

## Reflections on *Connected in Isolation*

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At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, people dealt with many uncertainties—how the virus is spread, when international sanctions on travels will be lifted, whether vaccines would be safe and effective, and so on—and often looked to online sources for information. With countries implementing nationwide lockdowns or stay-at-home requirements, networked technologies became even more important for individuals to not only seek information related to COVID-19 but also to maintain personal connections. As COVID-19 was forcing almost everything to go virtual (e.g., classes, business meetings, weddings, funerals, church services), a decades-long inequality was exposed: inequality in digital access and skills.

In her book, *Connected in Isolation: Digital Privilege in Unsettled Times*, Eszter Hargittai (2022) aptly documents this “unsettled” time through the lens of social and digital inequalities, specifically, “how long-existing social and digital inequalities played a critical role in the extent to which people were able to pivot to much of life happening through computer-mediated communication” (Hargittai, 2022, p. 2). By discussing various factors associated with digital device access, digital media use, and information sources during the pandemic in three different countries, the book helps researchers and practitioners better understand key issues that need to be considered in conducting research or developing relevant policies or programs in this area.

As a communication scholar focusing on digital inequality who has closely followed Hargittai’s work in this area in the past two decades (e.g., DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001; Hargittai, 2002, 2007; Hargittai & Dobransky, 2017), I appreciate how this book incorporates historical, social, and cultural contexts of digital inequalities by smoothly weaving her past and recent studies as well as research by scholars in different disciplines. In particular, the author’s nuanced examination of the relationships between social demographics, digital context, online behavior, and life outcomes provides a compelling account of how important it is to develop a multidimensional and holistic understanding to effectively address digital inequality through research or practice. This, along with Hargittai’s approachable and accessible writing style, makes the book a good read even for those who are not necessarily familiar with this line of academic research.

The comparative approach used in this book is another strength of the book. Through its comprehensive examination of country characteristics including digital media patterns and COVID-19 measures in the United States, Italy, and Switzerland, this book presents up-to-date data and insights on digital experiences during the pandemic in the three countries. At first glance, one might wonder why the three countries were chosen, but the author provides a clear justification for the selection (Western democratic countries, high number of Internet users, etc.). The methodological framework used for the comparative analysis serves as a helpful guidance for future research aimed at exploring related topics in multiple countries.

Relatedly, rigorous empirical data presented in the book are valuable resources for various sectors. Through an online survey distributed in April 2020, Hargittai's team collected responses from 1,374 American adults (and additional 1,551 adults in May 2020), 983 Italian adults, and 1,350 Swiss adults. Contracting with a survey firm, Hargittai's team used a quota sampling approach for their online survey research "to reflect US Census figures" and "to ensure a diverse sample in Switzerland and Italy" (Hargittai, 2022, p. 133). Since it was an online survey, those without Internet access were not included, which is a limitation of this research. The charts and figures included in the book make it easier for readers to compare and contrast responses from the three countries. For example, chapter 4 includes bar graphs on information sources about COVID-19, and it is interesting to see how traditional newspapers and magazines (online or offline), unlike in the United States and Italy, were more popular than social media in Switzerland. From the Preface section, including behind-the-scene accounts of how the research came about, to the Appendix on the survey methodology, this book includes a wealth of resources that make it an excellent textbook for a social science research methods class.

Finally, from a scholarly research perspective, I consider the author's linking digital contexts and online behavior to life outcomes (e.g., social media engagements and pandemic safety measures taken) one of the most significant contributions of the book. This is also an area that I had hoped to read more of. In the context of the pandemic, such life outcomes included seeking and getting information about the pandemic, dealing with misconceptions or misinformation about COVID-19, and taking relevant safety measures. As there are various online and offline factors that influenced COVID-19-related information seeking or safety behaviors, the author's goal here is not to identify causality but to carefully analyze relationships between online behavior and life outcomes. The result is tangible insights that can lead to evidence-based strategies for future public health emergencies or other related areas.

In reading a research book like this one, those in academic communities may think about how it connects with their own research and what interesting future research questions it raises. I hope readers think about implications of this book for studying specific populations experiencing marginality in terms of digital experiences. This is an important area of research for communication scholars in the area of digital inequalities to be able to provide research-informed and tailored recommendations to address issues around a particular marginalized or underserved population. The theoretical framework and measurement items used in the book offer helpful insights to analyzing digital device access, digital media use, information sources, and life outcomes among different marginalized or underserved populations. For example, this book connects with my own research on digital experiences of justice-involved women during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. Those in jail or prison or released from correctional facilities during the COVID-19 pandemic had varying degrees of digital access and skills that were related to their information access and responses to the pandemic (e.g., Blomberg, Altschwager, Seo, Booton, & Nwachukwu, 2021; Seo, Blomberg, Altschwager, & Vu, 2021; Seo et al., 2022).

A silver lining of the COVID-19 pandemic experience in the United States is that government agencies now have better sense of the urgency of addressing the issue of digital inequity. They are also realizing the importance of approaching different areas and populations affected by digital divide (e.g., Tribal communities, people with disabilities, justice-involved communities) with community-based and tailored approaches (Digital Equity Act Programs, 2023). For the scholarly community in communication technology

to make meaningful policy and practical contributions in the area of digital inequality, we need rigorous empirical research on digital experiences of specific marginalized or underserved populations, which in turn informs the development of tailored messages and measures in addressing digital inequality and other related issues. *Connected in Isolation* (Hargittai, 2022) offers a helpful research framework.

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