Quality of life in a hyper-connected digital world: implications for urban wellbeing

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Trends in urban development centered on the collection and use of data to create connections claim to increase quality of life, yet the metrics used to understand the success of a smart city rarely feature this. While the role of the citizen within a smart city has been investigated through lenses such as Foucault’s governmentality and visual imaginary, which identify the inhabitant as both consumer and consumed for their data as nodes in a network, the impact on wellbeing of digital architecture has been minimally investigated. To question if smart solutions really enhance quality of life, this paper explores connection, a factor of wellbeing and, therefore, a significant aspect of quality of life. Evidence gathered during the COVID-19 global pandemic suggests that it is only specific aspects of digital connection which provide protective qualities for wellbeing, such as active rather than passive use of social media and the positive effect of feelings of community. Using survey and focus group responses which question technology use during the pandemic in Singapore, the identified characteristics of connection are assessed for factors of ‘good’ connection, such as continuity, quality, reciprocal knowledge, use of power and commonality. The lockdown period is used to exemplify
one possible urban future under the smart banner. Results are split into connection at the micro and meso levels, where reciprocal knowledge between inhabitant and government demonstrate different features to that of reciprocal knowledge between peers. The duality of connection at these levels illuminates how digital living has the potential to influence an individual's navigation of their environment, and therefore impact their wellbeing. For smart solutions, which are being proposed across the world, the implications are important for how the design of the digital spaces, data collection and governance can enhance, or detract from, the lives of those living there.

• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Aisha is a third year PhD student with a broad interest in systems of power and human flourishing. She has a varied background, prior to her PhD she completed an MPhil concentrating on cyber power at the University of Cambridge, following a BA(Hons) in Politics, Philosophy and Economics from Queens University Belfast. She was chosen as a Digital X scholar by the Norman Foster Foundation for an international workshop, and holds the Fitzwilliam College Lee Kuan Yew PhD scholarship for her research concentrated on the Singaporean Smart Nation. Following the global Covid-19 pandemic, which has fast-tracked urban dependence on technology, Aisha’s current research focuses on wellbeing in the digital urban environment envisioned by smart projects. Outside the university setting, Aisha has worked at a range of non-profit organizations for people with additional needs, holds a mental health first aid qualification and has undertaken a Positive Psychology foundation course.