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How Does Digital Technology Use Help Immigrants? Examining its Impact on Life Satisfaction of Immigrants in Korea

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Abstract

Immigration process entails a range of difficulties and challenges for immigrants, and many immigrants experience loss of or severed social networks and relationships dur-ing the process. Research on immigrants' social capital and well-being is widespread worldwide, though only a few studies have examined their well-being in the context of digitalization. In this paper, we focus on immigrants' access to digital devices, digital competence, and digital utilization, and how each is related to their social capital and ultimately their well-being, namely life satisfaction. Using data from 2023 Digital Di-vide Survey, we found that immigrants' digital competence and utilization were posi-tively related to social capital, and that using more functions and services online in-creased their life satisfaction. Mediation analyses also revealed that immigrants' digital competence and utilization were mediated by social capital. Findings demonstrate the importance of boosting immigrants' digital capital to assist their adjustment in Korea.

Keywords: *Immigrants, Life Satisfaction, Access To Digital Technology, Digital Competency, Digital Utilization, Social Capital, Korea.*

Introduction

Immigration poses a multitude of challenges. Moving from a country of origin to another country brings not only physical separation, but also institutional, cultural, social separation [1]. Immigrants have to take on new tasks ranging from learning the new language, culture, and societal norms to navigating through new social, health, welfare systems of the host society. Immigrants' adaptation to their host society and stress derived from this process has long been a topic of academic research, and their well-being has been investigated using various measures such as health, mental health, acculturation, and life-satisfaction. Life satisfaction, among these, has been used as a common indicator of their well-being in the host society as it is a general self-assessment of one's life [2]. Life satisfaction measures individuals' subjective and conscious evaluation of their life based on their own criteria [3] and captures how they perceive their lives overall. In this sense, life satisfaction is a better proxy of their adaptation and well-being [4], and a plethora of literature exists investigating what contributes to immigrants' life satisfaction and the underlying mechanisms leading to their life satisfaction [1, 4-9].

Life satisfaction is particularly an important topic to study in Korea, given the generally low levels of satisfaction reported among its population. According to the World Happiness Report [10], Korea ranked at 33rd out of 38 OECD countries in terms of life satisfaction. Special attention should be given to immigrant population, as they are especially vulnerable to a variety

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of risk factors that can negatively impact their life satisfaction. Research consistently indicates that immigrants are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, stress, and overall lower life satisfaction compared to the native-born population [1, 4-9, 11]. For example, Arpino and de Valk [4] compared the life satisfaction levels between immigrants and native-born individuals across Europe, finding that immigrants reported significantly lower life satisfaction than their native counterparts. Similar findings were reported by Morassei et al. [11], who examined the life satisfaction of older immigrants and refugees compared to Canadian-born older adults. Theye also found that, even after accounting for all demographic, socioeconomic, and health related variables, immigrants continued to report significantly lower levels of life satisfaction.

One of the primary challenges affecting immigrants' life satisfaction is the need to build new social networks and support systems [7-9, 11-13]. Migration often results in the loss of existing support systems, compelling immigrants to establish new relationships and networks in the host society. Social support and networks in a new environment are critical for immigrants' well-being, as they provide not only emotional and instrumental support but also important sources of information and resources [13-15]. Social networks and perceived social support are key aspects of social capital, which is widely recognized as a crucial element in successful adaptation of immigrants [12]. Since the migration process frequently disrupts social ties and weakens existing support systems [12-14], rebuilding and recreating social relationships becomes a vital task post-immigration [15]. These newly formed support systems are especially valuable, as they offer access to a variety of social resources [15], foster a sense of belonging, and enhance feelings of embeddedness within the new community [16-18].

Social capital, defined as resources an individual gains through social networks and social relationships [19], is a crucial determinant of well-being [8-9, 12-13, 15, 18]. Bourdieu [16] defines social capital as the aggregate of resources accessible through group membership and social connections. The role of social capital in immigrant adaptation and well-being has been a longstanding focus in migration literature [8, 13, 15, 18-19]. Despite variations in its conceptualization and measurement, ranging from network size and perceived social support to social ties, trust, and social embeddedness, a growing body of literature consistently underscores the positive impact of social capital on immigrants' well-being [1, 4-5, 7-9, 12, 18, 20]. For example, Kim et al. [12] found that social capital significantly influenced life satisfaction among Asian American immigrants in the United States. Novara et al. [1] reported a positive association between social support and life satisfaction among immigrants in Italy, highlighting the critical role of social networks in adaption and overall well-being. Arpino and de Valk [4] further examined the impact of social capital, specifically social embeddedness, on life satisfaction among first-generation immigrants. Their findings revealed that lower levels of embeddedness were a key predictor of reduced life satisfaction, suggesting that disrupted social capital during migration can have a detrimental effect on immigrants' overall well-being.

While the importance of social capital has long been discussed in the field of sociology, social work, and psychology, how immigrants build and acquire social capital in new environment in this era of digitalization is less well known. Do immigrants living in digitalization era still experience the same difficulties finding resources, information and new social support systems as immigrants of the past did? How do immigrants seek information and find resources within the host society? How do they form new social networks and support systems? With rapid development and advancement of digital technology, human life has changed drastically in the last few decades. Digital technology has transformed the ways through which people seek and acquire knowledge and information, communicate, form and maintain social relationships,

interact with the outside world, use social and healthcare services, and even take part in political and civic activities [21]. One of the ways digital technologies has notably changed human life is how humans interact with one another. Watts [22] has referred to this as the 'new age of connectedness' in which people have found different ways to connect and interact with one another. Social distance has reportedly been reduced due to the rise of social network services, connecting people across the globe [23], and on-line interactions have led to formation of dynamic networks through which people are able to access and consume information. In other words, digital technology enables individuals to connect with others more easily and frequently and it allows communication to transcend its limits in borders and time zones [24]. Scholars also argue that digital technology facilitates development and expansion of social capital [25-26] which is fundamentally about how people interact with others and form social networks [27].

For immigrants, in particular, the use of digital technology is crucial for their adaption and adjustment. The use of digital technology is now considered a key element for immigrants' adaptation in a new country [18, 28], and social integration [29]. According to Yoo et al. [30], immigrants tend to rely more on online information and communication due to their language barriers and severed social ties in the host society. Other studies also demonstrate the benefit of using digital technology as it has been identified as an important tool for migrants to navigate through systems in new countries and access various information [31-34]. Several studies provide empirical evidence on such relationships, demonstrating significant associations between more digital technology use and higher life satisfaction [30, 34-39]. For example, a recent study by Jang and Lee [36] revealed that life satisfaction among marriage migrants in Korea increased with a higher rate of PC and mobile devise use, particularly in domains of their social network services. In addition to accessing and locating important information, digital technology use is identified as an important mean through which immigrants form and sustain their social networks. A recent study by Ekoh [34], reviewing empirical studies conducted digital technology and immigrants, supports the idea as they posit for an essential role of the digital technology use in immigrants' life, especially in domains of building and maintaining new social support networks.

While there are reports of benefits the digital technology use carries in immigrants' life [26, 28, 34-35], how it is related to life satisfaction of immigrants is less well known. In addition, whether the use of digital technology has a positive impact on their social capital also remains to be examined in depth. While studies on older populations have reported supportive findings on the beneficial effect of digital technology use on their life satisfaction via increased social capital [37-38], the relationships are less well-known in immigrant population. The present study is thus an effort to expand current understanding of the impact of digital technology use in immigrants' lives. More specifically, this study seeks to investigate whether the use of digital technology benefits immigrants' social capital, which in turn may enhance their life satisfaction, and we seek to examine the relationship in context of Korea where the continuous influx of immigrants is witnessed, and the immigrant population now consists of more than five percent of the total population [40]. As for digital technology use, we focus on the impact of access to digital devices, digital competence, and digital utilization on immigrants' social capital and life satisfaction. The research model follows ([Figure 1]).

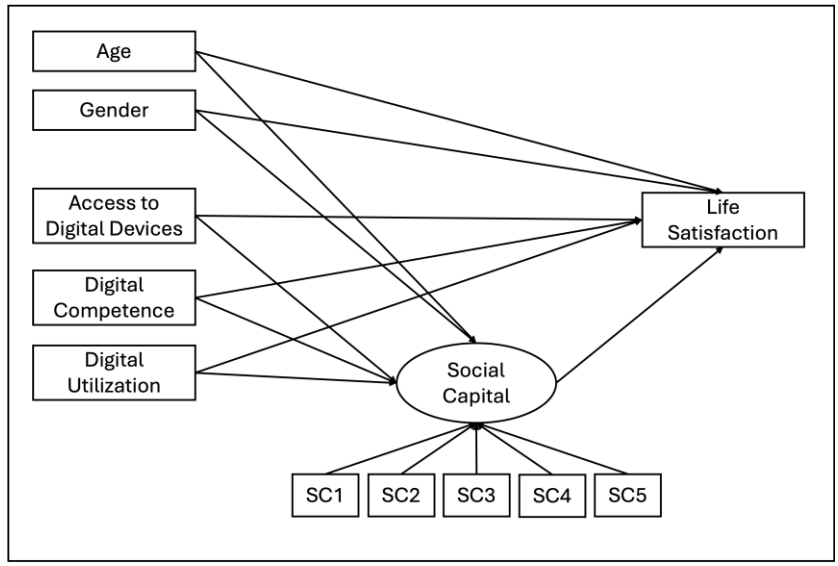

Figure 1. Research Model

Materials and Methods

Data

We used the secondary data from the 2023 Digital Divide Survey, collected and organized by the National Information Society Agency in Korea. This annual survey, which began in 2002, aims to provide fundamental information to reduce the digital divide in the country. The survey was conducted between October and December of 2023 through structured face-to-face interviews. It is nationally representative and includes a sample of 15,000 individuals, including older adults, people with disabilities, individuals living in poverty, those residing in rural areas, North Korean defectors, and immigrants. A total of 700 immigrants, aged 18 and older were selected through proportional quota sampling based on gender, age, country of origin, and area of residence [41]. The data specifically includes data from marriage migrants in Korea who are foreign-born migrants married to Korean nationals. Of the 700 immigrants, we excluded 17 individuals over the age of 60 to minimize the digital literacy and utilization gap according to age. Due to amendments to the Personal Information Protect Act in 2023, socio-economic variables, such as income, country of origin, education, and length of residence in Korea, are no longer publicly available, except gender and age.

Measures

Life satisfaction: We defined life satisfaction as an individual's overall assessment of their life as suggested by Diener et al. [2]. The dependent variable of this study is life satisfaction. We measured life satisfaction by asking respondents to rate the degree of their satisfaction with their life on a four-point Likert scale. The score ranges from "not satisfied at all (1)" to "very satisfied (4)". A higher score indicates greater satisfaction with life.

Social capital: We measured social capital as the perceived social support of immigrants. Perceived social support is used as a proxy for social capital in many studies, capturing the relation-based resources for individuals through their social networks [42]. We used five items closely related to interpersonal support for the latent variable. Example statements include: "I

know someone who can help with my issues.", "I have someone who can give me advice when I have to make an important decision.", and "I have someone with whom I can share my private issues.". Responses were measured on a four-point scale: "Not at all", "Rarely", "A little bit", and "Very much". Higher scores indicate greater social capital. Cronbach's alpha was .678. Although Cronbach's alpha score is below the commonly accepted threshold of .70, values in the range of .60-.70 are also considered acceptable for an exploratory study [43].

Digital technology use: The independent variables in this study represent digital technology use among immigrants, assessed through Access to Digital Devices (AD), Digital Competence (DC), and Digital Utilization (DU). AD was measured using a dichotomous variable, indicating whether the respondents own a smartphone (0=No, 1=Yes).

DC assesses mobile literacy skills which can be defined as the ability to use the functions of the digital device. DC was measured through seven items including: "I can control settings, such as display, sound, alerts, and/or security on mobile devices.", "I can set up a Wi-Fi network on mobile devices.", "I can transfer files between a mobile device and a computer.", "I can send files and pictures from a mobile device.", "I can install, delete, and update applications on mobile devices.", "I can check for viruses on mobile devices.", and "I can use note-taking applications on mobile devices.". Responses were rated on a four-point scale: "Not at all", "Not so much", "So-so", and "Very well". The total score was summated, with higher scores indicating greater mobile device competency. The reliability of this measure was high (Cronbach's alpha=.885).

DU was measured by how frequently the respondents engage in seven categories of digital services and activities: (1) networking services, (2) life services (i.e. e-commerce, public service, online banking), (3) searching (i.e. news, email, media contents), (4) information sharing, (5) economic services (i.e. job searching, investment, marketing), (6) social networking services (i.e. SNS, messenger, blogs, community), and (7) social participation (i.e. donation, on-line survey). Response options were "Never", "Seldom", "Sometimes", or "Often". The total score was summated, with higher scores indicating more frequent mobile device utilization. The reliability of this measure was also high (Cronbach's alpha=.819).

Control variables: Gender (0=Male immigrants, 1=Female immigrants) and age (20-59 years old) were included as control variables.

Analyses

We conducted descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, minimum and maximum values of the key variables. Next, we examined the key variables using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using Stata 15.0. SEM is an effective tool for identifying inter-relationships among variables, particularly when assessing mediating effects. Model fit was evaluated using the following criteria: Chi-square statistics, Root Mean Square of Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Standardized Root Mean Square of Residuals (SRMR), Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI). A good model fit was indicated by RMSEA under 0.5, SRMR under .08, CFI and TLI over .90 [44-46]. Finally, we tested the mediating effect using bootstrapping methods, examining total effects, direct effects, and indirect effects. The significance of indirect effects confirmed the statistical significance of the mediating variable.

Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the key variables. Regarding gender distribution,

143 respondents (20.94%) were male, and 540 respondents (79.06%) were female. The mean age of respondents was 38.96 (SD=7.84). While most respondents owned a smartphone (89.90%), 69 respondents did not (10.10%). Digital competence scores ranged from seven to 28, with a mean of 20.65 (SD=4.43). Digital utilization scores ranged from 26 to 96, with a mean of 53.32 (SD=11.81). The mean social capital score was 14.87 (SD=2.01). Finally, life satisfaction score ranged from one to four, with a mean of 2.93 (SD=0.57).

	Mean (SD)	**Frequencies (%)**	**Min.**	**Max.**
Gender				
Male		143 (20.94)		
Female		540 (79.06)		
Age	38.96 (7.84)		20	59
Digital technology use				
Access to digital devices				
Doesn't have a smart phone		69 (10.10)		
Has a smart phone		614 (89.90)		
Digital competence	20.65 (4.43)		7	28
Digital utilization	53.32 (11.81)		26	96
Social capital	14.87 (2.01)		5	20
Life satisfaction	2.93 (0.57)		1	4

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Key Variables

The model fit of the research model was acceptable, with χ^2 (24) = 53.55 (p<.001), RMSEA=.045, SRMR=.028, CFI=.946, and TLI=.899. Although TLI score is slightly below than the conventional threshold of .90, we concluded the model is acceptable overall, as the CFI is above .90, the RMSEA is below .06, and the SRMR is below .08 [47]. Standardized path coefficients for the key variables are presented in Table 2. Immigrants who utilized digital technology and devices more frequently exhibited higher life satisfaction (ß=.116, p<.05). Additionally, immigrants with higher social capital reported greater life satisfaction (ß=.219, p<.001). However, access to digital devices, digital competence, gender, and age were not significantly related to life satisfaction among immigrants. Digital competence was significantly associated with social capital, with immigrants who were more confident in using digital devices reporting higher social capital (ß=.259, p<.001). Furthermore, immigrants who utilized digital technology and devices more frequently perceived greater social capital (ß=.330, p<.001).

	ß	**SE**	**LL**	**UL**
->Life satisfaction				
Gender	-.033	.040	-.111	.045
Age	.017	0.41	-.064	.098
Access to digital devices	-.056	.039	-.133	.021
Digital competence	.013	.043	-.071	.099
Digital utilization	.116*	.046	.026	.205
Social capital	.219***	.058	.106	.332
->Social capital				

Gender	.007	.045	-.082	.096
Age	.106	.046	.015	.197
Access to digital devices	-.059	.045	-.147	.029
Digital competence	.259***	.045	.171	.347
Digital utilization	.330***	.047	.239	.423

Table 2. Standardized Path Coefficients

***p<.001, **p<.05, *p<.10

The results of total effects, direct effects, and indirect effects for the significant paths in the SEM model are presented in Table 3 and Figure 2. The bootstrapping results indicated that social capital fully mediated the relationship between digital competence and life satisfaction. Specifically, individuals with higher digital competence were more likely to build stronger networks, which, in turn, contributed to greater life satisfaction. The direct effect of digital competence on life satisfaction was not significant, suggesting that the impact of digital competence on life satisfaction operated entirely through social capital. However, the analysis also revealed that social capital partially mediated the relationship between digital utilization and life satisfaction. In this case, digital utilization influenced life satisfaction both directly and indirectly through social capital. Specifically, individuals with higher digital utilization tended to have stronger social networks, which, in turn, resulted in greater life satisfaction. Since the direct effect of digital utilization remained significant, it suggested that digital utilization had an independent impact on life satisfaction beyond its effect on social capital.

	Total effect	**Direct effect**	**Indirect effect**
->Life satisfaction			
Access to digital devices	-.674*	-.549	-.125
Digital competence	.009*	.002	.008**
Digital utilization	.009***	.005**	.003**
Social capital	.496***	.496**	-
->Social capital			
Access to digital devices	-.253	-.253	-
Digital competence	.015***	.015***	-
Digital utilization	.007***	.007***	-

Table 3. Bootstrapping Results

***p<.001, **p<.05, *p<.10

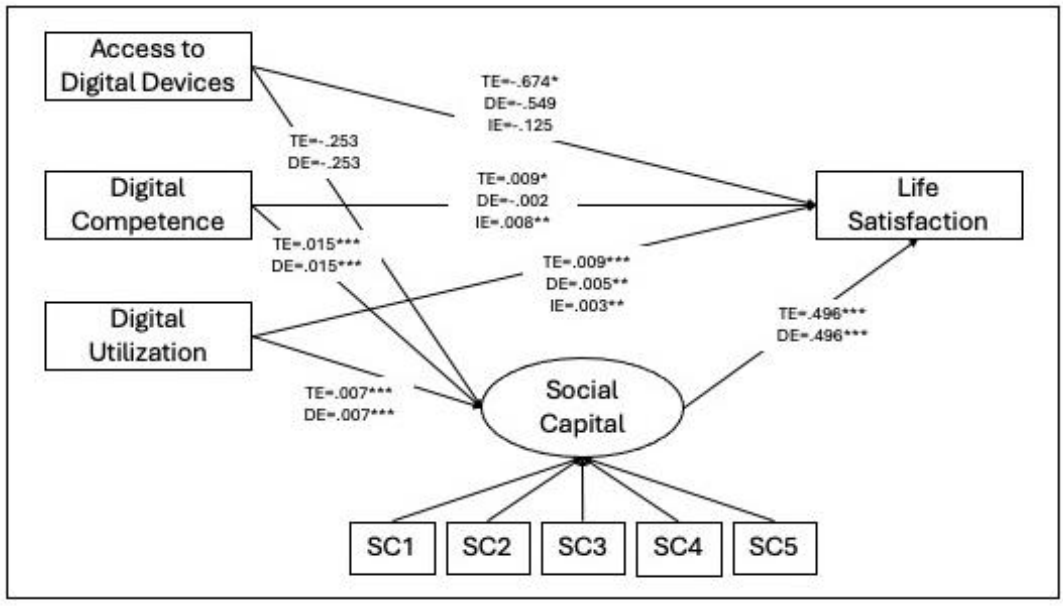

Figure 2. Total Effect, Direct Effects, Indirect Effects

***p<.001, **p<.05, *p<.10

TE=Total Effect, DE=Direct Effect, IE=Indirect Effect

Discussion

Korea, a country rising to be one of the esteemed destination countries for many immigrants, is now home to more than 2.5 million immigrants making up a little above five percent of the entire population [40]. The welfare and the well-being of immigrants in Korea has long been a topic of discussion for many policy makers, social work practitioners, and researchers, and the interest is also commonly shared across the globe as immigration and immigrants' well-being have been a universal phenomenon. This study was set out with an aim to understand what attributes to their well-being, life satisfaction specifically. We tried to move beyond the traditional framework of understanding life satisfaction of the immigrants by focusing on the impact of digital technology use on immigrants' social capital and life satisfaction. The findings can be summarized as follows.

First, most of the immigrants who participated in the survey reported having a mobile device though it is lower than the Korean national smartphone penetration rate, which is close to 100 percent [41]. Having or not having the actual device to use and access digital technology is an essential component contributing to the digital exclusion of marginalized group within society [42-44], and our finding adds to the existing literature on the digital divide among immigrants. The digital divide, the gap between those who have access to digital technology and those who do not, is a relatively new concept that emerged in the digitalized era and is considered another form of socioeconomic inequality [43]. In a digitalized society, unequal distribution of resources often leads to unequal access to digital devices, which in turn may affect access to digital services, furthering disparities in social connectedness and participation within society [45-46]. Though significant associations between access to digital devices and social capital, as well as

life satisfaction, were not found in this study, it warrants a need to investigate the digital divide further. For example, examination of additional path analyses linking digital access to digital competence and utilization may shed light on the dynamics of digital divide, and future studies should also consider examining differences in digital access between the native and immigrant populations.

Second, both immigrants' digital competence and their use of digital services were significantly associated with social capital, namely perceived social support. The ability to use various device functions and applications was strongly linked to both their digital utilization and social capital. This finding aligns with previous research [26, 33-34] and provides further empirical evidence highlighting the importance of digital technology in helping immigrants build social capital in a new country. Social capital is a vital resource for immigrants [20], who often experience disruptions or changes in their social connections during their migration process. A lack of social capital can contribute to their vulnerability within the host society [48]. Recognizing its importance in immigrants' adjustment to Korean society, both local and central governments have made considerable efforts to strengthen immigrants' social capital by expanding their social networks and support systems [49]. Various social welfare agencies have developed and implemented programs aimed at building new social support systems for immigrants, ranging from bridging initiatives that connect immigrants with native residents to community participation programs [50]. While these programs may be effective in expanding their social capital, the findings of this study suggest the need to also focus on building immigrants' digital capital.

It also should be noted that access to digital devices was not significantly related to social capital and life satisfaction. However, directions of the relationships among the variables warrant further investigation. For example, access to digital devices was negatively related to social capital and life satisfaction, indicating that those who have smartphones scored lower on social support and life satisfaction. While it has been argued that having or not having the actual device to use and access digital technology is an essential component contributing to the digital exclusion of marginalized group within society [51-52], others also report aversive effect of smartphone access and its use on one's mental health and well-being [53]. With inconclusive findings on the relationship between access to digital devices and one's well-being, further examination probing the mechanism underlying the relationships is warranted. For example, examination of additional path analyses linking digital access to digital competence and utilization may shed light on the dynamics of the relationship.

Digital capital is a new type of capital that was introduced by Ragneda [25]. It is the accumulation of digital competency and digital technology use and helps individuals gain resources from digital realms, which can then be transformed into other forms of capitals in offline life. Ragneda [25] argues that the level of digital capital can also influence one's digital experiences, which can lead to broadened opportunities both on and offline, and it can ultimately lead to improved quality of life and well-being. Findings of our study strongly supports Ragneda's proposition on digital capital. The findings show that immigrants' digital competence and digital utilization indeed increased their social capital, which in turn increased the level of life satisfaction. Specifically, our findings show that immigrants who are more competent in using digital devices and technologies and who utilized information and communication services online were more satisfied with their lives.

Korea is a highly digitalized society, ranking high in digital competitiveness, internet and

smartphone penetration [54]. Much of the information related to everyday life in Korea is relayed and provided online, it is critical for individuals to be able to access and utilize digitalized information online. Immigrants' use of digital technology and online services are even more critical, as our findings show that they provide an important gateway to building meaningful social networks and relationships, which, in turn, lead to a more convenient and satisfying life in Korea. Such findings call for a need to assist immigrants in better using and utilizing digital devices, applications, and digital information services. Just as there are community-based programs for elderly and the disabled individuals to increase their digital competence and utilization of digital services, programs tailored to meet immigrants' digital literacy needs to be developed and implemented communitywide. Furthermore, our findings also warrant in-depth discussion on digital divide that may impact immigrants' well-being. As our study shows, access to digital devices is relatively limited compared to the native population. Findings also imply that the immigrants who are less competent in using the device and technology and utilize digitalized information less may also be more marginalized, as they are unable to form and maintain important social relationships, which may in turn exacerbate their overall well-being. Our findings, therefore, call for a need to be attentive to digital divide of immigrants and take active measures to address immigrants' digital access, digital competence, and utilization.

Limitation

While this study provides additional and important empirical evidence on the impact of digital technology use on immigrants' lives, it also has several limitations. First, we were unable to account for immigration and immigrant-related factors that may have varying effects on social capital, life satisfaction, and digital technology use due to the limited data availability. The dataset used in this study only provided immigrants' age and gender, preventing us from controlling for potentially confounding variables such as length of stay, income, employment status, and language proficiency, which previously reported as significant in influencing social capital and life satisfaction [1, 7-9, 13-15]. In addition, further efforts are needed to identify factors contributing to differential access to digital devices, in order to better locate and support the more vulnerable subgroups within the immigrant population. Prior studies have documented disparities among immigrant subgroups in terms of access to digital devices and use of digital technology [35-36, 55]. Second, the cross-sectional nature of this study limits our ability to understand the causal dynamics among the variables. Longitudinal analyses would be more effective in capturing the cumulative and long-term effects of digital technology use on immigrants' social capital and life satisfaction. Third, more comprehensive measures are needed to accurately assess life satisfaction and social capital. In this study, we used a single item measure for life satisfaction. While this approach is common in large scale surveys such as World Value Survey and the Gallup World Poll, single item measures are limited in their ability to control for both random and non-random measurement errors [56]. Furthermore, adopting validated scales such as Personal Social Capital Scale or Global Social Capital Survey would allow for a more understanding of social capital. In our study, social capital was conceptualized as perceived social support. While social support represents an important component of social capital, it does not capture the full construct. Future research should explore additional dimensions of social capital, including bonding and bridging capital, to better understand how digital technology use influences different aspects of social capital and the mechanisms through which social capital affects life satisfaction.

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Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

AD	Access to Digital Devices
DC	Digital Competence
DSU	Digital Utilization

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