be replicated.

Pak-Hang Wong has recently argued that for Confucians 'technology can be 'ritualized' to support people's ethical development'.[50] 'Confucian Li', for Wong, 'can be used as a normative standard for ethical analysis of technology, or it can be used to inform the design and use of technology – or, more proactively, it can be used to ritualize technology so that it serves to guide users' and the society's responses with reference to Li'.[51] Wong's idea of Confucian ritualising technology is problematic. The challenge for the application of the Confucian thick notion of rituals to SMTs is that the practice of Confucian rituals is very culturally sensitive and the idea of a life shaped by ritualised aesthetically fulfilling activities may puzzle those who are not acquainted with the Confucian texts. Even in historically Confucian East Asia (China, Japan, North and South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, and Vietnam), many persons do not self-consciously identify with Confucianism while others belong to non-Confucian minority groups. This does not mean that Confucianism has lost its moral authority in the region or that many persons unconsciously do not live according to Confucian values. But it certainly raises the question of the feasibility of imposing the Confucian thick notion of rituals on non-Confucian modern societies.

Besides feasibility concerns, the above discussion suggests potential issues on the justifiability of ritualising SMTs. Considering the pluralism and persistent presence of moral disagreements in contemporary societies, it seems unjust to impose the Confucian thick notion of rituals on the design of digital societal networks. If most of the users' conceptions of the good disagree with the Confucian thick notion of rituals, would it be fair to impose on them a ritualised form of digital life on SMTs? Confucian philosopher Sungmoon Kim raises a similar point concerning the justifiability of Confucian political theories.[52] According to Kim, the imposition of Confucian principles on pluralistic and multiethnic contemporary East Asian societies would violate the principle of public reason that must inform modern pluralistic societies. What is more troublesome for the case of ritualised SMTs is that digital communities are even more pluralistic since they extend beyond national borders.

What are the consequences for SMT designers and Confucian ethicists of technology? Should they forget about Confucian rituals entirely and dismiss them as passé? The answer is no. Despite its cultural specificity, the Confucian thick notion of rituals offers insights into what effective human-to-human communication should look like. It is the mode of communication underpinning Confucian rituals that in our view can be key for enhancing SMT users' digital wellbeing.

As discussed in the previous section, the thick conception of Confucian rituals is based on the idea that the ability to cultivate human relations (which are key for human wellbeing) depends on the possibility to have multidimensional forms of communication. Personal connections develop through different senses and take place through multiple media. The ancient texts suggest that physical clues like a person's dress can be an effective communicative means to express one person's esteem for others, while contextual elements like background music or aesthetic features of the surrounding environment can help to attune individuals' emotions and predispose them towards a positive relationship with each other.

For the design of SMTs, this suggests that one crucial aspect for turning digital connections into human personal relations is to create digital environments in which users communicate with each other through multiple sensory channels. This Confucian insight

addresses the concerns that Marin and Roeser have raised on the heavy textual communication of some SMTs and van Grunsven's emphasis on the need for greater effort to replicate physical presence in SMTs' future design. It illustrates the link between the limited communicative potential of contemporary SMTs and their detrimental effects on users' digital wellbeing. At the same time, it suggests that a digital form of communication that is based on multiple dimensions of social interactions can be tested in future SMTs' designs. However, this Confucian-inspired design proposition avoids the problems of a claim for a Confucian ritualising technology because it focuses on what human communication is, without imposing a Confucian ethical ideal on SMTs' design.

4.3. The Importance of Reciprocal Human Relationships

Finally, the need for reciprocal human relationships offers us some insights into the third paradox of creating a social connection using individual identity (Problem 3). From a Confucian perspective, SMTs exponentially increase the number of human-to-human connections, while making little progress on the quality of human relations. Strictly speaking, from a Confucian standpoint, most of the human-to-human connections that users develop online are not 'human relationships' because most of these connections lack the exchange of care or 'personal connection' that is essential to human relationships and, therefore, to human flourishing. Under these circumstances, from a Confucian perspective, it is not surprising if an increasing number of digital connections does not correspond to an improvement in the user's wellbeing. Being digitally connected is not sufficient to be personally connected.

Confucians may also suspect that being constantly digitally connected to countless people may undermine the ability of some users to cultivate their fundamental relationships. This is problematic because, as discussed in the previous section, humans have a natural need for care and companionship. In an extremely large community, whether millions of individuals are connected in an almost identical way, our natural needs for care and companionship may find expression in extreme actions to recall the attention of the many. Without a shared bond and common experience, it is astonishment, shock, and wonder that are often the most effective ways to receive the attention of others. However, this seems to be an ineffective solution since, in the best scenario, it provides a temporary replacement for human affection.

One way to solve this issue may be to introduce distinctions in the users' structure of digital social relations. This idea was previously discussed concerning problem 1 (the lack of structure on SMTs), but it can also help to control the negative effects that a high number of connections has on users. Introducing social distinctions in SMTs could allow users to be part of a smaller digital community of friends and close contacts who are more likely to develop and maintain relationships with a specifically personal connection. This structural change may lead users to feel less pressure to be unique or to stand out from the crowd. This does not limit users' ability to establish new human relations through SMTs; rather it can require the user to act differently to cultivate human connections.

5.   **Conclusion**

This article has explored the possibility of using Confucian ideas, focusing on their claim that human flourishing is connected to the structure of social relationships, to sketch a new approach to DWB. We began by identifying three key problems that SMTs generate for DWB. First, SMTs often generate unstructured social connections; second, SMTs neglect the vital contextual conditions that facilitate social connection; third, SMTs create social connection by requiring users to express strong individual identities. While it is beyond the parameters of this article to show how these problems can be comprehensively solved, we identified three sets of conceptual resources within the Confucian tradition that indicate how this might be done. Confucian ethics has a rich and dynamic approach to wellbeing that emphasises cultivating excellent human relationships. Understanding human relationships as 'graduated', taking seriously the 'contextual and nonverbal aspects' of human communication, and emphasising 'reciprocity in relationships' illuminate how a Confucian-inspired approach to DWB has useful resources that could improve the design of tomorrow's SMTs.

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NOTES

1 Burr, Christopher, and Luciano Floridi. 2020. *The Ethics of Digital Well-Being: A Multi-Disciplinary Approach*. New York: Springer, p. 3.

2 On the one hand, SMTs directly link us to our 'friends' or 'followers', as depicted by their interfaces. On the other hand, SMTs link users together indirectly, insofar as these technologies require us to share the mutual sharing and aggregation of data in order to function.

3 Twenge, Jean, Thomas Joiner, Megan Rogers, and Gabrielle Martin. 2018. "Increases in Depressive Symptoms, Suicide-Related Outcomes, and Suicide Rates Among U.S. Adolescents After 2010 and Links to Increased New Media Screen Time." *Clinical Psychological Science* 6(1): 3–17.

4 Western theories of wellbeing can be more or less individualistic. Capability approaches, for instance, claim that the opportunity to 'be part of a community' and develop 'intimate relations', 'real friendship', and 'affiliation' is what makes life valuable (Nussbaum, Martha. 2000. *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities*

Approach. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Nussbaum, Martha. 2003. "Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements: Sen and Social Justice." *Feminist Economics* 9(2/3): 33–59; Sen, Amartya. 1980. "Equality of What?" In *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values 1*, edited by S. McMurrin. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press). Nevertheless, as we explain below, theories that emphasise individual autonomy have been especially influential in the DWB space. In contrast to these theories, we claim, the emphasis on social relations in Confucian ethics is particularly suitable in viewing DWB from a less individualistic point of view.

5 Burr and Floridi op. cit.; Brey, P., J. Søraker, J.-W. Rijt, J. Boer, and P.-H. Wong, eds. 2015. *Well-Being in Contemporary Society*. Dordrecht: Springer; van de Poel, I. 2012. "Can We Design for Well-Being?" In *The Good Life in a Technological Age*, edited by P. Brey, A. Briggle, and E. Spence, 295–306. London: Routledge.

6 Dennis, Matthew. 2021. "Digital Well-Being Under Pandemic Conditions." *Ethics and Information Technology* 23(3): 435–45. Online first.

7 Peters, Dorian, Raphael Calvo, and Richard Ryan. 2018. "Designing for Motivation, Engagement and Wellbeing in Digital Experience." *Frontiers in Psychology* 9: 797. Online first.

8 Calvo, Raphael, and Dorian Peters. 2020. "Tools for Wellbeing-Supportive Design: Features, Characteristics, and Prototypes." *Multimodal Technologies and Interaction* 4(3): 40. Online first.

9 Our aim aligns with one of scholars who have begun reflecting on the interconnected dimension of new technologies. See, for example, Wong, Pak-Hang. 2021. "Artificial Intelligence, Personal Decisions, Consent, and the Confucian Idea of Oneness." In *Harmonious Technology: A Confucian Ethics of Technology*, edited by P. Wong and T. Wang, 79–94. New York: Routledge.

10 Ivanhoe, Philip. 2017. *Oneness: East Asian Conceptions of Virtue, Happiness, and How We Are All Connected*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

11 Ackard, Diann, Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, Mary Story, and Cheryl Perry. 2006. "Parent–Child Connectedness and Emotional Health Among Adolescents." *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 30(1): 59–66; Allen, Kelly-Ann, Ryan Tracii, Gray DeLeon, Dennis McInerney, and Lea Waters. 2014. "Social Media Use and Social Connectedness in Adolescents: The Positives and the Potential Pitfalls." *Educational and Developmental Psychologist* 31(1): 18–31; Askari, Sima, Antal Haans, Pieter Bos, Maureen Eggink, Emily Mengfei, Fenella Kwong, and Wijnand IJsselsteijn. 2020. "Context Matters: The Effect of Textual Tone on the Evaluation of Mediated Social Touch." In *Haptics: Science, Technology, Applications. EuroHaptics 2020. Lecture Notes in Computer Science*, edited by I. Nisky, J. Hartcher-O'Brien, M. Wiertlewski, and J. Smeets, 131–9. Cham: Springer.

12 In our subsequent use of the term 'connection', we acknowledge that connections that are primarily mediated by social media are distinctive compared to their nondigital equivalents (such as face-to-face connections). This is most clear in the case of what we term 'asymmetrical connection' below. We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for encouraging us to be clearer about this.

13 McCarty, Christopher, Peter Killworth, Russell Bernard, Eugene Johnsen, and Gene Shelley. 2000. "Comparing Two Methods for Estimating Network Size." *Human Organization* 60(1): 28–39.

14 Steinsbekk, Silje, Lars Wichstrøm, Frode Stenseng, Jacqueline Nesi, Beate Wold Hygen, and Vera Skalická. 2021. "The Impact of Social Media Use on Appearance Self-Esteem from Childhood to Adolescence – A 3-wave Community Study." *Computers in Human Behavior* 114: 106528; de Vries, Dian, and Rinaldo Kühne. 2015. "Facebook and Self-Perception: Individual Susceptibility to Negative Social Comparison on Facebook." *Personality and Individual Differences* 86: 217–21; Jang, Kyungeun, Namkee Park, and Hayeon Song. 2016. "Social Comparison on Facebook: Its Antecedents and Psychological Outcomes." *Computers in Human Behavior* 62: 147–54.

15 Google+ introduced a similar feature to designate which 'circles' of social connections they would post to. Recently, Instagram has begun offering a new 'close friends' function, so users can limit those who see their 'stories'. While these initiatives are to be welcomed, it should be remembered that the number of social connections that users can make is relatively unlimited.

16 Marin, Lavinia, and Sabine Roeser. 2020. "Emotions & Digital Well-Being: The Rationalistic Bias of Social Media Design in Online Deliberations." In *The Ethics of Digital Well-Being: A Multi-Disciplinary Approach*, edited by C. Burr and L. Floridi. New York: Springer, p. 139.

17 Ibid., pp. 144–6.

18 Ibid., pp. 142–4.

19 Van Grunsven, Jana. 2020. "Perceptual Breakdown During a Global Pandemic: Introducing Phenomenological Insights for Digital Mental Health Purposes." *Ethics and Information Technology* 23(1): 91–8. Topical Collection on the Ethics of COVID-19. Online first.

20 Askari *et al*. op. cit.

21 Twenge *et al.* op. cit.

22 Li, Jie, Vinoba Vinayagamoorthy, Raz Schwartz, Wijnand IJsselsteijn, David Shamma, and Pablo Cesar. 2020. "Social VR: A New Medium for Remote Communication and Collaboration." Extended Abstracts of the 2020 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems.

23 Cocking, D., and J. Van den Hoven. 2019. *Evil Online*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

24 Giles, David. 2006. "Constructing Identities in Cyberspace: The Case of Eating Disorders." *British Journal of Social Psychology* 45(3): 463–77.

25 Rodgers, Rachel, Sabrina Skowron, and Henri Chabrol. 2012. "Disordered Eating and Group Membership among Members of a Pro-Anorexic Online Community." *European Eating Disorders Review* 20(1): 9–12, p. 11.

26 Kim, Richard. 2020. *Confucianism and the Philosophy of Well-Being*. New York: Routledge, p. 20.

27 Bloom, Irene, and Philip Ivanhoe. 2009. *Mencius*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 35. 2A6.

28 Bloom and Ivanohe op. cit., p. 125. 6A7.

29 Ames, Roger. 1991. "Reflections on the Confucian Self: A Response to Fingarette." In *Rules, Rituals and Responsibility: Essays Dedicated to Herbert Fingarette*, edited by M. Bockover. LaSalle: Open Court, p. 105.

30 Slingerland, Edward. 2003. *Analects*. Indianapolis: Hackett. p. 63. 6.30. Here, we follow Ranjoo Herr who maintains that *shu* is the negative requirement of *ren*, while establishing oneself and other is the positive requirement of *ren*. Herr, Ranjoo. 2003. "Is Confucianism Compatible with Care Ethics? A Critique." *Philosophy East & West* 53(4:2): 471–89, p. 476.

31 Ivanhoe op. cit., p. 55.

32 House, James, Karl Landis, and Debra Umberson. 1988. "Social Relationships and Health." *Science* 241: 540–5.

33 Umberson, Debra, Robert Crosnoe, and Corinne Reczek. 2010. "Social Relationships and Health Behavior Across the Life Course." *Annual Review of Sociology* 36: 139–52, p. 152.

34 Tan, Sor-hoon. 2019. "AI and the Confucian Conception of the Human Person: Some Preliminary Reflections." SMU Research Data Repository (RDR). Conference contribution. https://doi.org/10.25440/smu.16717291.v1. p. 4.

35 Tan op. cit., p. 3.

36 Kim op. cit., p. 72.

37 Family relationships are a model for political relations according to the *Analects* and the *Mencius*. However, the value that Confucianism attributes to family relations depends on the reciprocal nature of these relations. Furthermore, Confucianism does not exclude the development of intimate relations with those genetically unconnected, especially when family relations are toxic and self-destructive. For a more detailed discussion on this issue, see Tan, Sor-hoon. 2002. "Between Family and State: Relational Tensions in Confucian Ethics." In *Mencius: Contexts and Interpretations*, edited by A. Chan, 169–88. Honolulu: Hawaii University Press.

38 Hartup, Willard. 1989. "Social Relationships and Their Developmental Significance." *American Psychologist* 44(2): 120–6, p. 124.

39 Hartup op. cit., p. 125.

40 Boutelle, Kerri, Marla Eisenberg, Melissa Gregory, and Dianne Neumark-Sztainer. 2009. "The Reciprocal Relationship Between Parent–Child Connectedness and Adolescent Emotional Functioning Over 5 Years." *Journal of Psychosomatic Research* 66: 309–16.

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42 Ibid., p. 59.

43 Bloom and Ivanhoe op. cit., p. 9. 1A7.

44 At a minimum, the Confucians believe, harmony means refraining from violence even in conflictual situations and seeking peaceful relationships (Ziliotti, Elena. 2018. "Public Deliberation in a Globalized World? The Case of Confucian Customs and Traditions." In *The Yearbook Practical Philosophy in a Global Perspective*, edited by M. Reder, A. Filipovic, D. Finkelde, and J. Wallacher. Freiburg im Breisgau: Verlag Karl Alber, p. 11).

45 Schwartz, Benjamin. 1985. *The World of Thought in Ancient China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p. 67.

46 Tu, Wei-Ming. 1972. "Li as Process of Humanization." *Journal of Philosophy East & West* 22(2): 187–201.

47 Slingerland op. cit., p. 87. 9.3.

48 Wong, Pak-Hang. 2021. "Dao, Harmony and Personhood: Towards a Confucian Ethics of Technology." In *Harmonious Technology: A Confucian Ethics of Technology*, edited by P. Wong and T. Wang. New York: Routledge, p. 42.

49 Wong, Pak-Hang. 2013. "Confucian Social Media: An Oxymoron?" *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 12: 283–96, p. 295.

50 Wong, Pak-Hang. 2020. "Why Confucianism Matters in Ethics of Technology." In *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Technology*, edited by S. Vallor. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 13. Online first.

51 Ibid., p. 14.

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