

HOW DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES
CAN SUPPORT POSITIVE
PSYCHOLOGY

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HOW DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES CAN SUPPORT POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABM	Attention-bias modification
ADHD	Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder
AI	Artificial intelligence
APA	American Psychiatric Association
ASC	Autism spectrum condition (a.k.a. Autism Spectrum Disorder)
AW	Artificial wisdom
AWS	Amazon Web Services
CBT	Cognitive-behavioural therapy
CMC	Computer-mediated communication
DOORs	Digital Opportunities for Obtaining Resources and Skills Program
DSM	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders
DL	Deep learning
DLC	Downloadable content
EG	Educational game(s)
eHealth	Electronic health
EMA	Ecological momentary assessment
EMI	Ecological momentary intervention
ERIC	Emotionally Responsive Interactive Client NHS National Health Service
F2F	Face-to-face
fMRI	Functional magnetic resonance imaging
FWTW	Five Ways to Well-being
FWTW	Five Ways to Well-being Framework
G4E	Games for entertainment
ICD	International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems
JITAI	Just-in-time adaptive intervention
WHO	World Health Organisation
ML	Machine learning
MMO	Massively-multiplayer online (games)
NLP	Natural language processing
NPC	Non-playable character(s)

OPPIs	Online Positive Psychology Interventions
PC	Personal computer(s)
PTSD	Post-traumatic stress disorder
SDT	Self-Determination Theory
STAI-Y6	State-Trait Anxiety Inventory Short-Form
TAM	Technology Acceptance Model
TG	Therapeutic game(s)
UCD	User-centred design
UK	United Kingdom
VG	Video game(s)
XP	Experience point(s)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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FOREWORD

Michelle Tytherleigh

Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution. – Albert Einstein

In the modern world, where digital technologies are reshaping every aspect of our lives, when used appropriately, the intersection of technology and psychology can offer extraordinary opportunities to enhance human well-being. Positive psychology, the scientific study of what makes life worth living, has always focused on nurturing strengths, fostering gratitude, and building on the upward spiralling effects of positive emotion. More traditionally, this has come via face-to-face interactions, therapy sessions, and self-help practices. However, with the rapid advancement of digital tools, from mobile apps to cyberspace and virtual reality – new pathways are opening up to support, expand, and democratise the reach that positive psychology can have.

This book, written by two psychologists interested and experienced in cyber psychology and its applications for mental health, offers a timely exploration of how digital technologies and approaches can enhance our understanding and practice of positive psychology for well-being. From personalised well-being apps that provide real-time feedback on emotions and mood, to online platforms that foster global communities of support, the opportunities are both exciting and vast. The tools we have so often seen as distractions and detrimental to mental health are now able to evolve into instruments of mindfulness, empathy, and growth.

Not only a guide for practitioners, researchers, and enthusiasts, this book offers an invitation to think boldly about how technology can be harnessed for good and how the pixels on our screens can translate into moments of connection, happiness, and joy. Showcasing the positive side of technology and how it can be used to promote growth and enhance well-being, as the fourth in our series on Positive Psychology in Practice, this book is an inspiration to any reader open to consider and explore the boundless potential of digital innovation to support and amplify the principles of positive psychology and help build a future where well-being is accessible to all.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to:

- *Introduce the reader to cyberspace as an area of interest.*
- *Introduce the value of digital innovations in the context of positive psychology.*
- *Provide an outline of the structure and topics discussed in this book.*

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY: A (VERY) BRIEF INTRODUCTION

The history of psychology has been dominated by efforts to understand and alleviate psychological problems. Following the development of the sciences, and the shift from supernatural to somatogenic and psychogenic explanations for behaviour, significant progress has been made in understanding the origins and differential manifestations of a range of psychological disorders. This progress has, to date, culminated in the ongoing development of established manuals for their classification, such as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), now in its 5th edition (APA, 2022), and the International Classification of Diseases (ICD), now in its 11th edition (WHO, 2019). Additionally, numerous assessment tools and successful therapeutic approaches to measure, intervene with and alleviate the burden of psychological disorders have also emerged. In terms of our ability to reverse the deterioration of mental health, psychology has come a considerable way although there still exists substantial scope for further development.

However, this model of psychology has also been criticised for placing too great an emphasis on disease and its reversibility to an assumed level of functionality, emphasising disease and defect over strength (Maddux, 2008). Additionally, therapeutic efficacy rates and the high tendency towards comorbidity suggest that the current clinical focus in identifying and isolating a range of individual disorders may be an overly reductionist means of understanding a more complex network of disorder and transdiagnostic processes.

Similarly, the disease model which has dominated psychology was argued by Seligman (often referred to as the father of positive psychology) to be underappreciative of how human experience might be lifted beyond a baseline of absence of disorder, to a higher level of functioning, even thriving (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). It has long been acknowledged that ‘health’ represents more than the absence of disease or infirmity (WHO, 1947) – that is the absence of disorder does not equate to a positive experience. It is in this vein that positive psychology exerts its influence. While positive psychology does not overlook the need for intervention in cases of distress, it places equal emphasis on how we might understand the full spectrum of mental health to promote the ways and means to building well-being, resilience, and flourishing (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). A recent systematic review and meta-analysis reported that, while findings were somewhat inconclusive due to heterogeneity, risk of bias, and the small number of included studies, positive psychological interventions appear to hold potential as alternatives with comparable outcomes to other forms of active intervention (Lim & Tierney, 2023).

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) described positive psychology as having three primary aims: (1) to be as concerned with strength as with weakness; (2) to be as concerned with understanding and enacting the means to build strengths as well as with repairing damages; and (3) to be concerned with making the everyday lives of people fulfilling. One of the principles of the discipline is that, while genetic dispositions play a consequential role in our experience of life (and by connection, the state of mental health and well-being), the choices we make in response to life experiences are also important. While negative emotions are a natural product of life experience and, therefore, should be acknowledged, the management of negative experience is a key factor in ensuring that we are not governed by it. Instead, the successful development of a battery of effective tools (e.g. optimism, resilience) helps reduce the negative influence of negative experience and to overcome adversity, finding challenge in difficulty rather than threat. Moreover, features of positive psychology may act as preventative mechanisms which act against the onset or relapse of psychological disorder (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

As the name suggests, positive psychology considers human qualities from a positive perspective. Park et al. (2016, p. 200) provide an effective summary of positive psychology as ‘the study of strengths, assets, and positive attributes’. Well-being, optimal functioning, resilience, happiness, grit, and flourishing are all topics of interest, and numerous theories have been developed. One such theory, to which we refer throughout this book, is the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011a, 2011b), which hypothesised that well-being was comprised of five core elements: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. While there has been some research to discuss the extent to which PERMA is effective in cross-cultural contexts (Khaw & Kern, 2014), it aligns well with other models of well-being (Goodman et al., 2017) and has become widely accepted in the field.

While disease models hold value in understanding and in remedying experiences of psychological problems, they often do not provide an effective means of prevention (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Instead, this may be better achieved by understanding how to build competencies which protect against mental distress (e.g. resilience, hope, optimism), rather than merely correcting deficiencies. In short, positive psychology encourages us to reorient our understanding of mental health beyond the presentation (or lack of) symptoms of mental disorder, broadening this spectrum to also encompass a conceptualisation of the human condition where greater potential might be realised.

CYBERSPACE: WHAT IS IT, AND WHY BE INTERESTED?

The term ‘cyberspace’ was first coined by the American-Canadian writer William Gibson and refers to the vast and dynamic non-physical world of interconnected computers and networks, through which information and communication occur. This exchange of information and communication data may be synchronous or asynchronous and propagated via a number of means (e.g. via email or social networking).

Unlike other forms of ‘space’, the digital world has little tangible and physical presence; events occurring in cyberspace are often not conceptualised as occurring at the location of individual users, or within the real-world servers hosting a particular website, rather in a non-physical place. Instead, cyberspace can be thought of as heterotopic (both physical and metaphorical) and as a ‘place’ where digital processes occur (such as computer-mediated communication – CMC).

Mirroring the real world, as the influence of digital technologies becomes ever greater and ever more pervasive, so too does technology's influence on all things psychological. Whether they are acting as a tool for obtaining and processing research data, providing education and training, or delivering psychological therapy, digital technologies continue to grow as a diverse and malleable medium for psychologists to expand their reach and influence. The rapid growth and reach of the digital space have prompted much discussion and research into the psychology of our interactions with it, the relationships between our online and offline identities, the social and legal ramifications of non-physical places, and the blurring boundary between 'real' and 'virtual'.

In something of a parallel to the prevalent status of disease models in psychology more widely, significant focus in cyber psychological and social research has been placed on the negative implications of our interactions with cyberspace, rather than its potential benefits. This critique has often stemmed from technologically determinist perspectives which paint the digital world as a Pandora's Box of dangerous anonymity, an unregulatable space which breeds antisocial conduct. While we do not wish for the focus of this book to overlook the very real and consequential darker sides of the digital world (such as cyberbullying, trolling and griefing, and cyberstalking to name a few examples), this is not our area of focus. Instead, we focus more on the affordances of cyberspace which also represent an opportunity for prosocial conduct to emerge and a platform where individuals might engage in healthy behaviours and interactions which would be either difficult to achieve or socially maligned in their real world.

Cyberspace provides us with a 'place' where, unlike the real world, the identity of individuals engaged in communication can be easily masked. This anonymity, while at times disadvantageous in terms of its capacity to provide a platform for nefarious behaviours (such as cyberbullying), may also have significant advantages at both the individual and group levels. For example, the anonymity offered by the digital world allows for individuals who might otherwise be excluded from social networks (e.g. geographically or as a consequence of social stigmas) to find and engage with individuals and groups usually beyond their access. This is also true for vulnerable individuals seeking to disclose sensitive and personal concerns, who may otherwise find accessing real-world health intervention either physically or psychologically challenging (e.g. due to limited provision, social stigmas, or pathological barriers such as difficulties with motivation or high levels of avoidance; Chan, 2021).

Digital therapy has experienced a boom in recent years, accelerated by the necessity for online provision during the COVID-19 pandemic (Torous et al., 2020). In addition, the psychological phenomena which occur as a result

of perceived or actual anonymity (such as greater disinhibition) encourage greater disclosure. While some technologies remain more accessible to wider audiences than others (e.g. smartphones over virtual reality), for many the affordances of cyberspace have significant, meaningful, and impactful benefits, allowing the provision of health services to transcend real-world restrictions (Lungu & Sun, 2016; Priyadarshini et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2020).

Additionally, the capacity for digital technologies to intervene in mental health and well-being is not limited to active participation on the part of the target individual/group. Developments in machine learning, artificial intelligence (AI), and ecological momentary intervention (covered later in this book) mean that emerging technologies are also able to passively identify and provide support by examining data relating to an individual's wider online and real-world behaviour. For example, by examining adherence to rehabilitation exercise, by monitoring movement via gyroscopes and accelerometers in smart devices (Bavan et al., 2019), or by detecting early signs of mental illness or relapse from social networking posts (Kim et al., 2020). This is also true of the active participation of health professionals, with the growing interest in AI as a provider of health intervention (e.g. Nie et al., 2022), a development which has led some to question the practical and ethical implications of an ever-expanding role for technologically mediated provision (Fiske et al., 2019; Grodniewicz & Hohol, 2023; Khawaja & Bélisle-Pipon, 2023).

PURPOSE AND STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

Due to the growing development of, and demand for, digital innovations across a range of health-related provisions, and with the rapid development of autonomous technologies, the interest in the role of cyberspace continues to grow. In this book, we examine a range of available options which can be of value in enhancing the availability and impact of positive psychology programmes in the digital age (AI, digital gaming...). Additionally, we focus on digital tools which may have greater potential in enhancing the reach of positive psychology interventions. Accordingly, we focus primarily on accessible technologies (e.g. smartphones), technologies with increasing accessibility (e.g. AI), and less so on more specialised equipment (e.g. virtual reality). While this is not to say that these more specialised platforms do not hold value, they are not the focus of this book.

We also introduce the reader to novel means for managing the delivery of digital positive psychology interventions (ecological momentary intervention) and methods for improving the acceptability and usability of digital

innovations among users and expanding their reach (e.g. by utilising processes originating in other areas of the technological field such as user-centred design).

That is to say (perhaps unsurprisingly) that this book can by no means be considered a comprehensive overview of the vast spectrum of digital tools. Instead, we intend this book to be an introductory guide for anyone who holds an interest in positive psychology and digital health. We also intend for the book to act as a means of providing an initial exploration of novel options and areas for consideration for digital positive psychology intervention.

In this book, we consider how the digital world may have numerous applications and implications for the field of positive psychology. Chapters are individually focused on one or a small number of applications of digital technologies, including AI, gamification, social media and wearable technologies, data collection and analysis, and the role of end-users in shaping the next generation of these tools. In each chapter, we will consider how digital technologies provide a platform for extending the influence of a range of areas of interest to positive psychologists, including well-being, resilience, meaning, and relationships. Perhaps unsurprisingly, we approach these topics largely from a positive perspective. However, each chapter also adopts a critical discussion of the various and intricate implications of the role which digital technologies may come to play in the future of training, research, and psychological health care.

In Chapter 2, we consider the rapidly growing role of AI in healthcare provision, and its potential role in delivering positive psychological interventions based on positive psychological concepts. Due to technical advancements in recent years, AI is becoming increasingly utilised in many areas of our lives including health and mental health care. This chapter considers how AI technology can support positive psychology principles from a well-being point of view. The chapter will firstly consider how AI technology can be, and is being, utilised to support people, especially in terms of well-being and emotional support. The chapter will have a focus on the psychological and therapeutic applications, and uses of current AI capabilities. In consideration of the potential benefits and uses of AI in the area of mental health and mental health support, the chapter will also highlight the ethical issues, concerns and risks raised through the utilisation of AI in the field of mental health and emotional well-being support. When considering AI applications for mental health support especially in the therapeutic setting, positive psychology aspects of relationships, well-being, and quality of life are all relevant and discussed within the chapter. Pertinent to the area of positive psychology, the chapter will also consider future developments of AI with a focus on AI wisdom. AI wisdom is

concerned with developing AI technology to include very human personality traits such as the ability to be empathetic, compassionate moral and demonstrate a level of emotional intelligence. The future of AI leads to this relatively new area of AI wisdom, which aims to make the technology not only intelligent but also wise, making for a timely and important consideration when looking at how digital technologies support positive psychology.

In Chapter 3, we explore digital games as an engaging medium for the delivery of psychoeducational and therapeutic provision. While the use of video games for entertainment is a well-established and highly financially profitable industry, the application of games to the therapeutic process and as psychoeducational tools is a somewhat more recent phenomenon. This chapter will consider how the motivational value of gamification has been, and may continue to be, leveraged to elicit intrinsic motivation and engagement with psychological programmes to produce improvements in well-being, resilience, and optimal functioning. It will also explore how digital tools, such as games, offer opportunities for advancements in outpatient care in a manner responsive to the user's immediate needs (e.g. ecological momentary intervention; EMI). While highlighting the potential benefits of games in improving engagement and in driving outcomes, a range of practical, social, and ethical issues will be discussed. Of particular relevance to the field of positive psychology, and in addition to engagement, this chapter will explore how the use of games has implications for positive emotions, how digital worlds can establish a sense of meaning, can initiate and develop relationships, and provide a platform for accomplishment. This chapter will close by discussing prospects for the future of gamification in psychological tools, including its potential incorporation into integrated digital platforms which integrate and assimilate machine learning, dynamic networks, and mixed/blended realities.

Chapter 4 explores mobile applications and social media and provides a focus on novel means of delivering (and knowing when to deliver) positive psychological interventions using smart technologies. Technology affords the opportunity for the real-life measurement of behaviour to support the diagnostic as well as the symptom management and adherence concerns associated with serious mental illness. Technology can reduce the need for self-report measurements leading to more accurate assessments. Sensor-based monitoring systems as well as social media platforms can predict and classify mental illness (Lee et al., 2021). Multimodal sensing includes smartphones, wearable devices, and physiological and ambient sensors, all of which enable the collection of real-world and continuous data detailing not only symptoms and treatment response but also behaviours, thoughts, and emotions providing both objective and subjective information. In this chapter, we will discuss how

ecological momentary assessment (EMA) and, to a lesser extent, ecological momentary invention (EMI) are being used in the area of psychology to support mental health and emotional well-being. The chapter will also consider the wider use of mobile applications and social media in the support of people's well-being. EMA also provides real-life data providing ecological validity that psychology researchers have often struggled with due to the reliance on self-report questionnaires or lab experiments. The technology discussed in this chapter provides a positive way forward in the field of mental health. The chapter considers topics such as well-being, relationships, and quality of life, and how people might find support through the use of digital technologies.

The fifth chapter of this book considers the development processes involved in creating positive psychology digital innovations, and how some of the challenges associated with these processes might be addressed by involving users. The successful uptake of, ongoing engagement with, and ultimately the success of, these digital technologies, no matter their theoretical value and intricate development, will ultimately be determined by user-perceptions of their ease of use, trustworthiness and security, relevance, and value in terms of impact potential. In this chapter, authors explore the topic of user-participation and user-centred design in the conceptualisation, development, and administration of digital technologies for positive psychology through the lens of relevant theoretical models such as the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh & Bala, 2008; Venkatesh & Davis, 2000). The chapter will explore the various ways and means with which potential end users are of value during the development cycle, and how considering and acting upon the diverse and, at times contradictory, needs of large groups of users is of central importance to the ultimate success, reach, and impact of digital tools.

In our final chapter, we bring all individual sections of the book together to provide readers with an overall summary. We provide a number of final thoughts and concluding comments from the authors. The conclusion chapter will present the reader with a table of what we, the authors, feel are key issues and recommendations which can be derived from the literature covered within the chapters. We also consider how future research might chart a forward path. The concluding chapter will also consider some of the potential future possibilities of digital technology within the field of positive psychology.

Along the way, we supplement our discussions with relevant theory and research drawn from the fields of cyberpsychology, positive psychology, clinical psychology, and more. In addition, to provide the reader with working examples of how digital tools might operate and might be developed, we provide a number of case studies drawn from projects either one or both of the authors have had the pleasure and opportunity to be involved with.